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# Counter-Terrorism as a U.S. National Security Priority

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## **Counter-Terrorism as a U.S. National Security Priority<sup>1</sup>**

by

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In remarks given in January 2010, the U.S. State Department's coordinator for counter-terrorism policy, Daniel Benjamin, declared that a critical test for anyone's counter-terrorism (CT) policy is "to see how they emerge from contact with a genuine terrorist event." Perhaps not surprisingly, Benjamin gave relatively high marks to the Obama Administration of which he is a part, though he admitted that the "underwear bomber" episode of December 23, 2009 – which we shall discuss further below – showed that some of its most important [operating assumptions were no longer adequate.](#)

Napolitano seems to have meant that the government's *response* to the incident went "properly, correctly and ... very smoothly," but of course being merely *responsive* to attacks is obviously inadequate.

Rather than assessing U.S. operational readiness, however, this essay will focus upon questions of CT prioritization, and the place of counter-terrorism within a philosophical or ideological framework that shapes approaches to governance. These issues of conceptualization and prioritization can have real relevance to policy effectiveness, but the connection is indirect. Nevertheless, since it remains useful to assess governments' broad *philosophy* of CT, let us explore such matters through the prism of the Obama Administration's first year or so in office.

I. "We are extraordinarily fortunate ...."

It is no doubt true, as the old saying has it, that it is better to be *lucky* than to be *good*. And, so far, President Barack Obama has been notably lucky. On not one but *two* highly-publicized occasions, terrorists have successfully positioned themselves to cause terrible domestic mayhem on Obama's CT watch – but in both cases their bombs have failed to ignite. On December 23, 2009, a Nigerian man with ties to *al-Qa'ida* terrorist networks in Yemen failed to ignite plastic explosives hidden in his underwear as he sat aboard Northwest Airlines' Flight 253 from Amsterdam on its descent into Detroit. On May 1, 2010, a Pakistani-born naturalized U.S. citizen apparently sponsored by the Pakistani Taliban left a sport-utility vehicle full of explosives sitting in New York City's famous Times Square; the detonators he had fashioned to set off this car bomb, however, failed to work properly. In both cases, even a little bit more technical competence on the terrorists' part could have had grave consequences. Either incident, moreover, could have been the first major terrorist attack in the United States since September 11, 2001. (A third incident, in which a *jihadi* U.S. Army major apparently inspired by an *al-Qa'ida* cleric in Yemen killed 13 people at the Fort Hood military base in Texas in November 2009, seems not to have had dramatic political consequences – perhaps because "only" 13 persons died, or because the perpetrator's chosen method, a shooting spree, no longer horribly shocks Americans inured to such incidents occasionally occurring in schools, post offices, or other locations for more banal reasons of mental instability.)

So the Obama Administration is certainly lucky. (As Daniel Benjamin put it, "[we are extraordinarily fortunate](#).") George W. Bush managed to avoid presiding over any follow-up to the disastrously unexpected terrorist attacks of September 2001 – which killed nearly 3,000 people in the space of a few minutes, precipitated profound changes in U.S. domestic security policy, plunged the United States into its current war in Afghanistan, and contributed to the advent of the Iraq War as well. The vigorous, hard-nosed, and quite uncompromising CT policies that President Bush employed in order to prevent further attacks, hunt the *al-Qa'ida* perpetrators around the world, and mobilize the formidable U.S. national security establishment for a wide-ranging "global war on terrorism," however, have long been excoriated by Barack Obama for being unnecessarily harsh, or worse. The Obama Administration has gotten as much political

mileage as possible out of appearing to follow a less heavy-handed approach, and especially in this context, U.S. officials must now feel profoundly grateful that, thanks to terrorist bungling, Obama has twice escaped presiding over America's first real "9/11" follow-up attack. Being lucky, certainly, is something.

