

## DECLARING VICTORY

*The United States is succeeding in its struggle against terrorism. The time has come to declare the war on terror over, so that an even more effective military and diplomatic campaign can begin.*

BY JAMES FALLOWS

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Osama bin Laden’s public statements are those of a fanatic. But they often reveal a canny ability to size up the strengths and weaknesses of both allies and enemies, especially the United States. In his videotaped statement just days before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, bin Laden mocked the Bush administration for being unable to find him, for letting itself become mired in Iraq, and for refusing to come to grips with al-Qaeda’s basic reason for being. One example: “Contrary to Bush’s claim that we hate freedom, let him explain to us why we don’t strike, for example, Sweden?” Bin Laden also boasted about how easy it had become for him “to provoke and bait” the American leadership: “All that we have to do is to send two mujahideen ... to raise a piece of cloth on which is written ‘al-Qaeda’ in order to make the generals race there.”

Perhaps al-Qaeda’s leaders, like most people, cannot turn a similarly cold eye upon themselves. A purely realistic self-assessment must be all the more difficult for leaders who say that their struggle may last for centuries and that their guidance comes from outside this world. But what if al-Qaeda’s leaders could see their faults and weaknesses as clearly as they see those of others? What if they had a Clausewitz or a Sun Tzu to speak frankly to them?

This spring and summer, I talked with some sixty experts about the current state of the conflict that bin Laden thinks of as the “world jihad—and that the U.S. government has called both the “global war on terror” and the “long war.” I wanted to know how it looked from the terrorists’ perspective. What had gone better than expected? What had gone worse? Could bin Laden assume, on any grounds other than pure faith, that the winds of history were at his back? Could he and his imitators count on a growing advantage because technology has made it so easy for individuals to inflict mass damage, and because politics and the media have made it so hard for great powers to fight dirty, drawn-out wars? Or might his strategists have to

conclude that, at least for this stage of what they envision as a centuries-long struggle, their best days had passed?

About half of the authorities I spoke with were from military or intelligence organizations; the others were academics or members of think tanks, plus a few businesspeople. Half were Americans; the rest were Europeans, Middle Easterners, Australians, and others. Four years ago, most of these people had supported the decision to invade Iraq. Although they now said that the war had been a mistake (followed by what nearly all viewed as a disastrously mismanaged occupation), relatively few said that the United States should withdraw anytime soon. The reasons most of them gave were the need for America to make good on commitments, the importance of keeping the Sunni parts of Iraq from turning into a new haven for global terrorists, and the chance that conditions in Iraq would eventually improve.

The initial surprise for me was how little fundamental disagreement I heard about how the situation looks through bin Laden's eyes. While the people I spoke with differed on details, and while no one put things exactly the way I am about to here, there was consensus on the main points.

The larger and more important surprise was the implicit optimism about the U.S. situation that came through in these accounts—not on Iraq but on the fight against al-Qaeda and the numerous imitators it has spawned. For the past five years the United States has assumed itself to be locked in “asymmetric warfare,” with the advantages on the other side. Any of the tens of millions of foreigners entering the country each year could, in theory, be an enemy operative—to say nothing of the millions of potential recruits already here. Any of the dozens of ports, the scores of natural-gas plants and nuclear facilities, the hundreds of important bridges and tunnels, or the thousands of shopping malls, office towers, or sporting facilities could be the next target of attack. It is impossible to protect them all, and even trying could ruin America's social fabric and public finances. The worst part of the situation is helplessness, as America's officials and its public wait for an attack they know they cannot prevent.

Viewing the world from al-Qaeda's perspective, though, reveals the underappreciated advantage on America's side. The struggle does remain asymmetric, but it may have evolved in a way that gives target countries, especially the United States, more leverage and control than we have assumed. Yes, there could be another attack tomorrow, and most authorities assume that some attempts to blow up trains, bridges, buildings, or airplanes in America will eventually succeed. No modern nation is immune to politically inspired violence, and even the best-executed antiterrorism strategy will not be airtight.

But the overall prospect looks better than many Americans believe, and better than nearly all political rhetoric asserts. The essence of the change is this: because of al-Qaeda's own mistakes, and because of the things the United States and its allies have done right, al-Qaeda's ability to inflict direct damage in America or on Americans has been sharply reduced. Its successor groups in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere will continue to pose dangers. But its hopes for fundamentally harming the United States now rest less on what it can do itself than on what it can trick, tempt, or goad us into doing. Its destiny is no longer in its own hands.

“Does al-Qaeda still constitute an ‘existential’ threat?” asks David Kilcullen, who has written several influential papers on the need for a new strategy against Islamic insurgents. Kilcullen, who as an Australian army officer commanded counter-insurgency units in East Timor, recently served as an adviser in the Pentagon and is now a senior adviser on counterterrorism at the State Department. He was referring to the argument about whether the terrorism of the twenty-first century endangers the very existence of the United States and its allies, as the Soviet Union's nuclear weapons did throughout the Cold War (and as the remnants of that arsenal still might).

“I think it does, but not for the obvious reasons,” Kilcullen told me. He said the most useful analogy was

the menace posed by European anarchists in the nineteenth century. “If you add up everyone they personally killed, it came to maybe 2,000 people, which is not an existential threat.” But one of their number assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife. The act itself took the lives of two people. The unthinking response of European governments in effect started World War I. “So because of the reaction they provoked, they were able to kill millions of people and destroy a civilization.

“It is not the people al-Qaeda might kill that is the threat,” he concluded. “*Our reaction* is what can cause the damage. It’s al-Qaeda plus our response that creates the existential danger.”

Since 9/11, this equation has worked in al-Qaeda’s favor. That can be reversed.

