
Program Brief

A publication of **THE NIXON CENTER**

Vol. 7, No. 17

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“Responses to Megaterrorism: Strategies for a New Alliance” A Nixon Center Panel Discussion

September 19, 2001

The Nixon Center, Washington, DC

In the aftermath of the worst terrorist attacks in the United States' history, the current administration is deliberating over its options for launching a retaliatory response. At a luncheon discussion at The Nixon Center, five distinguished panelists offered opinion on the scenarios being discussed in the White House, and their own recommendations in responding to terrorism. The panel included former National Security Advisor and Nixon Center Advisory Board Member Robert McFarlane, the former Chairman of the National Commission on Terrorism L. Paul Bremer III, CSIS Senior Fellow and ABC consultant Tony Cordesman, Professor of Middle East Studies at the School of Advanced International Studies, Fouad Ajami, and Geoffrey Kemp, Director of Regional Strategic Programs at The Nixon Center. The discussion, televised on CSPAN, was moderated by former Secretary of Defense and Nixon Center Advisory Board Chairman, James Schlesinger.

Assessing the Threat

“The attack brought home to everybody, what unfortunately has been clear to those following terrorism for the last decade, the threat of terrorism has changed dramatically in the 1990s, a change from terrorists who were largely willing to conduct attacks and create discriminate numbers of deaths to terrorists who have moved up the ladder and escalated to indiscriminate numbers. The reason?

Their motives have changed,” explained Amb. Bremer, who chaired the Congressionally mandated National Commission on Terrorism. Professor Ajami noted that the extreme Islamist terrorist groups were beaten at home and now have made their way to the liberal democracies of the West. Speaking on one of the alleged hijackers, Muhammad Ata, Professor Ajami explained the new threat, “This is a young man who came from a good family in Egypt, he studied in Hamburg, and he is also known to have ran up a \$48 drinking tab in Florida. If this (terrorist act) is a religious one, then he would not drink vodka. Obviously we are dealing with a different phenomenon now.”

Given the evolution of the way terrorists are now operating, Amb. Bremer said it is important that the United States improve internal institutions to prevent further attacks from occurring. He said the State Department must have greater coordination with the Immigration and Naturalization Service to ensure proper adherence to current visa policies. Agencies including the CIA, FBI, and the Defense Intelligence Agency must have better cooperation so that information can be shared at more effective levels. Along with linking the agencies to one another more efficiently, Amb. Bremer added the United States has to give these agencies more tools to do their jobs. “They need better ways to track people. Give the FBI more ability to pursue suspects. Getting the

proper court order for wire taps can be redundant and time consuming.”

Asked by Geoffrey Kemp of The Nixon Center if he believes the U.S. first crippled then blamed the CIA, former Director of Central Intelligence James Schlesinger said “The damage is a reflection on the American values of the time. Beginning in 1995 we made it so we could only talk to the good guys and not the bad guys. That is associated with the emphasis on human rights.”

The Response to Terror

“The sine qua non to our response is to deal with those who conducted this thing and those who allowed it,” stated Amb. Bremer. With administration officials all but concluding Osama bin Laden’s involvement in the terror strikes, the Taliban is under increased pressure to hand bin Laden over or face what will be dire consequences. “There is no alternative but to get rid of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and assist a new government only if they will not house terrorists,” asserted Amb. Bremer, who outlined a three step plan to assess where we are and what we need to do in response to these attacks. “We must deal decisively with those responsible for these attacks in all areas, militarily, diplomatically, and economically.” “We must become more vigorous in stopping states from supporting terrorists, and close down the ambiguity of these relationships,” added Amb. Bremer.

Finally, he said the United States must get the broadest support possible to include not only NATO support but international support so that all terrorist cells can be stamped out, and can be done so in a legitimate, widely-supported manner.