Being lucky isn't a strategy, however, and Obama's CT policy deserves to be judged on the basis of its substantive merits rather than its good fortune. The debate over the operational effectiveness of current CT may be followed in other fora, but one can get some window into the new administration's *commitment* to CT from an exploration of its underlying psychology. At the level of public political posturing, the story told by the Obama Administration is relatively straightforward, but a closer examination reveals that there is nothing conceptually simple about the current U.S. approach to counter-terrorism. The encounter between the Obama Administration's political meta-narrative and the complexities of developing and implementing CT policy in the real world is fascinating and complex.

## II. *Shifting Paradigms*

After 9/11, of course, the United States for a time adopted a strategy of counter-terrorist "war" – and it seemed, at least for a while, really to have meant it. The conceptual (and legal) paradigm of *warfare* was transposed from its traditional state-on-state context to the new environment of CT operations against non-state enemies that were deemed to have taken up arms against the United States, and who therefore could appropriately be met with *war*-type responses. Backed by legal theories explicitly predicated upon the war paradigm, this approach underpinned essentially all of the most important (and controversial) post-9/11 initiatives of the U.S. Government.

Much has been written elsewhere debating the legal and policy merits of the various policies embraced by the Bush Administration, but for present purposes it must at least be conceded that whatever one's conclusions in this regard, the "war paradigm" approach unquestionably bespoke an intense focus upon CT as a top – indeed, essentially

shift was probably inevitable. The crisis-driven intensity of America's focus upon CT after 9/11 was politically and psychologically unsustainable over the long-term, especially in the absence of follow-on attacks. (Ironically, therefore, the very success of Bush Administration CT may have contributed to its political undoing.) If the United States is settling into a "[new normal](#)" of an ongoing CT struggle against non-state actors – a struggle qualitatively different *both* from traditional state-on-state war *and* from the law enforcement-focused approaches of peacetime – it is perhaps appropriate that we figure out a CT policy that can be maintained indefinitely. This requirement of potentially infinite sustainability may require toning down some of the initial intensity of the post-9/11 war paradigm, even as it also quite precludes a return to the complacency and inattention of the pre-9/11 politico-legal order.

The CT-focused post-9/11 national security agenda largely *defined* the Bush presidency, even coloring how senior officials reacted to mistaken reports from the U.S. Intelligence Community about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The United States had been in a "peacetime" CT mode, the argument went, until shocked out of its passivity by the slaughter of 3,000 people on that fateful September morning by men wielding only hijacked airliners, not even actual *weapons* at all. This, the Bush Administration felt, could not be permitted to happen again, especially with regard to WMD – with which terrorists could, of course, inflict harm on a vastly greater scale. Long-term deterrence relationships with well-established nuclear powers such as Russia were one thing, but WMD in the hands of "rogue regimes" and vicious non-state actors

In fact, the White House's ostentatious repudiation of the "[excesses of the past few years](#)" represents a triumph of message over substance. The Obama Administration

by the National Security Agency (NSA) with Bush's authorization after 9/11. Additionally, the Obama Administration has continued longstanding practices of invoking the "state secrets" privilege to quash sensitive civil court litigation. Indeed, in May 2010, Attorney General Eric Holder announced that the Justice Department would seek a law allowing domestic law enforcement officials to interrogate terrorism suspects without being subject to the U.S. Supreme Court's *Miranda* rules that would otherwise require a suspect to be informed of his constitutional rights and given the opportunity to refuse to answer absent the presence of legal counsel. "[We're now dealing with international terrorists,](#)" Holder proclaimed, [so the United States needs "something that is flexible and is more consistent with the threat that we now face."](#) All in all, on the level of specific CT policies and approaches, the Obama Administration would seem to represent more continuity than change.

