
Symposium on America's War on Terrorism

Co-sponsored by *The National Interest* and *The Nixon Center*

Summary by Nikolas K. Gvosdev, Executive Editor, [The National Interest](#)

On October 4, 2001, [The National Interest](#) and The Nixon Center convened a symposium to consider the long-term impacts of the terrorist attacks of September 11th on different facets of U.S. policy. Dr. James Schlesinger—Publisher of [The National Interest](#), Chairman of The Nixon Center's Advisory Council, and a former Secretary of Defense and Director of the Central Intelligence Agency—chaired the symposium. He asked the participants, a selected group of distinguished foreign policy practitioners, journalists, and analysts, to consider the ramifications of this “highly successful” act of terrorism, unprecedented in history in terms of the scale of death and destruction caused, for the future of foreign, defense, economic, and domestic policy. An edited transcript of the sessions, along with a series of commentary articles, will be published as a special supplement of [The National Interest](#).

Foreign Policy

Columnist Charles Krauthammer opened the first session by pointing out that, for the last ten years, Americans have been on a “holiday from history.” The confusion over the direction of American foreign policy in the aftermath of the Cold War has now ended, replaced by a new “organizing principle”: the war on terrorism. Radical Islam has replaced fascism and communism as the new threat to U. S. security, and the United States will be able to determine who its friends and foes in the post-Cold War world are based upon their support (or lack thereof) in this new struggle.

The attack of September 11th marks the end of “unchallenged unipolarity” for the United States has been shown to be vulnerable; however, instead of a coalition of states forming to oppose perceived American hegemony in the world (e. g. a Sino-Russian alliance or some other grouping of powers), it is a movement, using unconventional means, which is trying to challenge the American-led international system by striking at the very principle it rests upon: the open society. The structure of the post-Cold War world rests not upon the illusion of global norms but on effective American power to guarantee open lines of communication and trade. Terrorism is an attempt to erode the basis of the Pax Americana based on openness. Thus, the United States must clearly demonstrate its power—and thus its strength—by waging a successful campaign against the terrorists.

Dr. Krauthammer identified several post-attack “tectonic shifts” in foreign policy. The first is a likely realignment of countries and a reseeded of American priorities, the most critical of which is the relationship with Russia. The attack and the resulting struggle against global

terrorism provides a way to align Russia with the West. The second is dealing with the psychological shock of American vulnerability. The United States, particularly in the last decade, used to act on the international arena with an incredible margin of safety; this sense of invulnerability to attack allowed many Americans to conceive of the national interest in very broad, expansive, and idealistic terms (e. g. the world-wide “defense of freedom.”) Now, the pendulum appears to be shifting to a more narrow, realist conception of the national interest.

Dimitri K. Simes, the president of The Nixon Center, commented that, for a hegemonic power, the United States has been remarkably lax. He noted that in trying to determine a motive for the September 11th attacks, it is important to recall that for some groups, the United States is despised for specific policies, and for others, the United States itself, as a society and civilization, is to be targeted. As the preeminent actor in the international arena, the United States has “danced on the global minefield,” and it is expected that, sooner or later, one would have to go off. What is now critical is for the United States to step up to the challenge that has been presented. For the last ten years, the United States largely ignored the problem of Afghanistan. In 1989, the United States was not prepared either to work with the Soviet Union to establish some sort of coalition regime, or to take steps to create a viable post-Soviet government after the USSR withdrew. Since then, the United States allowed the vacuum to develop which produced the Taliban. Such inattention can no longer be tolerated. He also criticized the way that some American commentators seem to feel that, in order to demonstrate their support of the United States in the war against terrorism, other states are obliged to abandon their specific foreign policy agendas. Instead, our attitude must be that the fact that other states, including Russia and China, have specific agendas is not a big problem as long as they do not seek to work against important American interests in pursuing those agendas.

Dr. Adam Garfinkle, editor of The National Interest, pointed to the key dilemma facing policymakers. While there is a great deal of political consensus for military operations directed against Afghanistan, demonstrating a clear military victory in that particular part of the world is problematic. There are other states that sponsor and aid terrorists where overwhelming U. S. military might could be employed effectively and decisively, but there is no political consensus to act. Moreover, in focusing on Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda organization, policymakers have paid almost no attention to the ideological foundation for Islamic radicalism—Wahhabi Islam. The financial and organizational support for Wahhabism by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states must be addressed, and it must be clear that America's erstwhile allies in the region will suffer serious penalties if they continue to promote this type of radicalism.