#### WHAT HAS GONE WRONG FOR AL-QAEDA

**B**rian Michael Jenkins, a veteran terrorism expert at the RAND Corporation, recently published a book called *Unconquerable Nation: Knowing Our Enemy, Strengthening Ourselves*. It includes a fictional briefing, in Osama bin Laden’s mountain stronghold, by an al-Qaeda strategist assigned to sum up the state of world jihad five years after the 9/11 attacks. “Any al-Qaeda briefer would have to acknowledge that the past five years have been difficult,” Jenkins says. His fictional briefer summarizes for bin Laden what happened after 9/11: “The Taliban were dispersed, and al-Qaeda’s training camps in Afghanistan were dismantled.” Al-Qaeda operatives by the thousands have been arrested, detained, or killed. So have many members of the crucial al-Qaeda leadership circle around bin Laden and his chief strategist, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Moreover, Jenkins’s briefer warns, it has become harder for the remaining al-Qaeda leaders to carry out the organization’s most basic functions: “Because of increased intelligence efforts by the United States and its allies, transactions of any type—communications, travel, money transfers—have become more dangerous for the jihadists. Training and operations have been decentralized, raising the risk of fragmentation and loss of unity. Jihadists everywhere face the threat of capture or martyrdom.”

Michael Scheuer was chief of the CIA’s Osama bin Laden unit from 1995 to 1999 and was a special adviser to it for three years after 9/11 (the CIA disbanded the unit this summer). In a similar mock situation report that Scheuer has presented at military conferences, a fictional briefer tells his superiors in al-Qaeda: “We must always keep in focus the huge downside of this war. We are, put simply, being hunted and attacked by the most powerful nation in the history of the world. And despite the heavy personnel losses we have suffered, may God accept them as martyrs, the United States has not yet made the full destructiveness of its power felt.”

Any assessment of the world five years after 9/11 begins with the damage inflicted on “Al-Qaeda Central” —the organization led by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri that, from the late 1990s onward, both inspired and organized the worldwide anti-American campaign. “Their command structure is gone, their Afghan sanctuary is gone, their ability to move around and hold meetings is gone, their financial and communications networks have been hit hard,” says Seth Stodder, a former official in the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).

Kilcullen says, “The al-Qaeda that existed in 2001 simply no longer exists. In 2001 it was a relatively centralized organization, with a planning hub, a propaganda hub, a leadership team, all within a narrow geographic area. All that is gone, because we destroyed it.” Where bin Laden’s central leadership team could once wire money around the world using normal bank networks, it now must rely on couriers with vests full of cash. (I heard this point frequently in interviews, weeks before the controversial news stories revealing that the U.S. government had in fact been tracking international bank transfers. Everyone I spoke with assumed that some sort of tracking was firmly in place—and that the commanders of al-Qaeda had changed their behavior in a way that showed they were aware of it as well.) Where bin Laden’s network

could once use satellite phones and the Internet for communication, it now has to avoid most forms of electronic communication, which leave an electronic trail back to the user. Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri now send information out through videotapes and via operatives in Internet chat rooms. “The Internet is all well and good, but it’s not like meeting face to face or conducting training,” says Peter Bergen, author of *The Osama bin Laden I Know*. “Their reliance on it is a sign of their weakness.”

Scheuer, Richard Clarke (the former White House terrorism adviser), and others have long complained that following the bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole*, in 2000, the United States should have been prepared to launch a retaliatory raid on Afghanistan immediately after any successor attack—“the next day!” Scheuer told me—rather than taking several weeks to strike, and that it might well have chased down and eliminated bin Laden and al-Zawahiri if it had concentrated on them throughout 2002 rather than being distracted into Iraq. Nonetheless, most experts agree that the combination of routing the Taliban, taking away training camps, policing the financial networks, killing many al-Qaeda lieutenants, and maintaining electronic and aerial surveillance has put bin Laden and al-Zawahiri in a situation in which they can survive and inspire but not do much more.

“Al-Qaeda has taken some very hard blows,” Martin van Creveld, a military historian at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and the author of *The Transformation of War* and other books, told me. “Osama bin Laden is almost irrelevant, from an operational point of view. This is one reason why he has to keep releasing videos.”

Does this matter, given bin Laden’s elevation to Che Guevara-like symbolic status and his ability to sneak out no fewer than twenty-four recorded messages between 9/11 and the summer of this year? “For bin Laden, it’s clearly a consolation prize to become a ‘philosophy’ rather than an organization,” says Caleb Carr, a history professor at Bard College and the author of *The Lessons of Terror*. “They already were a global philosophy, but they used to have a command structure too. It’s like the difference between Marxism and Leninism, and they’re back to just being Marx.” Marc Sageman, author of *Understanding Terror Networks*, says that before 9/11, people attracted to the terrorist cause could come to Afghanistan for camaraderie, indoctrination, and specific operational training. “Now you can’t *find* al-Qaeda, so it’s difficult to join them,” he told me. “People have to figure out what to do on their own.”

The shift from a coherent Al-Qaeda Central to a global proliferation of “self-starter” terrorist groups—those inspired by bin Laden’s movement but not coordinated by it—has obviously not eliminated the danger of attacks. In different ways, the bombings in Madrid in 2004, in Bali and London in 2005, and in Iraq throughout the past three years all illustrate the menace—and, in the view of many people I spoke with, prefigure the threats—that could arise in the United States. But the shift to these successor groups has made it significantly harder for terrorists of any provenance to achieve what all of them would like: a “second 9/11,” a large-scale attack on the U.S. mainland that would kill hundreds or thousands of people and terrorize hundreds of millions.

