

### III: Is it War?

*War is a matter of vital importance to the State; the province of life or death; the road to survival or ruin.*<sup>69</sup>

The overriding issue in the post-Iraq era is: Is the United States at war?

This is not a matter of mere semantics because “war,” as Sun Tzu insisted, is a consuming struggle for survival, justifying at least for a while any number of drastic measures. During the U.S. Civil War, for example, Lincoln suspended *habeus corpus*, one of the most fundamental American rights, and during World War II, the Roosevelt administration relocated thousands of American citizens of Japanese descent to camps thousand of miles from their homes. After Sept. 11, 2001, the call for a “war on terror” justified all manner of restrictions on civil liberties and expansion of government powers that Americans would have denounced had someone like Russian President Vladimir Putin undertaken them. But, in the foreseeable world environment, will such actions be necessary? Or by restricting democracy and freedom in our own country, are we crippling our efforts to spread it abroad? It all depends on whether we are in a state of war.

The administration of George W. Bush has gone to great lengths to sell the notion of a “war on terror.” Michael Chertoff, the secretary of homeland security, wrote a piece in the *Washington Post* in early 2007 stating categorically, “Make no mistake, we are at war.”<sup>70</sup> His primary justification for considering our situation as war was that Osama bin Laden said that it was:

Is this actually a war? Well, the short answer comes from our enemies. Osama bin Laden’s fatwa of Feb. 23, 1998, was a declaration of war, a self-serving accusation that

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69 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 63.

70 Michael Chertoff, “Make No Mistake: This Is War,” *Washington Post*, April 22, 2007.

America had somehow declared war on Islam, followed by a “ruling” to “kill the Americans and their allies — civilians and military... in any country where it is possible to do it.”

He then gave al-Qaida the capability to actually engage the United States of America in war:

Today’s extreme Islamist groups such as al-Qaida do not merely seek political revolution in their own countries. They aspire to dominate all countries. Their goal is a totalitarian, theocratic empire to be achieved by waging perpetual war on soldiers and civilians alike. That includes the use of weapons of mass destruction ... The fanatics’ intent, while grandiose, is not entirely fanciful. Islamist extremists such as those in al-Qaida, the Taliban and associated groups from North Africa to Iraq and South Asia are fighting for and sometimes achieving control of territory in which they can train; assemble advanced, inhumane weaponry; impose their own vision of repressive law; and dominate local life.

These are powerful arguments, but they also raise questions that the next administration, and all Americans, should consider carefully:

- ▶ Just because bin Laden declared war on the United States 10 years ago, does that mean that we are at war?<sup>71</sup> Shouldn’t we, the world’s strongest military power, be somewhat embarrassed to raise an infirm and isolated old man to the status of legitimate threat to the survival of the United States?
- ▶ Does “not entirely fanciful” mean “real?”
- ▶ Is there one piece of real estate outside the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region where these “associated groups are ... achieving control of territory?” Their success in that area is solely due to our failure to find and destroy bin Laden when we shifted our focus to Iraq.

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71 In his remarks upon leaving the chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, October 1, 2007, Marine Gen. Peter Pace repeated the claim that we are at war because Osama bin Laden said that we are. Ann Scott Tyson, “Gen. Pace’s Successor Is Sworn In,” *Washington Post*, October 1, 2007.

- ▶ Is there any evidence that a sizable minority of people in any of the areas Chertoff describes — other than the Afghan border region — have any desire to live under the control of such groups? If the violent groups that Chertoff describes had any chance of carrying out their program, Saudi Arabia, the homeland of both bin Laden and of the religious philosophy he espouses, should be in revolutionary turmoil.
- ▶ If the United States is at war, how can U.S. officials hold “unlawful enemy combatants” in Guantanamo? Wouldn’t they be prisoners of war?<sup>72</sup>

When deciding whether to consider our current situation “war,” the next administration should also consider that although the war metaphor provides an effective tool for mobilizing domestic support for its positions, wars against entities other than organized military forces are not replete with success. In addition to the guerrilla wars that the next chapter will examine, the United States has fought equally unproductive wars against such ills as poverty, illiteracy and drugs, chewing up huge amounts of taxpayer dollars but producing little and having any number of unintended consequences.