In the discussion that followed, much attention was paid to the question of what constitutes “success” in the coming campaign. Is success defined as the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan? If the Taliban regime collapses before any substantive U. S. intervention takes place, would the United States receive the “credit” for its destruction, and would this deter other would-be sponsors of terrorism?

Issues about long-term strategy were also discussed. A military strike on Afghanistan (or other state sponsors of terrorism) cannot occur within a vacuum; what role would the United States play in any post-strike reconstruction, to “fill the void” and prevent terrorist movements from finding refuge and shelter in the ruins? Is seeking a regime change (in Afghanistan or in other states) the optimal solution for ending state sponsorship of terrorism; indeed, are there indeed any viable alternatives to regimes in Iraq or Syria? Will other states, such as Syria, respond to American pressure if it is delivered in the form of an ultimatum to cease and desist from support for terrorism? Could the anti-terrorist campaign end up derailing the cause of economic and political reform in Iran, and reduce the likelihood of an evolutionary change in regime? No consensus was reached as to what the likely answers would be.

Discussion then shifted to whether or not the fight against terrorism could be sustained over the long-term as the new “operating principle” of American foreign policy. At what point might pre-attack concerns—differences with China over the status of Taiwan, or coping with global warming—reemerge as significant points of dispute with other states? How enduring would the anti-terrorism coalition be, and could it remain intact if the focus of its attention was no longer simply bin Laden, the al-Qaeda network, or Afghanistan in particular? In the end, what even constitutes terrorism? (The consensus that emerged was that terrorism should not be conflated with all acts of violence, but seen as planned and deliberate attacks on civilian targets for political advantage, as opposed to acts against military targets.)

The United States needs to become comfortable with a more undefined and vague international system, where realist considerations (forging common cause with other states to pursue joint action against our enemies) takes precedence in the formulation of policy. Predictions were advanced that, over the next several years, terrorism will become an “established facet of life,” for all, including Americans. In practical terms, this might lead to more controls being established with regard to travel, civil liberties, and the free flow of persons and capital. A vigorous U. S. response against Afghanistan might lead other states to severely restrict their support of terrorism so as not to trigger an overwhelming American response. The struggle against terrorism will be largely undertaken on a country-by-country basis, with alliances of convenience forming and dissolving as specific conditions change.

National Security Policy

Richard Perle, Chairman of the Defense Policy Board and a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, opened the second session. He began by noting that the world, but especially the states that support terrorism, are expecting an American response that is commensurate to the attack. He warned that anything that appears to be nothing more than a symbolic or token gesture will be a source of encouragement to other groups—and the states that sponsor them—to engage in further attacks. The response must be severe, highlighting the destruction of the physical infrastructure—bases and other buildings—that form part of the terrorist apparatus.

The United States has at its disposal a formidable array of weaponry and an unmatched set of military institutions to carry out any response, but the U. S. must not become trapped in its thinking about the coming campaign. It must not allow the action to become defined as a “manhunt” for Osama bin Laden, defining success or failure by the capture of a single individual. It must recognize that a traditional assumption in formulating a defensive strategy—that an attacker wants to survive—is not operative. Most importantly, the role of state sponsorship cannot be covered up. The September 11th attack, he noted, was not planned in a cave in Afghanistan. It required a great deal of planning and support staff, noting that one likely possibility is that the terrorists were able to “test” what sorts of weapons might pass X-ray inspection. Terrorists need states to provide equipment and sanctuary. However, up to this point, the cost to a state for supporting terrorism has been quite low. Without a sharp increase in the price—and all the governments which support terrorism have a number of vulnerable assets that are susceptible to destruction—states will not abandon their support of terrorist groups. The United States needs to be prepared to utilize a whole range of political and military options to put pressure on other states; if so, he concluded, we will see a “mass exodus from the terrorism business.”

Mr. Perle noted that, unlike prior to Desert Storm, the creation of an international coalition is not as pressing in order to achieve success. If the price of coalition-building today is to shackle the United States, it is not worth pursuing, especially if the process is corrupted by including states in the coalition that are known sponsors of terrorism. He warned against accepting any precedents that would suggest that the United States requires some sort of international authority (e. g. from the United Nations or NATO) before it can act against terrorism. Instead of assembling a “list of names”, the United States should enlist the aid of specific countries that have critical elements that we require on a case-by-case basis.