I asked everyone I spoke with some variant of the familiar American question: Why, through nearly five years after 9/11, had there not been another big attack on U.S. soil? People prefaced their replies with reminders that the future is unknowable, that the situation could change tomorrow, and that the reasons for America’s safety so far were not fully understood. But most then went on to say that another shocking, 9/11-scale coordinated attack was probably too hard for today’s atomized terrorist groups to pull off.

The whole array of “homeland security” steps had made the United States a somewhat more difficult target to attack, most people said. But not a single person began the list of important post-9/11 changes with these real, if modest, measures of domestic protection. Indeed, nearly all emphasized the haphazard, wasteful, and sometimes self-defeating nature of the DHS’s approach.

“It is harder to get into the country—to a fault,” says Seth Stodder. Much tougher visa rules, especially for foreign students, have probably kept future Mohammed Attas out of flight schools. But they may also be keeping out future Andrew Groves and Sergey Brins. (Grove, born in Hungary, cofounded Intel; Brin, born in Russia, cofounded Google.) “The student-visa crackdown was to deal with Atta,” Stodder says. “It’s affecting the commanding heights of our tech economy.” Richard Clarke says that the domestic change that has had the biggest protective effect is not any governmental measure but an increased public scrutiny of anyone who “looks Muslim.” “It’s a terrible, racist reaction,” Clarke says, “but it has made it harder for them to operate.”

The DHS now spends \$42 billion a year on its vast range of activities, which include FEMA and other disaster-relief efforts, the Coast Guard, immigration, and border and customs operations. Of this, about \$5 billion goes toward screening passengers at airports. The widely held view among security experts is that this airport spending is largely for show. Strengthened cockpit doors and a flying public that knows what happened on 9/11 mean that commercial airliners are highly unlikely to be used again as targeted flying bombs. “The inspection process is mostly security theater, to make people feel safe about flying,” says John Mueller, a political scientist at Ohio State and the author of a forthcoming book about the security-industrial complex. He adds that because fears “are not purely rational, if it makes people feel better, the effort may be worth it.”

John Robb, a former clandestine-operations specialist for the Air Force who now writes a blog called [“Global Guerrillas.”](#) says that it is relatively easy for terrorists to disrupt society’s normal operations—think of daily life in Israel, or England under assault from the IRA. But large-scale symbolic shock, of the type so stunningly achieved on 9/11 and advocated by bin Laden ever since, is difficult to repeat or sustain. “There are diminishing returns on symbolic terrorism,” Robb told me. “Each time it happens, the public becomes desensitized, and the media pays less attention.” To maintain the level of terror, each attack must top the previous one—and in Robb’s view, “nothing will ever top 9/11.” He allows for the obvious and significant exception of terrorists getting hold of a nuclear weapon. But, like most people I interviewed, he says this is harder and less likely than the public assumes. Moreover, if nuclear weapons constitute the one true existential threat, then countering the proliferation of those weapons themselves is what American policy should address, more than fighting terrorism in general. For a big, coordinated, nonnuclear attack, he says, “the number of people involved is substantial, the lead time is long, the degree of coordination is great, and the specific skills you need are considerable. It’s not realistic for al-Qaeda anymore.”

Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism expert at Georgetown University and the author of [Inside Terrorism](#) and other books, says that the 9/11-style spectacular attack remains fundamental to Osama bin Laden’s hopes, because of his belief that it would “catapult him back into being in charge of the movement.” Robb’s fear is that after being thwarted in their quest to blow up the Rose Bowl or the Capitol, today’s loosely affiliated terrorists will turn to the smaller-scale attacks on economic targets—power plants, rail lines—that are very hard to prevent and can do tremendous cumulative damage.

The dispersed nature of the new al-Qaeda creates other difficulties for potential terrorists. For one, the recruitment of self-starter cells within the United States is thought to have failed so far. Spain, England, France, and the Netherlands are among the countries alarmed to find Islamic extremists among people whose families have lived in Europe for two or three generations. “The patriotism of the American Muslim community has been grossly underreported,” says Marc Sageman, who has studied the process by which people decide to join or leave terrorist networks. According to Daniel Benjamin, a former official on the National Security Council and coauthor of [The Next Attack](#), Muslims in America “have been our first line of defense.” Even though many have been “unnerved by a law-enforcement approach that might have been inevitable but was still disturbing,” the community has been “pretty much immune to the jihadist virus.”

Something about the Arab and Muslim immigrants who have come to America, or about their absorption

here, has made them basically similar to other well-assimilated American ethnic groups—and basically different from the estranged Muslim underclass of much of Europe. Sageman points out that western European countries, taken together, have slightly more than twice as large a Muslim population as does the United States (roughly 6 million in the United States, versus 6 million in France, 3 million in Germany, 2 million in the United Kingdom, more than a million in Italy, and several million elsewhere). But most measures of Muslim disaffection or upheaval in Europe—arrests, riots, violence based on religion—show it to be ten to fifty times worse than here.

The median income of Muslims in France, Germany, and Britain is lower than that of people in those countries as a whole. The median income of Arab Americans (many of whom are Christians originally from Lebanon) is actually higher than the overall American one. So are their business-ownership rate and their possession of college and graduate degrees. The same is true of most other groups who have been here for several generations, a fact that in turn underscores the normality of the Arab and Muslim experience. The difference between the European and American assimilation of Muslims becomes most apparent in the second generation, when American Muslims are culturally and economically Americanized and many European Muslims often develop a sharper sense of alienation. “If you ask a second-generation American Muslim,” says Robert Leiken, author of *Bearers of Global Jihad: Immigration and National Security After 9/11*, “he will say, ‘I’m an American and a Muslim.’ A second-generation Turk in Germany is a Turk, and a French Moroccan doesn’t know what he is.”