Yet as much as it speaks tellingly to the imperatives of life in the "new normal" of the post-9/11 world, this substantive policy continuity is not the *political* narrative of CT in America today – or at least not the narrative advanced and defended by the Obama Administration in describing itself and its approaches. CT is a priority for the new administration, but it is a priority that cannot let itself be ranked *too* highly, lest Obama fall into a rhetorical and political trap he would have set for himself by adopting and endorsing the reviled policies of a reviled repa Bara Baraihie

As 9/11 has shown us in many ways, what may seem a civil liberties intrusion one day can become a widely-accepted “cost of doing business” after a terrorist horror occurs. Moreover, while the Obama Administration is probably right that we do not face a crisp choice between values and security, this is not necessarily for the reason they contend. The White House story is that to act according to its conception of American “values” is to support U.S. national security; thus it can be maintained that the *apparent* choice between security and values is a false one. In fact, however, the notion of a value/security dichotomy may be false *notwithstanding* the fact that Obama is wrong that CT presents no challenge of managing tension between prized objectives that are to some degree incompatible. In truth, after all, it surely is one of “our values” that the citizenry should be protected against industrial-scale mass murder.

At any rate, the White House clearly feels the need to “prove” its theory – the notion, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has put it, of [“reaffirming our basic values” as an “antidote against those who join violence”](#) – by making enough showy or at least apparent changes in operational CT conduct that it can claim credit for ending “the excesses of the past few years,” while not changing so much that it can be held accountable for having invited or permitted attack.

Part of the Obama Administration’s story of itself revolves around the need explicitly to construct what U.S. officials describe as a countervailing American answer to *al-Qa’ida’s* own “narrative” of Islamist *jihad*. This is not a new insight, insofar as American CT policy has long understood that the struggle against *jihadist* fanaticism is a war of ideas as much as a war of bombs and bullets. This was why, for instance, President Bush endlessly repeated homilies about Islam *really* being [“a great religion that preaches peace.”](#) His campaign against terrorists was [“not a struggle against ... the Muslim religion”](#) – and in effect took the purportedly philo-Islamic position of supporting the *true* (*i.e.*, axiomatically “peaceful”) interpretation of Islamic doctrine against its perversion by violent *jihadists*.

Indeed, the Bush Administration’s national security strategy quite openly aimed to demolish ideological appeal of radical Islam by waging a [“war of ideas to win the battle against international terrorism” in which “supporting moderate and modern government, especially in the Muslim world,” would help “ensure that the conditions and ideologies that promote terrorism do not find fertile ground.”](#) After 9/11, the Bush Administration hoped that the expansion of democratization in the Middle East might serve as its own form of antidote for extremism. Barack Obama was thus not the first U.S. president to claim, in effect, that the choice between values and security is a false one: in its own way, as one analyst has observed, the Bush formulation of the counter-terrorist war of ideas itself served to [“collapse\[\] the divide between U.S. ideals and U.S. interests in the region.”](#)

While today’s theme of the imperative of an anti-*jihadist* counter-narrative is hardly new, therefore, an idiosyncratic version of it has become quite central to the Obama Administration’s *own* narrative. Specifically, it is defended as part of the *point* of



present-day CT policy to *seem* less threatening, for it is imagined that at least striking the pose of a more relaxed, less “Bush-like,” approach will have payoffs in undercutting support for terrorism overseas.

The controversial detention facility at Guantánamo, for instance, has repeatedly been described by Obama Administration officials as a “recruiting tool” for *al-Qa’ida* – a public relations blemish that vitiates any achievements it may have had by blackening our reputation abroad and “confirming” the Islamists’ false and cartoonish stereotype of a predatory America intent upon oppressing Muslims. President Obama, in fact, has gone to far as to declare that [“the existence of Guantánamo likely created more terrorists around the world than it ever detained.”](#) Guantánamo must therefore be closed – or at least we must make a big show of *wanting* to close it. (Actual closure, as we have seen, is apparently another matter entirely.)

Ostentatiously seeming to back away from Bush-era CT policy is depicted as being in no way a *lessening* of CT commitment: to the contrary, it is even suggested, such relaxations are the only way to be *faithful* to real CT. [“Navigating by our values,” says counter-terrorism coordinator Benjamin, “is an essential part of a successful counterterrorism effort.”](#) In this, Benjamin echoes his boss, for President Obama has proclaimed sonorously, if somewhat vaguely, that [upholding “our values” in fact “keeps us safe,” and that “our values have been our best national security asset.”](#)

The tag line about “navigating by our values,” of course, is more a bumper sticker than a clear programmatic guide to CT policy. Indeed, the quiet, almost embarrassed way in which Obama officials seem to be ratifying and continuing so many Bush-era CT approaches suggests that they do not fully believe it themselves – or at least that they prize the *appearance* of “change,” for perception management purposes, more than they prize change itself.