In the resulting discussion, the participants were reminded that the United States must think for the long term, that it took Germany and Japan nearly twenty years to eliminate radical terrorist groups operating in their countries. There must be effective coordination and utilization of resources. The past practice of agencies and departments using homeland security as a line item in the budget to cover pork and pet projects must be ended, as well as the largely artificial distinction between defense as something done “overseas” versus in the homeland. Resources must be found to bolster defenses, both foreign and domestic, rather than having a situation where one is increased at the expense of the other, though Mr. Perle noted that as terrorist groups are decimated overseas, before they have been able to enter and establish themselves in the United States, the domestic costs of increased security will begin to be lowered.

The question was raised at what point will terrorist groups be able to operate and utilize technologies of mass destruction without significant state sponsorship. In the debate that ensued, the general consensus that emerged was that, at this point in time, no terrorist group can hope to develop a workable, viable weapon of mass destruction without significant state backing in terms of resources and facilities; therefore, attention must remain focused upon the role of state sponsorship in aiding and abetting terrorism.

Economic Policy

Foreign Policy magazine editor Moises Naim began the session on economic policy by pointing out that, even prior to the attacks, the global economy was poised to enter recession, but the events of September 11th have “consolidated” the trends. Capital flows to the developing world are down, the search for secure havens for wealth is increasing, and commodity prices are dropping. However, the attacks have also removed some of the political limitations to government action to stimulate the economy. The rigid ideological commitment to allowing the “market” to solve all economic problems has been modified by the language of “bailout.” In pursuing a more vigorous policy of external and internal defense, there is a greater toleration today in American circles for fiscal deficits, and the rhetoric of a “lockbox” to preserve any sort of surplus has vanished from the lexicon. The new-found bipartisanship in Congress may also translate into the granting of “trade promotion authority” to the President, enabling progress to be reached at the next summit of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in Doha. However, there are limits to what any stimulus policy can achieve. Harder to quantify is how the shock waves from the crisis in confidence in the aftermath of September 11th will affect the global economy.

Dr. Naim identified five variables that are crucial to the restoration of confidence in the American economy, and by extension, the global markets. The first and foremost is that there must be a credible policy framework in place to deal with the crisis which is perceived as being sustainable and achievable. A grandiose plan is less useful than a more limited but attainable proposal. Linked to this is the perception of the quality of the economic team that the Administration has in place to implement the proposals. The third is the domestic political climate (as to whether the economic proposals enjoy broad-ranging support or whether the plan is doomed to be picked apart). The fourth element and the hardest to predict are the external factors (e. g. the oil price) which can have a dramatic impact on whether the proposed economic package can be achieved. The final element to the restoration of business confidence is how the political leadership is perceived.

In the discussion that followed, it was noted that economic recovery will also be linked to the confidence of American workers and consumers that their lives and property are secure from further attacks. There must also be an increase in new investment, for, even before the attacks, the venture capital markets were largely dormant, reflecting a lack of interest in new investment projects.

The prediction was advanced that a recession would last into the second quarter of 2002, and that the oil price would decline to a low of \$19.75 per barrel before beginning to increase (as demand picks up in the second half of 2002). While raids on Afghanistan would have little or no likely effect on the price of oil, any expansion of the war on terrorism (to encompass Iran or Iraq, for example) would cause a great deal of volatility in the oil price. The real beneficiary in the coming year is likely to be Russia, a non-OPEC member (yet the world's second largest oil producer) who is poised to be able to influence the oil price not only by its own domestic production, but its clout over the new hydrocarbon sources in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Domestic Policy

The last session—covering domestic policy—began with the remarks of former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Fred Ikle. Dr. Ikle began by commenting on the sense of shock within the United States, as to how could this tragedy have befallen us? He noted that Americans' sense of invulnerability prior to the attack created an attitude that hampered real efforts to deal with the potential threat of mass-casualty terrorism on U. S. soil—public concerns about civil liberties, bureaucratic infighting, and Congressional inaction. Citing one example, Dr. Ikle pointed out how the tort laws have handicapped our preparations, noting that the Defense Department ultimately contracted with a British firm to provide smallpox vaccinations, because most American firms feared potential antitrust and liability factors in undertaking such work. Dr. Ikle suggested that effective homeland defense is to take those measures that will force potential attackers to have to call more attention to themselves, making identification of terrorist threats easier. This requires real coordination and actual funding for programs.

A vigorous discussion ensued about what steps need to be taken. Some of the participants argued that an entire new “homeland security agency” is required, because existing institutions—the FBI, CIA, and others—are too mired in their specific bureaucratic culture to effectively reorient themselves to combat the new terrorist threats. Others maintained that remaking the government and adding new bureaucratic entities is not the solution, that existing agencies must be tasked to deal with discrete issues and be given appropriate funding and staff support to carry out those assignments.