The point is not that all is comfortable between American Muslims and their fellow citizens. Many measures show that anti-Muslim sentiment is up, as are complaints by Muslims about discrimination and official mistreatment. James Woolsey, a former director of the CIA, points out that while very few American Muslims sympathize with Wahhabi-style extremism, mosques and institutions representing extreme views have begun to appear. Yet what many Western nations fear—widespread terrorist recruitment or activity from among their own population—for now seems less likely in the United States.

An even deeper problem for al-Qaeda and the self-starter groups is an apparent erosion of support where it would be most likely and necessary: in the Arab and Muslim worlds. The difficulty involves what they have done, and what they cannot do.

What they have done is to follow the terrorist’s logic of steadily escalating the degree of carnage and violence—which has meant violating the guerrilla warrior’s logic of bringing the civilian population to your side. This trade-off has not been so visible to Americans, because most of the carnage is in Iraq. There, insurgents have slaughtered civilians daily, before and after the death this spring of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq. But since American troops are also assumed to be killing civilians, the anti-insurgent backlash is muddied.

The situation is different elsewhere. “Like Tourette’s syndrome, they keep killing Muslim civilians,” says Peter Bergen. “That is their Achilles’ heel. Every time the bombs go off and kill civilians, it works in our favor. It’s a double whammy when the civilians they kill are Muslims.” Last November, groups directed by al-Zarqawi set off bombs in three hotels in Amman, Jordan. Some sixty civilians were killed, including thirty-eight at a wedding. The result was to turn Jordanian public opinion against al-Qaeda and al-Zarqawi, and to make the Jordanian government more openly cooperative with the United States. In October 2002, a suicide bomber from Jemaah Islamiyah (the Indonesian counterpart to al-Qaeda) blew up a nightclub in Bali and killed more than 200 people. Most of them were Australians and other foreigners, and the attack created little backlash among Muslims. A year ago, a second wave of suicide bombings in Bali killed twenty people, fifteen of them Indonesians. “The reaction in Indonesia was extremely negative,” Bergen says. Other people described similar reactions to incidents in Egypt, Pakistan, even Saudi Arabia.

If you have a taste for doctrinal dispute, the internal al-Qaeda documents that Bergen included in his book

on bin Laden and those available elsewhere make fascinating reading. Fawaz Gerges, of Sarah Lawrence College, who was raised in Lebanon, describes some of these documents in his new book, *Journey of the Jihadist*. He quotes one Egyptian extremist, who is still in prison for his role in the assassination of Anwar Sadat, as saying that al-Qaeda had left the world's Muslims worse off than before 9/11. This man, Mohammed Essam Derbala, told Gerges that jihad for the sake of jihad—which is how he viewed al-Qaeda's efforts—had backfired, and that, as Gerges writes, “It produces the opposite of the desired results: the downfall of the Taliban regime and the slaughter of thousands of young Muslims.” In 2005, al-Zawahiri rebuked al-Zarqawi for the extreme brutality of his terrorist campaign within Iraq, in what Bergen has called the “enough with the beheadings!” memo.

Marc Sageman says that those recruited into terrorist groups, from the nineteenth-century anarchists to the present jihadists, are typically “romantic young people in a hurry, with a dream of changing the world.” The romance is easiest to maintain during strikes on distant, depersonalized enemies, like the Americans overseas or the Israelis behind their new barriers. But as attacks move into the terrorists' own neighborhoods, and as the victims include recognizable kinsmen or fellow citizens, the romance fades. That is why, Sageman says, “my long-term view is that the militants will keep pushing the envelope and committing more atrocities to the point that the dream will no longer be attractive to young people.”

The other part of a battle of ideas is the ability to offer a positive vision, and there al-Qaeda's failure has been complete.

Shibley Telhami, of the University of Maryland, has conducted polls in six Muslim countries since 9/11, gauging popular attitudes toward the United States and toward al-Qaeda. “If their aim was to be the source of inspiration for the Muslim world,” Telhami says of al-Qaeda, “they are not that.” Telhami's polls, like those from the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, show a steady increase in hostility toward the United States—but no surge of enthusiasm for Taliban-style fundamentalist life. “What we see in the polls,” Telhami told me shortly before al-Zarqawi was killed, “is that many people would like bin Laden and Zarqawi to hurt America. But they do not want bin Laden to rule their children.” In his polls, people were asked to identify which aspect of al-Qaeda they most sympathized with. Only 6 percent of respondents chose al-Qaeda's advocacy of a puritanical Islamic state.

“The things we have done right have hurt al-Qaeda,” says Caleb Carr, who strongly supported the reasoning behind the war in Iraq. By this he means the rout of the Taliban and the continued surveillance of Pakistan. “The things they have done wrong”—meaning the attacks on mosques and markets—“have hurt them worse.”

“There is only one thing keeping them going now,” he added. “That is our incredible mistakes.” The biggest series of mistakes all of these experts have in mind is Iraq.

#### WHAT HAS GONE RIGHT FOR AL-QAEDA

**O**ver the past five years Americans have heard about “asymmetric war,” the “long war,” and “fourth-generation war.” Here is an important but underdiscussed difference between all of these and “regular war.”

In its past military encounters, the United States was mainly concerned about the damage an enemy could do directly—the Soviet Union with nuclear missiles, Axis-era Germany or Japan with shock troops. In the modern brand of terrorist warfare, what an enemy can do directly is limited. The most dangerous thing it can do is to provoke you into hurting yourself.