The hope clearly is that if a less aggressive-looking, smiling face is put on CT policies that aren’t actually all that much different from their Bush-era antecedents, *al-Qa’ida* and other such terrorist groups will find their job much harder. This is possible, but it is still far from proven. And there is at least some reason to be skeptical. To begin with, it is not clear that the Muslim world sees current U.S. policy as being all that different from what came before – as indeed it arguably is not. (This is an empirical question that social scientists, pollsters, and intelligence analysts can presumably help answer.) Even if there is felt to have been great change, however, it seems at present to be more an assumption than a demonstrable fact that a public relations campaign based upon “our values” can provide an antidote to Islamist extremism and a retardant to terrorist recruitment.

Increasing U.S. fears about the degree to which *al-Qa’ida* and its fissiparous affiliates are said to be recruiting “home-grown” Western terrorists suggests that there may be a sharp limit to how much we can depend upon political atmospherics, or an appreciation for “American values,” to attenuate the appeal of the radicals. If there is any Muslim population in the world that we can be sure pretty well understands the

counterpoint “narrative” that our political and economic freedom offers to *jihadist* brutality, after all, it is precisely such “home-grown” Islamist recruits: they know America surpassingly well, for they are “us.” If “Jihad Jane” (a.k.a. Colleen LaRose from suburban Philadelphia) doesn’t “get” the American narrative, what success can we expect from trying to sell its virtues as a remedy for fanaticism in Waziristan? This is not an argument *against* developing an improved anti-*jihadist* counter-narrative rooted in “our values,” but we should not oversell the degree to which such an approach can really revolutionize CT.

Obama Administration officials also argue that poverty, poor education, lack of health care, and a lack of social welfare support are also major “[local drivers](#)” for terrorist radicalization in countries around the world, often suggesting that such ills are in fact the *real* reasons that terrorism exists in the first place. As Benjamin told the International Peace Institute in March 2010, CT policy must be based on more than just military power, intelligence operations, and law enforcement; it must also seek to “[eliminate the underlying political, economic, and social conditions that help put so many individuals in situations where they might choose the path to violence.](#)”

This “social welfare theory of terrorism” is now a key part of the Obama team’s narrative of itself. The administration seeks to turn the urgency and drama of CT policy – the mobilizing energies of *war!* – into the handmaiden of the welfare state, a marketing tool for a broad center-left social policy agenda that only incidentally relates to terrorism. The idea seems to be that if the world only did more to fight poverty, provide education, improve health care coverage, and augment social welfare policies, *al-Qa’ida* and its affiliates will have “[a shrinking pool of recruits.](#)” Daniel Benjamin – who, in rather telling contrast to the line of Bush Administration State Department counter-terrorism coordinators who came from “operational” backgrounds in the military or the CIA, is merely a [former journalist who got his start in government as a speechwriter for President Bill Clinton](#) – puts this idea quite plainly:

[“There is no denying that when children have no hope for an education, when young people have no hope for a job and feel disconnected from the modern world, when governments fail to provide for the basic needs of their people, when people despair and are aggrieved, they become more susceptible to extremist ideologies.”](#)

It is apparently now felt to be part of the job of CT policy – that is, what the Obama Administration now likes to term “[countering violent extremism,](#)” or “[CVE](#)” – to help meet these basic human needs. Benjamin has argued that “[terrorism flourishes where there is marginalization and perceived – or real – relative deprivation.](#)” According to him, therefore, we need to “[confront the political, social, and economic conditions that our enemies exploit to win over the new recruits .... we must work to resolve the long-standing problems that fuel those grievances.](#)” That this is, *sub silentio*, a transmutation of CT into a conventional social welfare policy agenda is quite clear, a point highlighted by Benjamin’s revealing identification of “relative deprivation” as the culprit. Counter-

terrorism, he seems to suggest, requires government intervention in smoothing out the awkward and provocative peaks and valleys in the global distribution of wealth.