Several participants commented on the inappropriateness of the “czar model” for homeland defense. Having a coordinator who has no control over budgetary outlays and who is largely confined to issuing request of agencies to take action (rather than having authority, backed by control over resources, to direct policy) will prove ineffective. The emerging consensus was that a homeland security advisor must have cabinet rank and have control over budget and personnel. It was also noted that one of the main reasons why there has been little action taken over homeland security issues has been that responsibilities for such matters have been diffused over so many different agencies (with, in some cases, competing pilot programs) that no “iron triangle” has emerged between a specific Executive-branch agency dealing with homeland security and a corresponding Congressional committee that can ensure both effective funding and oversight.

Immigration issues cannot also be overlooked. The visa system, which should be the first line of defense against foreign terrorists entering the United States, is under-funded and viewed as low-level, non-prestigious work by the Foreign Service officers who handle it. Little attention has been paid to the use of Canada as a point of entry for potential terrorists, and without resolving the question of immigration from Mexico, the same networks that bring in illegal immigrants could also be utilized by terrorists. The events of September 11th, therefore, may force American policymakers to seriously reexamine the proposals of President Vicente Fox, to shift to a new system of legal, controlled migration of Mexican workers into the United States.

The session—and the symposium—closed on the following note: would we be having the same conversations if the events of September 11th had been much worse, with a greater loss of life or amount of destruction, especially if a weapon of mass destruction had been utilized? Is the United States taking sufficient measures in its policies—foreign, defense, economic, and domestic—to cope with the threat? Whether we are over-reacting—or under-reacting—can only be assessed over time.

Symposium Participants

Chairman

James Schlesinger
Publisher, The National Interest
Chairman, Advisory Council, The Nixon Center
Former Secretary of Defense, Secretary of Energy, and Director of Central Intelligence

Co-Directors

Adam Garfinkle
Editor, The National Interest

Dimitri K. Simes
President, The Nixon Center

Presenters

Foreign Policy
Charles Krauthammer
Syndicated Columnist

National Security Policy
Richard Perle
Resident Fellow, American Enterprise Institute
Chairman, Defense Policy Board

Economic Policy
Moises Naim
Editor and Publisher, Foreign Policy

Domestic Policy
Fred C. Ikle
Distinguished Scholar, Center for Strategic and International Studies
Former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy

Participants

Michael Armacost
President, Brookings Institution
Former Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs

Michael Barone
Senior Writer, U.S. News & World Report

L. Paul Bremer
Senior Advisor, MMC Enterprise Risk
Former Chairman, U.S. Commission on Terrorism

Frank Carlucci
Chairman, Carlyle Group
Former Secretary of Defense

Anthony Cordesman
Senior Fellow and Arleigh Burke Chair, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Nikolas Gvosdev
Executive Editor, The National Interest

Morton H. Halperin
Senior Fellow, Council on Foreign Relations

Carl Hampe
Counsel, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison

Larry Johnson
Berg Associates

Geoffrey Kemp
Director of Regional Strategic Programs, The Nixon Center

Morton Kondracke
Senior Editor, Roll Call

Peter Kovler
Director, Marjorie Kovler Fund

Mark Krikorian
Executive Director, Center for Immigration Studies

David M. Lampton
Director of Chinese Studies, The Nixon Center

Robert Leiken
Nonresident Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

James Lindsay
Senior Fellow, Brookings Institution

Robert C. McFarlane
Chairman and CEO, Global Energy Investors
Former National Security Advisor

Jessica Mathews
President, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Doris Meissner
Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Former Commissioner, Immigration and Naturalization Service

Steven Moore
President, Club for Growth

Julia Nanay
Director, Petroleum Finance Company

Richard Nelson
Director, Program on International Security, Atlantic Council of the U.S.

Joseph S. Nye, Jr.
Dean, John F. Kennedy School of Government
Former Chairman, National Intelligence Council

Martha Brill Olcott
Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment

Lionel H. Olmer
Partner, Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison
Former Undersecretary of Commerce for International Trade

Erik R. Peterson
Senior Vice President and Director of Studies, Center for Strategic and International Studies

Adam Posen
Senior Fellow, Institute for International Economics

Paul J. Saunders
Director, The Nixon Center

David Speedie
Program Chair, International Peace and Security, Carnegie Corporation of New York

Robin West
Chairman, Petroleum Finance Company