This is what David Kilcullen meant in saying that the response to terrorism was potentially far more destructive than the deed itself. And it is why most people I spoke with said that three kinds of American

reaction—the war in Iraq, the economic consequences of willy-nilly spending on security, and the erosion of America’s moral authority—were responsible for such strength as al-Qaeda now maintained.

“You only have to look at the Iraq War to see how much damage you can do to yourself by your response,” Kilcullen told me. He is another of those who supported the war and consider it important to fight toward some kind of victory, but who recognize the ways in which this conflict has helped al-Qaeda. So far the war in Iraq has advanced the jihadist cause because it generates a steady supply of Islamic victims, or martyrs; because it seems to prove Osama bin Laden’s contention that America lusts to occupy Islam’s sacred sites, abuse Muslim people, and steal Muslim resources; and because it raises the tantalizing possibility that humble Muslim insurgents, with cheap, primitive weapons, can once more hobble and ultimately destroy a superpower, as they believe they did to the Soviet Union in Afghanistan twenty years ago. The United States also played a large role in thwarting the Soviets, but that doesn’t matter. For mythic purposes, mujahideen brought down one anti-Islamic army and can bring down another.

If the United States stays in Iraq, it keeps making enemies. If it leaves, it goes dragging its tail. Six months after the start of the Iraq War, bin Laden issued a bitter criticism of the Bush administration (“Bush and his gang, with their heavy sticks and hard hearts, are an evil to all humankind”). After the president was reelected, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri said that the jihad against all Americans should continue until the United States changes its policy toward Muslim countries. “Many believe that the United States, bloodied and exhausted by the insurgency, stripped of its allies, will eventually withdraw,” Brian Jenkins writes of the jihadist view. From that perspective, “this defeat alone could bring about the collapse of the United States, just as collapse followed the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan.”

Jim Guirard, a writer and former Senate staffer, says that America’s response has helped confirm bin Laden’s worldview in an unintended way. The Arabic terms often brought into English to describe Islamic extremists—*jihadists* or *mujahideen* for “warriors,” plus the less-frequently used *shahiddin* for “martyrs”—are, according to Guirard, exactly the terms al-Qaeda would like to see used. *Mujahideen* essentially means “holy warriors”; the other terms imply righteous struggle in the cause of Islam. The Iraqi clergyman-warlord Muqtada al-Sadr named his paramilitary force the Mahdi Army. To Sunnis and Shiites alike, the Mahdi is the ultimate savior of mankind, equivalent to the Messiah. Branches of Islam disagree about the Mahdi’s exact identity and the timing of his arrival on earth, but each time U.S. officials refer to insurgents of the Mahdi Army, they confer legitimacy on their opponent in all Muslims’ eyes.

With the advice of Islamic scholars and think-tank officials, Guirard has assembled an alternative lexicon he thinks U.S. officials should use in both English and Arabic. These include *hirabah* (“unholy war”) instead of *jihad*; *irhabists* (“terrorists”) instead of *jihadists*; *mufsidoon* (“evildoers”) instead of *mujahideen*; and so on. The long-term effect, he says, would be like labeling certain kinds of battle *genocide* or *war crime* rather than plain *combat*—not decisive, but useful. Conceivably President Bush’s frequent use of *evildoers* to describe terrorists and insurgents represented a deliberate step in this direction, intended to steer the Arabic translation of his comments toward the derogatory terms. (I could not confirm whether there was any such plan behind Bush’s choice of words, or whether it had made much difference in translations. While granting Guirard’s point, for convenience I’ll stick with the familiar terms here.)

The fictional al-Qaeda strategist in Brian Jenkins’s book tells Osama bin Laden that the U.S. presence in Iraq “surely is a gift from Allah,” because it has trapped American soldiers “where they are vulnerable to the kind of warfare the jihadists wage best: lying in wait to attack; carrying out assassinations, kidnappings, ambushes, and suicide attacks; destroying the economy; making the enemy’s life untenable.” The Egyptian militants profiled in *Journey of the Jihadist* told Fawaz Gerges that they were repelled by al-Qaeda after the 9/11 attacks and deaf to its appeals to undertake jihad against the United States. But that all changed, they said, when the United States invaded Iraq.

Because the general point is familiar, I'll let one more anecdote about the consequences of invading Iraq stand for many that I heard. When Americans think of satellite surveillance and the National Security Agency, they are likely to imagine something out of the TV show *24*: a limitless set of eyes in the sky that can watch everything, all the time. In fact, even today's amply funded NSA can watch only a limited number of sites. "Our overhead imagery is dedicated to force protection in Iraq and Afghanistan," I was told by a former intelligence official who would not let me use his name. He meant that the satellites are tied up following U.S. troops on patrol and in firefights to let them know who might be waiting in ambush. "There are still ammo dumps in Iraq that are open to insurgents," he said, "but we lack the imagery to cover them—let alone what people might be dreaming up in Thailand or Bangladesh." Because so many spy satellites are trained on the countries we have invaded, they tell us less than they used to about the rest of the world.

Documents captured after 9/11 showed that bin Laden hoped to provoke the United States into an invasion and occupation that would entail all the complications that have arisen in Iraq. His only error was to think that the place where Americans would get stuck would be Afghanistan.

Bin Laden also hoped that such an entrapment would drain the United States financially. Many al-Qaeda documents refer to the importance of sapping American economic strength as a step toward reducing America's ability to throw its weight around in the Middle East. Bin Laden imagined this would happen largely through attacks on America's oil supply. This is still a goal. For instance, a 2004 fatwa from the imprisoned head of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia declared that targeting oil pipelines and refineries was a legitimate form of economic jihad—and that economic jihad "is one of the most powerful ways in which we can take revenge on the infidels during this present stage." The fatwa went on to offer an analysis many economists would be proud of, laying out all the steps that would lead from a less-secure oil supply to a less-productive American economy and ultimately to a run on the dollar. (It also emphasized that oil wells themselves should be attacked only as a last resort, because news coverage of the smoke and fires would hurt al-Qaeda's image.)

