

When Winning is Not Fighting

October 5, 2001

Jeffrey W. Legro

Associate Professor, University of Virginia

(804-924-3958, legro@virginia.edu)

The United States has declared war on terrorist groups of global reach and every government that supports them. We aim to win. But what does “winning” mean? The theory and history of war suggests four answers.

The first is that war is won only if its outcome enhances a broader strategy. As Clausewitz rightly pointed out, war is only a continuation of politics not an end in itself. In this case we must ask whether the campaign to defeat terrorism will thwart our ultimate objectives: the preservation of national security, the health of the economy, the maintenance of our values, and an international system that sustains those goals.

Seen in broad terms, the main strategy and challenge of the United States before September 11 was how to employ its immense power to achieve its ultimate objectives without provoking a reaction that would defeat such an effort. We worried that such a reaction could come from our European allies, Russia, China, rogue states, or terrorists. That it came, in fact, from the last group does not mean we can forget the others who are more important.

With NATO, Russia, and China on board, the crisis has opened new possibilities. Consider how that might change, even in the *positive* scenario of an invasion of Afghanistan – i.e. one where we are overwhelmingly militarily successful. Countries will begin to worry that they will be next, a perception that may lead to powers balancing against, not with, American efforts. How might China react once the Taliban is subdued and American forces control territory on its border? What about Iran and Russia? Invading Iraq and Iran is even more problematic and could well challenge our relationship with even the Europeans. If we lose sight of our broader goals in this new war on terror, we lose.

The second lesson follows. Winning wars, at least wars of global reach, is like winning an election. At the end of the day, and even during the day, you win if you maximize those on your side, minimize those against you, and neutralize the rest. Winning means uniting allies and dividing opponents.

America has done better in wars – especially those outside its hemisphere – when it has had united multilateral coalitions. Compare the results of World War I, World War II, and the Gulf War with Korea, Viet Nam, and Somalia.

Dividing the potential opposition is just as important. Terrorism, David Fromkin wrote 25 years ago, achieves its goals not through its acts but through the response to its acts. It creates fear to get somebody – not the terrorist – to do something that helps the terrorist.

In this case our opponents are not united. The wellspring of resentment of possible terrorists -- from Palestinians to Pushtuns -- has different sources. In some instances it is about Israel, in others U.S. support of despised domestic regimes, or

American culture, and in some instances it is geopolitical. Striking out at terrorism as if it is a uniform threat, especially in terms of the countries or groups that support it (i.e. those who are uniformly Muslim), risks inducing a far greater challenge than we face now. Imagine a collective consciousness opposed to us that reaches from Algeria to Indonesia. That is the reaction to terror that achieves terror's goals.

The third lesson is that winning wars is not simply about military power. Information has historically been as important as force in victory. Think about the massive role of codebreaking in World War II. The impact of Ultra and Magic and the contribution of human agents on the ground were critical in the decisive battles. In this new war, information is even more important. It is the single decisive key to any sort of effective retaliation and future prevention. Winning therefore means foregoing actions that seem to show progress but that impair the collection of vital information for future engagements. Fighting terrorism, like fighting crime, is a process, not a result.

Finally, winning wars is not just about winning the war; it is about winning the peace--a truth that brings us back to the question of a broader strategy. Winning militarily is only one part of the picture, and perhaps in this conflict, not even a necessary part.

The United States intervened in World War I, helping to defeat Germany. But then it withdrew from the world arena and the seeds of the Great Depression and World War II were sown. It achieved military victory but lost the aim that justified entering the war -- "A World Made Safe For Democracy" as Woodrow Wilson put it. After World War II, America did just the opposite, building pillars of post-war stability and prosperity in Europe and Asia. To put it mildly, nation building in the middle of an impoverished, non-democratic Central Asia is a daunting challenge at best.

If these four lessons encompass what winning means, how do we do it? Most important is what we do not do. What the United States should *not* do is militarily invade countries. Such a reaction to September's terrorist attacks is likely to lead to resistance to America's efforts by neutral parties, diminish our allied support, decrease the flow of information that we need to fight terrorism, and leave a virtually hopeless job of nation-building in its wake.

Winning means we emphasize the defensive and diplomatic aspects of our response. We strengthen our intelligence capabilities, our immigration controls and tracking, and our civil defense readiness. Diplomatically we must use the emerging international Concert Against Terror for information and to establish new international regimes that aid the longer-term struggle.

This battleplan denies terrorists the outward reaction they desperately want, it keeps allies and world sympathies with us, it does not unite our opponents or threaten those who are neutral. It would increase the chances that we will receive the critical intelligence we need to successfully attack the terrorists' political, financial, and military networks. Above all it will help us to sustain and enlarge the international system that served America's national security interests, economy, and values over the last decade. The difference is we would be safer, even while aware that our safety is not absolute.

In this new war, politics and patience, not force, makes winning possible.