### **If it isn’t “war,” what am I watching on TV?**

What you’re seeing is our participation in the Iraqi civil war.<sup>73</sup> It is similar, though on a larger scale, to the Lebanese civil war that you saw during the late 1970s and early 1980s. After a brief but tragic foray in 1982-83, done as part of an international force and for the best humanitarian reasons, the United States withdrew from that conflict not because we did not sympathize with the Lebanese people, but because President Ronald Reagan had the wisdom to realize that there was nothing our military forces could do about it.

The purpose of this book is not to offer advice on how to wind up U.S. involvement in Iraq, but instead to offer an answer to the question, “What next?” The Iraqis may, as a result of our invasion, be at war for a long time, but the question that concerns us here is whether *we* are at war in a wider sense, such as against “international terrorism.”

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72 William Glaberson, “Military judges dismiss charges for 2 detainees,” *New York Times*, June 5, 2007.

73 Biddle, “Seeing Baghdad, Thinking Saigon.”

### **What's wrong with calling it war?**

The main risk is that we will do the very things to ourselves, in the name of fighting the “war,” that bin Laden fanaticizes doing to us. We are already seeing this: the USA-PATRIOT Act — particularly Section 215, which authorizes broad searches without probable cause — the FBI’s extensive use of “national security letters,” indefinite confinement of anybody the president considers an “unlawful enemy combatant,” and “extraordinary rendition” of suspects to countries like Syria and Egypt that have few inhibitions about interrogation methods. The acceptance of our current condition as “war” has also caused us to abandon fiscal restraint and accept an enormous run-up of the national debt.

Perhaps most curious of all, given the amount of money being spent and the weakness of any foreign opponents, is the significant damage we’ve done to the U.S. military, and not just to its hardware, as described above. To meet its goal for new recruits, the Army has had to resort to a variety of extraordinary measures, including “moral waivers” for those with a criminal background, lowering intellectual qualifications, and even considering targeting illegal aliens for Army service.<sup>74</sup> Financial incentives for service have reached record levels. For new recruits, the Army is offering bonuses of up to \$40,000 (with an extra \$20,000 for reporting early), and junior officers are leaving in such numbers that the Army recently raised its bonus package to \$35,000 to keep them on active duty for three more years.<sup>75</sup> These bonuses are on top of compensation packages that are already generous by U.S. standards. In addition to competitive salaries, members of the military receive free or low-cost medical care for themselves and their families, and they can retire on half pay after 20 years (which, for high school graduates who enlist, could be before reaching age 40), with their medical coverage continuing for life. Despite these measures, readiness continues to degrade, with, for example, only about one-third of the Army’s reserve brigades now fit for combat.<sup>76</sup>

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74 Nick Turse, “Tomgram: Nick Turse on 12-Pentagon Steps to Misfit Military,” *TomDispatch.com*, September 14, 2006, <http://www.tomdispatch.com/index.mhtml?pid=121072>. As a retired officer, I consider military service to be a privilege of citizenship.

75 Thomas Ricks, “Army officer accuses generals of ‘intellectual and moral failures,’” *Washington Post*, April 27, 2007. For the recent raise to \$35,000, see Ann Scott Tyson, “Army Offers Big Cash To Keep Key Officers,” *Washington Post*, October 11, 2007.

76 Maj. Gen. Robert Scales, what service? Statement for the Record, Senate Committee on Armed Services, 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, April 17, 2007.

Another risk is that by calling it “war,” we come to believe that military force is the solution. Again, we are seeing this today. As the next chapter shows, the Department of Defense is depending on the “war on terror” for a large part of its future budget. If, as the next chapter will also argue, military force is not the main component of national security in the post-Iraq era, and in many cases, such as reducing the problems caused by criminal organizations (of which al-Qaida is but one), military force is counter-productive, then pretending that we’re at war only adds to the problems we are trying to solve.

The most important point, however, is that the prosperity of any organization — state or otherwise — depends in large measure on its ability to think clearly about the problems it faces. Adopting a position or ideology and then focusing all one’s efforts on finding facts to justify it is extremely dangerous. The world will move on — and you won’t notice it because the indicators did not fit your preconceptions — until something dramatic happens. It is important, therefore, that the next administration carefully examine the usefulness of a “war on terror” and not merely accept it as a given or succumb to pressure from those with a vested interest in continuing it.