Higher-priced oil has hurt America, but what has hurt more is the economic reaction bin Laden didn't fully foresee. This is the systematic drag on public and private resources created by the undifferentiated need to be "secure."

The effect is most obvious on the public level. "The economy as a whole took six months or so to recover from the effects of 9/11," Richard Clarke told me. "The federal budget never recovered. The federal budget is in a permanent mess, to a large degree because of 9/11." At the start of 2001, the federal budget was \$125 billion in surplus. Now it is \$300 billion in deficit.

A total of five people died from anthrax spores sent through the mail shortly after 9/11. In *Devils and Duct Tape*, his forthcoming book, John Mueller points out that the U.S. Postal Service will eventually spend about \$5 billion on protective screening equipment and other measures in response to the anthrax threat, or about \$1 billion per fatality. Each new security guard, each extra checkpoint or biometric measure, is both a direct cost and an indirect drag on economic flexibility.

If bin Laden hadn't fully anticipated this effect, he certainly recognized it after it occurred. In his statement just before the 2004 election, he quoted the finding of the Royal Institute of International Affairs (!) to the effect that the total cost, direct and indirect, to America of the 9/11 attacks was at least \$500 billion. Bin Laden gleefully pointed out that the attacks had cost al-Qaeda about \$500,000, for a million-to-one payoff ratio. America's deficit spending for Iraq and homeland security was, he said, "evidence of the success of the bleed-until-bankruptcy plan, with Allah's permission."

The final destructive response helping al-Qaeda has been America's estrangement from its allies and

diminution of its traditionally vast “soft power.” “America’s cause is doomed unless it regains the moral high ground,” Sir Richard Dearlove, the former director of Britain’s secret intelligence agency, MI-6, told me. He pointed out that by the end of the Cold War there was no dispute worldwide about which side held the moral high ground—and that this made his work as a spymaster far easier. “Potential recruits would come to us because they believed in the cause,” he said. A senior army officer from a country whose forces are fighting alongside America’s in Iraq similarly told me that America “simply has to recapture its moral authority.” His reasoning:

The United States is so powerful militarily that by its very nature it represents a threat to every other nation on earth. The only country that could theoretically destroy every single other country is the United States. The only way we can say that the U.S. is *not* a threat is by looking at intent, and that depends on moral authority. If you’re not sure the United States is going to do the right thing, you can’t trust it with that power, so you begin thinking, How can I balance it off and find other alliances to protect myself?

America’s glory has been its openness and idealism, internally and externally. Each has been constrained from time to time, but not for as long or in as open-ended a way as now. “We are slowly changing their way of life,” Michael Scheuer’s fictional adviser to bin Laden says in his briefing. The Americans’ capital city is more bunkerlike than it was during World War II, he comments; the people live as if terrified, and watch passively as elementary-school children go through metal detectors before entering museums.

“There is one thing above all that bin Laden can feel relieved about,” Caleb Carr told me. “It’s that we have never stopped to reassess our situation. We have been so busy reacting that we have not yet said, ‘We’ve made some mistakes, we’ve done serious damage to ourselves, so let’s think about our position and strategies.’”

Seizing that opportunity can give America its edge.

#### CHANGING THE GAME

**H**ere is something I never expected. When I began this reporting, I imagined that it would mean a further plunge into current-events gloom. Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri might be under siege, but they had spawned countless imitators. Instead of having one main terrorist group to worry about, the United States now had hundreds. America’s explicit efforts to win the “war of ideas” for support from the world’s Muslims were being drowned out by the implicit messages from Afghanistan and Iraq and Guantánamo (and from the State Department, as it rejected requests for student visas). Our enemies were thinking in centuries-long terms, while we were living election to election—and with the results of the 2004 presidential election, anti-American sentiment hardened among Muslims worldwide. Sooner or later our enemies would find one of our vulnerable points—and then another, and another.

To some degree, many of these discouraging possibilities are likely to come true. Hostile groups and individuals will keep planning attacks on the United States. Some of the attacks will succeed. Americans—especially those who live in Washington, New York, and other big cities—will share a reality known for many years to residents of cities from London to Jerusalem: that the perils of urban life include the risk of being a civilian casualty of worldwide political tensions.

But the deeper and more discouraging prospect—that the United States is doomed to spend decades cowering defensively—need not come true. How can the United States regain the initiative against terrorists, as opposed to living in a permanent crouch? By recognizing the point that I heard from so many military strategists: that terrorists, through their own efforts, can damage but not destroy us. Their real destructive power, again, lies in what they can provoke us to do. While the United States can never

completely control what violent groups intend and sometimes achieve, it can determine its own response. That we have this power should come as good and important news, because it switches the strategic advantage to our side.

So far, the United States has been as predictable in its responses as al-Qaeda could have dreamed. Early in 2004, a Saudi exile named Saad al-Faqih was interviewed by the online publication *Terrorism Monitor*. Al-Faqih, who leads an opposition group seeking political reform in Saudi Arabia, is a longtime observer of his fellow Saudi Osama bin Laden and of the evolution of bin Laden's doctrine for al-Qaeda.