Mr. McFarlane agreed that regime change was a plausible scenario in Afghanistan. One scenario would be to reach out to former Mujahadeen commanders who now fill one-third of the Taliban’s command structure. Mr. McFarlane explained “These commanders are angry at the Taliban, and are ready to defect if there is something to defect to.” Mr. McFarlane said the United States could take some proactive steps in putting this defection into action by calling for the fighters to defect, persuading the commanders to disassociate themselves from the terrorist acts, and calling for expatriates in other countries to contact the commanders and urge them

to act. There is also a basis for a counter-revolutionary force in the north with the Northern Alliance, the ten percent of Afghanistan not run by the Taliban.

“This is a multidimensional struggle that will play out over decades. This is not a simple military action,” warned Anthony Cordesman. “We will face a continued diplomatic and political struggle with the Islamic world, and must convince them that we know the target and will get only those responsible.” Dr. Cordesman further elaborated the response by the U.S. government must be guided by three areas, leadership, persistence, and lethality. “Leadership in this case is taking the time to do what is necessary. Persistence means focusing on those who are guilty and realizing this will not be over in months, but in years,” Dr. Cordesman finally explained, “We cannot blow things up pointlessly. The lethality used in military operations must be directed against only the ones responsible.”

Building an International Coalition

As the United States prepares to mobilize to the east, there is a growing emphasis being placed on establishing a broad base. In this context it is even more essential to gain Arab and Muslim backing as well. Professor Ajami explained that we cannot have great illusions about this support. Drawing from the Orwell essay *Shooting an Elephant* Professor Ajami recounted “There is a white policemen in Burma who is called upon to kill an elephant that has gone mad, and the people want him to come and kill the elephant because they want its meat. The crowd follows him, because the white man is going to kill the elephant, and the crowd compels him to kill the elephant. So he shoots the elephant, and the crowd descends upon the elephant and takes its meat and then complains about the white man who shot the elephant. We are going east, we are going to be questioned in the east, we are not going win a campaign for the hearts and minds of the Islamic world, let’s be clear about this.” Professor Ajami added, “Things are clear, but when you get to the east, the trail is lost.”

Following these statements, Professor Ajami presented an overview of the opinions being expressed in the Islamic world. In Saudi Arabia and Egypt, there was a great condemnation of the heinous terrorist acts. Professor Ajami alluded to many examples in recent

editorials condemning the attacks on civilians as being against Islam, and that these attacks are a form of oppression and Sharia law forbids oppression of a people. Still though with the emphasis being placed on building a broad coalition to fight terrorism, many countries are finding an opportunity to improve relations with the United States and improve their position in the global community.

“Policy towards Pakistan, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority could change. We can be sure that these countries and Mr. Arafat are aware of the uniqueness of the moment and the risks and opportunities it poses for them,” explained Dr. Kemp. According to Dr. Kemp, the most urgent and delicate case right now is Pakistan. “Pakistan offers the United States two critical ingredients at this time: geography and military intelligence.” Dr. Kemp further illustrated Pakistan’s importance in a broader and more alarming context, “Pakistan is a full-fledged nuclear power...If the country descended into civil war and chaos as a result of a crisis with Afghanistan, the security of Pakistan’s nuclear facilities cannot be taken for granted.”

Having already received full unconditional support from Great Britain and complete NATO backing to include the enactment of Article 5 of the NATO clause, countries with whom the United States has had its differences are pledging more moderate support. In this context, Nixon Center President Dimitri K. Simes asked Dr. Schlesinger whether he believes some nation’s joining the United States in the coalition will have their own agendas, and if the United States will redefine their foreign policy based on the opportunity to bring Russia and China on board.

“We won’t redefine, we will adjust,” explained Dr. Schlesinger “ with Russia, sympathy for the Chechens could decline and with respect to China there could be diminution of support with respect to Tibet and Taiwan. Politics will change, but they won’t be redefined.”

This Program Brief was prepared by Nixon Center Staff Member Gregory Fedor.

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