#### V. *Some Reservations*

Like the argument about “navigating by our values,” however – a theory with which it neatly fits, especially if one assumes that social progressivism is a core American “value” – this “social welfare theory” of CT also needs to be understood to have sharp limits. It is far from obvious, for instance, that poverty and other deprivation translate in any direct or clear way into Islamic radicalism.

The lack of a clear causal link in this regard is visible, in part, in the fact that terrorism is *not* strongly or simply correlated with poor or neglected populations. *The Economist* magazine’s list of the 20 countries with the lowest gross domestic product (GDP) per head in 2007, for example, does include the terrorist breeding grounds of Afghanistan (number 8) and Somalia (number 13). It also, however, includes an additional 18 countries, some of which are in notably worse shape even than those two. And neither Afghanistan nor Somalia, in fact, appears among the 18 countries with the worst scores on the “human development index” compiled by the United Nations Development Programme. There are many poor countries, and many more poor people. Only a tiny minority of these people are terrorists, and the incidence of such radicalism is highly unevenly distributed, even within the sorry global demography of the desperate and deprived.

Among the ranks of the most dangerous *jihadist* terrorists of whom we are presently aware, moreover, there seem to be remarkably few people pushed into radicalism by poverty and such things as the lack of Obama-style healthcare reform in their native countries. The 9/11 hijackers were for the most part educated, middle class boys from “good families” in Saudi Arabia (and in one case Yemen). The father of the recent “underwear” bomber is a wealthy banker, while the Times Square bomber apparently had an MBA degree and is the son of a Pakistani Air Vice Marshal. (The Ft. Hood gunman, for his part, was a trained psychiatrist with by all accounts a fairly comfortable life, not to mention full medical care and eligibility for retirement pension benefits from a military career funded by the U.S. taxpayer.)

*Al-Qa’ida* is famously headed by Usama bin Laden, the scion of a wealthy Saudi engineering dynasty who himself studied economics and business administration at elite schools and may have gotten a degree in civil engineering. His second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, is a middle-class Egyptian surgeon whose father was a chemistry professor and whose mother is said to have come from a wealthy clan. Today, the newest star in the *jihadist* firmament, a cleric linked to multiple recent attempted attacks, is Anwar al-Awlaki – the well-educated, American-born son of a one-time Yemeni government minister. None of these people fits the profile of someone radicalized by his government’s failure to pursue welfare state policies with sufficient vigor.

The Taliban may recruit miserable peasants for its operations on the ground in Afghanistan or Pakistan, in other words, but if today's most problematic and dangerous *international* terrorists have any characteristic social class at all, they are of the *petit bourgeoisie*, or higher. And they are educated, almost worldly. At any rate, it is hard to make the argument that they are products of deprivation or socio-economic disadvantage. If anything, the contrary seems to be the case.

In ways that would perhaps not be surprising to scholars of the French Revolution, 19<sup>th</sup>-Century anarchist terrorism, or the development of European Marxism and its terrorist offshoots, there is something about such people that makes a few of them remarkably susceptible to bewitchment by some *grand idée* – and thereupon makes them distressingly prone to the brutalities attendant to trying to remake the world in their own ideological image. In fact, far from making terrorist recruitment more difficult, it may even be precisely the *familiarity* of such middle-class radicals with mainstream Western counter-narratives that helps make them easy marks for *jihadist* recruiters. It is against precisely the fruits of economic modernity and globalized “American values” that such people convince themselves that they have some need to rebel. These terrorists, at least, are not anti-American out of poverty, nor out of ignorance or some lack of exposure to our “narrative.” They know it rather well, or at least think they do. They are anti-American because they do not *like* that narrative.