In the interview, al-Faqih said that for nearly a decade, bin Laden and al-Zawahiri had followed a powerful grand strategy for confronting the United States. Their approach boiled down to "superpower baiting" (as John Robb, of the Global Guerrillas blog, put it in an article about the interview). The most predictable thing about Americans, in this view, was that they would rise to the bait of a challenge or provocation. "Zawahiri impressed upon bin Laden the importance of understanding the American mentality," al-Faqih said. He said he believed that al-Zawahiri had at some point told bin Laden something like this:

The American mentality is a cowboy mentality—if you confront them ... they will react in an extreme manner. In other words, America with all its resources and establishments will shrink into a cowboy when irritated successfully. They will then elevate you, and this will satisfy the Muslim longing for a leader who can successfully challenge the West.

The United States is immeasurably stronger than al-Qaeda, but against jujitsu forms of attack its strength has been its disadvantage. The predictability of the U.S. response has allowed opponents to turn our bulk and momentum against us. Al-Qaeda can do more harm to the United States than to, say, Italy because the self-damaging potential of an uncontrolled American reaction is so vast.

How can the United States escape this trap? Very simply: by declaring that the "global war on terror" is over, and that we have won. "The wartime approach made sense for a while," Dearlove says. "But as time passes and the situation changes, so must the strategy."

As a general principle, a standing state of war can be justified for several reasons. It might be the only way to concentrate the nation's resources where they are needed. It might explain why people are being inconvenienced or asked to sacrifice. It might symbolize that the entire nation's effort is directed toward one goal.

But none of those applies to modern America in its effort to defend itself against terrorist attack. The federal budget reveals no discipline at all about resources: the spending for antiterrorism activities has gone up, but so has the spending for nearly everything else. There is no expectation that Americans in general will share the inconveniences and sacrifice of the 1 percent of the population in uniform (going through airport screening lines does not count). Occasional speeches about the transcendent importance of the "long war" can't conceal the many other goals that day by day take political precedence.

And while a standing state of war no longer offers any advantages for the United States, it creates several problems. It cheapens the concept of war, making the word a synonym for *effort* or *goal*. It predisposes us toward overreactions, of the kind that have already proved so harmful. The detentions at Guantánamo Bay were justified as a wartime emergency. But unlike Abraham Lincoln's declaration of martial law, they have no natural end point.

A state of war encourages a state of fear. "The War on Terror does not reduce public anxieties by thwarting terrorists poised to strike," writes Ian Lustick, of the University of Pennsylvania, in his forthcoming book, *Trapped in the War on Terror*. "Rather, in myriad ways, conducting the antiterror effort as a 'war' fuels

those anxieties.” John Mueller writes in his book that because “the creation of insecurity, fear, anxiety, hysteria, and overreaction is central for terrorists,” they can be defeated simply by a refusal to overreact. This approach is harder in time of war.

A state of war also predisposes the United States to think about using its assets in a strictly warlike way—and to give short shrift to the vast range of their other possibilities. The U.S. military has been responsible for the most dramatic recent improvement in American standing in the Islamic world. Immediately after the invasion of Iraq, the proportion of Indonesians with a favorable view of the United States had fallen to 15 percent, according to the Pew Global Attitudes Survey. After American troops brought ships, cargo planes, and helicopters loaded with supplies for tsunami victims, the overall Indonesian attitude toward the United States was still negative, but some 79 percent of Indonesians said that their opinion of America had improved because of the relief effort. There was a similar turnaround in Pakistan after U.S. troops helped feed and rescue villagers affected by a major earthquake. But in most of the Muslim world, the image of American troops is that of soldiers or marines manning counterinsurgency patrols, not delivering food and water. “The diplomatic component of the war on terror has been neglected so long, it’s practically vestigial,” a Marine officer told me. “It needs to be regrown.” But in time of war, the balance is harder to correct.

Perhaps worst of all, an open-ended war is an open-ended invitation to defeat. *Sometime* there will be more bombings, shootings, poisonings, and other disruptions in the United States. They will happen in the future because they have happened in the past (Oklahoma City; the Unabomber; the Tylenol poisonings; the Washington, D.C.-area snipers; the still-unsolved anthrax mailings; the countless shootings at schools; and so on). These previous episodes were not caused by Islamic extremists; future ones may well be. In all cases they represent a failure of the government to protect its people. But if they occur while the war is still on, they are enemy “victories,” not misfortunes of the sort that great nations suffer. They are also powerful provocations to another round of hasty reactions.

War implies emergency, and the upshot of most of what I heard was that the United States needs to shift its operations to a long-term, nonemergency basis. “De-escalation of the rhetoric is the first step,” John Robb told me. “It is hard for insurgents to handle de-escalation.” War encourages a simple classification of the world into ally or enemy. This polarization gives dispersed terrorist groups a unity they might not have on their own. Last year, in a widely circulated paper for the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, David Kilcullen argued that Islamic extremists from around the world yearn to constitute themselves as a global jihad. Therefore, he said, Western countries should do everything possible to treat terrorist groups individually, rather than “lumping together all terrorism, all rogue or failed states, and all strategic competitors who might potentially oppose U.S. objectives.” The friend-or-foe categorization of war makes lumping together more likely.

The United States can declare victory by saying that what is controllable has been controlled: Al-Qaeda Central has been broken up. Then the country can move to its real work. It will happen on three levels: domestic protection, worldwide harassment and pursuit of al-Qaeda, and an all-fronts diplomatic campaign.

Domestically, a sustainable post-victory policy would mean shifting from the early, panicky “Code Orange” days, in which everything was threatened and any investment in “security” was justified, to a more practical and triage-minded approach. Four analysts—Mueller, of Ohio State; Lustick, of the University of Pennsylvania; plus Veronique de Rugy, of the American Enterprise Institute; and Benjamin Friedman, of MIT—have written extensively about the mindlessness and perverse effects of much homeland-security spending. In most cases, they argue, money dabbled out for a security fence here and a screening machine there would be far better spent on robust emergency-response systems. No matter how much they spend, state and federal authorities cannot possibly protect every place from every threat. But they could come close to ensuring that if things were to go wrong, relief and repair would be there fast.