All in all, therefore, the dynamics of the terrorism problem would appear to be much more complicated and intractable than can be addressed by the facile assumption that radicalization will be short-circuited either by more skillful trumpeting of “American values” or by the universalization of the Western welfare state, even if that model were not presently engaged in spending itself into insolvency in Europe and elsewhere – not least in Obama's America, which at the time of writing was running an annual government deficit significantly *larger* (at \$1.5 trillion) than the entire €750 billion package of emergency loan guarantees established by the European Union and the International Monetary Fund in order to stave off financial collapse in the Euro Zone. And if the dynamics of terrorism need to be turned around in some fashion, they will certainly prove resistant merely to a public relations campaign that applies an overlay of officious conciliation to a more or less unchanged CT policy. The Obama Administration may make some progress in making American CT *seem* less threatening, and this may be important to the administration's political self-perceptions and the diplomatic image it wishes to cultivate at home and abroad. It is an open question, however, what impact such political messaging will have upon terrorism. (For all we know at the moment, in fact, Obama-era conciliation may strike Islamists as a sign of weakness, or even – somewhat ironically, given Obama's moralistic approach to CT politics – a lack of moral courage.)

## VI. *Counter-Insurgency and Nuclear Terrorism*

The challenge of making such an “atmospheric” approach pay off may not be quite so severe when it comes to counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Afghanistan,

where “hearts and minds” approaches retain a very plausible currency and current approaches – following the success, and to some extent the example, of the Bush Administration’s belated Iraqi troop “surge” – stress the development of politically, economically, and militarily viable alternatives both to indefinite U.S. occupation and to the bigoted oppressions of Taliban rule. One suspects, however, that the political messaging that matters in this respect has rather less to do with Guantánamo than with much more local factors of concern to the “sea” of rural tribesmen amongst whom the Taliban insurgents seek – in classical Maoist terms – to “swim,” and whom the insurgents seek to recruit.

To be sure, the reported involvement of the Pakistani Taliban in the recent Times Square bombing attempt underlines the point made by many CT experts that – Vice President Biden’s predilection for a *solely* drone- and Special Operations-based anti-terrorist campaign notwithstanding – *al-Qa’ida* and the Taliban are not functionally separable or even particularly distinguishable as an analytical matter. Nevertheless, there seems little reason to believe that the success of counter-insurgency operations in Afghanistan have much of anything to do with the post-Bush theatrics of U.S. CT politics. The stability and honesty of the Karzai government and its ability to protect the population from guerrillas, the economic opportunities available to the Afghan peasantry, or the perception that NATO forces build roads and bring peace as well as killing insurgents? No doubt. But holding a civilian trial for KSM in Manhattan, or whether or not the Obama Administration prosecutes anyone in northern Virginia for waterboarding? Hardly. It is far from clear that the prospects for Afghan COIN may be influenced by such blandishments.

One area in which the Obama Administration claims to be doing *more* than its predecessor in the fight against terrorism – or at least wishes us to think that it is doing so



priorities at home (“transformative” social welfare expansion) and abroad (“transformative” disarmament).

Our current CT posture is thus to some extent cynical, opportunistic, and tendentious, amounting more to a perception management game than to a wholesale reorientation of national policy. At the same time, and in its own fashion, it is also to some degree ambitious and high-minded. Whatever the odd admixture of these elements, however, it is far from clear how well the Obama Administration’s changes – such as they are – will actually help fight terrorism. Yet as long as the administration can avoid political damage from any perceived “weakness” in the face of terrorism, operational effectiveness may be beside the point. Ultimately, the aim may be less to fight terrorism *per se* than to “brand” the new U.S. team as something fresh and praiseworthy that is *not* the Bush Administration, and to leverage the panache and war-reminiscent psychological imperatives of CT policy in support of higher policy priorities *unrelated* to terrorism.

Analytically, therefore, Obama-era CT is interesting in large part precisely because there *hasn’t* been more of a real change in policy, even while counter-terrorism has retreated from emotive and psychological center stage and the message politics of transformation has been ascendant. Counter-terrorism has *not* disappeared as a high U.S. policy priority, but its political context and atmospheric nuances have changed in fascinating ways – and quite out of proportion to the actual alteration of American counter-terrorism operational practice at home and abroad.

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