Internationally, the effort to pin down bin Laden—to listen to his conversations, keep him off balance, and prevent him from re-forming an organization—has been successful. It must continue. And the international cooperation on which it depends will be easier in the absence of wartime language and friction. The effort to contain the one true existential threat to the United States—that of “loose nukes”—will also be eased by smoother relations with other countries.

Militarily, the United States has been stuck in an awkward middle ground concerning the need for “transformation.” Donald Rumsfeld’s insistence that the Army, in particular, rely on technology to become leaner and more “efficient” led to steady reductions in the planned size of the ground force that invaded and occupied Iraq. By most accounts, Rumsfeld went too far with that pressure—but not far enough in changing the largest patterns of Pentagon spending. This year’s *Quadrennial Defense Review*, which is supposed to represent a bottom-up effort to rethink America’s defense needs, says that the nation needs to prepare for a new era of fighting terrorists and insurgents (plus China)—and then offers programs and weapons very much the same as when the enemy was the Soviet Union. “The United States is still trying to use its familiar old instruments against new opponents,” says Martin van Creveld, who calls Iraq a “totally unnecessary war.” “It was the right army to beat Saddam Hussein,” he says, “but the wrong one to occupy the country or deal with Osama bin Laden.” Most counterterrorism authorities say that a transformation is also needed in the nation’s spy agencies, starting with a much greater emphasis on language training and agents who develop long-term regional expertise in Muslim-dominated parts of the world.

Diplomatically, the United States can use the combination of “hard” and “soft” assets that constitute its unique strength to show a face that will again attract the world. “The only answer to a regime that wages total cold war is to wage total peace.” So said Dwight Eisenhower in his State of the Union address in 1958, four months after *Sputnik* was launched. He added, “This means bringing to bear every asset of our personal and national lives upon the task of building the conditions in which security and peace can grow.” A similar policy would allow the modern United States to use its diplomatic, economic, intellectual, and military means to reduce the long-term sources of terrorist rage.

America’s range of strengths is, if anything, greater than when Eisenhower spoke nearly fifty years ago. The domestic population is more ethnically varied and accepting of outsiders. The university establishment is much larger. The leading companies are more fully integrated into local societies around the world. The nation has more numerous, better-funded, and more broadly experienced charitable foundations. It is much richer in every way. With the passing of the nuclear showdown against the Soviet Union, the country is safer than it was under Eisenhower. We should be able to “wage total peace” more effectively.

Americans still face dangers, as they always have. They have recently lacked leaders to help keep the dangers in perspective. Shaping public awareness—what we mean by “leading”—is what we most remember in our strong presidents: Lincoln’s tone as the Civil War came on and as it neared its end; Theodore Roosevelt taking the first real steps toward environmental conservation and coming to terms with new industrial organizations; Franklin Roosevelt in the Depression and the Second World War; Eisenhower managing the showdown with the Soviet Union, but also overseeing the steady expansion of America’s transportation, scientific, and educational systems; Kennedy with the race to the moon; and on up to George W. Bush, with his calm focus in the months immediately after 9/11. One of the signals Bush sent in those first days may have had the greatest strategic importance in the long run. That was his immediate insistence that America’s Muslims were not the enemy, that they should not be singled out, that they should be seen as part of the nation’s solution rather than part of its problem. It is easy to imagine that a different tone would have had damaging repercussions.

Now we could use a leader to help us understand victory and its consequences. We are ready for a message like this one:

My fellow Americans, we have achieved something almost no one thought possible five years ago. The nation did not suffer the quick follow-up attacks so many people feared and expected. Our troops found the people who were responsible for the worst attack ever on our soil. We killed many, we captured more, and we placed their leaders in a position where they could not direct the next despicable attack on our people—and where the conscience of the world’s people, of whatever faith, has turned against them for their barbarism. They have been a shame to their own great faith, and to all other historic standards of decency.

Achieving this victory does not mean the end of threats. Life is never free of dangers. I wish I could tell you that no American will ever again be killed or wounded by a terrorist—and that no other person on this earth will be either. But I cannot say that, and you could not believe me if I did. Life brings risk—especially life in an open society, like the one that people of this land have sacrificed for centuries to create.

We have achieved a great victory, and for that we can give thanks—above all to our troops. We will be at our best if we do not let fear paralyze or obsess us. We will be at our best if we instead optimistically and enthusiastically begin the next chapter in our nation’s growth. We will deal with the struggles of our time. These include coping with terrorism, but also recognizing the huge shifts in power and resulting possibilities in Asia, in Latin America, in many other parts of the world. We will recognize the challenges of including the people left behind in the process of global development—people in the Middle East, in Africa, even in developed countries like our own. The world’s scientists have never before had so much to offer, so fast—and humanity has never needed their discoveries more than we do now, to preserve the world’s environment, to develop new sources of energy, to improve the quality of people’s lives in every corner of the globe, to contain the threats that modern weaponry can put into the hands of individuals or small groups.

The great organizing challenge of our time includes coping with the threat of bombings and with the political extremism that lies behind it. That is one part of this era’s duty. But it is not the entirety. History will judge us on our ability to deal with the full range of this era’s challenges—and opportunities. With quiet pride, we recognize the victory we have won. And with the determination that has marked us through our nation’s history, we continue the pursuit of our American mission, undeterred by the perils that we will face.

Different leaders will choose different words. But the message—of realism, of courage, and of optimism despite life’s difficulties—is one we need to hear.

*Photograph by Jim Hollander/EPA/Corbis*

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