

**“American security policy during and after the Cold War”
Teach-In on the War on Terrorism, 10/2/01
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- Thanks to everyone for coming out tonight, and to David for inviting me to participate in this second session of the teach-in.
- I’m going to read my remarks. Before getting into the main business at hand, let me be absolutely clear as to my intent. Nothing I say here must be construed as entailing or implying that the victims of September 11—the perhaps 6,500 dead, the thousands of injured, and their families—or America in general, deserved those monstrous attacks. To say or imply that would be equivalent to saying that the terrorists were acting justly, giving America what it deserved.
- Nor must anything I say be construed to entail or imply that U.S. foreign policy *caused*, in a mechanistic sense, the attacks of September 11. The nineteen murderers, and those who masterminded their attacks, had free will; they chose to do what they did. Their actions were not determined by American policy or anything else. Social forces, poverty, religion did not make them do it. They could have refused to commit these staggeringly horrible acts.
- Finally, and related, I would not wish anything I say here tonight to weaken anyone’s will to wage what I believe to be a necessary war for a just cause. I have gone on record as to why I think the use of force is necessary to combat this serious threat to the United States and indeed to all civilized states. Regardless of how we got to this point, a government’s first duty is to protect its citizenry. Not that anything our government does at this point is acceptable: the war must be waged justly. But it must be waged.
- Now, having said all that, what I want to do in the time allotted me is to outline, in general terms, U.S. policy in the Middle East after the Second World War, paying particular attention to those American policies that contributed to the resentments that made September 11 more likely.
- And here I might disagree with some of my colleagues; we’ll soon find out. I don’t regard all American policies that made the United States unpopular in the Muslim world as relevant here. That’s because plenty of people may have cheered the attacks of September 11 without actually have been willing to commit those acts themselves. I’m not after the sources of anti-Americanism in general—for that is a huge topic that extends far beyond the Middle East—but rather the sources of the acute hatred of the West and the United States in particular that motivated the enormities of 9/11.
- The global security strategy of the United States from the end of the Second World War in 1945 up to the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was called *containment*. The thing being contained was the power of the Soviet Union, the other so-called superpower. Since 1991, when there was no longer anything to contain, the United States has not had a coherent

security strategy—at least, up until September 11. It has, however, had certain clear security interests, including protecting American lives; American (and world) access to raw materials, including oil; and maintaining enough international stability that America's friends do not feel compelled to abandon America.

- Let me state my argument as succinctly as possible. In general, history demonstrates that great powers try to shape their environments so as to make themselves more secure and prosperous. Shaping their environments thusly involves affecting events and possibilities in other regions of the world, including within other countries. Great powers thereby thwart the aspirations of many actors around the world, thereby incurring their resentment and hatred. Consider how deeply most nineteenth-century Americans, apart from the Eastern Establishment, genuinely hated England. America, as a great power, has followed the same pattern followed by the England Americans once hated. U.S. foreign policy during and since the Cold War has affected events and possibilities all over the world. In the Middle East the United States supports Israel diplomatically, militarily, and economically, thwarting the aspirations of Palestinian Arabs and providing a focal point for Arab and Muslim frustrations in general. America also supports regimes in Arab states that do not enjoy the support of large percentages of their own populations, and hence America is hotly resented by many elites whose visions for their countries are sharply at odds with the status quo. (For the record, few of these thwarted actors are liberal democrats.) Thus U.S. policies have made anti-Americanism an appealing option for them, although by no means a necessity. But it does not necessarily follow that America could or should have avoided these policies. Anyone repudiating U.S. foreign policy must offer an alternative policy and argue counterfactually that that alternative would have led to a superior outcome.
- Now, accepting the necessity of pursuing U.S. interests does not entail accepting *any* means whatsoever to that end. I am not offering a blank check to U.S. foreign policy. To cite one obvious case, the United States did not fight the Vietnam War well. Most obviously, U.S. troops attacked civilians with great excess, napalming villages, massacred children and elderly people. A more recent case of a U.S. policy that was unnecessarily destructive was the Kosovo air war of 1999. For the sake of preserving the lives of U.S. military personnel—people who have already pledged their willingness to sacrifice their lives for the country—the U.S. and other NATO governments refused to use ground troops in Serbia, relying instead on high-altitude air strikes that opened the door for Slobodan Milosevic to kill and forcibly displace thousands more Kosovar Albanians. So I don't want to be interpreted as offering uncritical support for any and all U.S. policies.
- So first, the Cold War strategy of containment. Containment was settled upon in the late 1940s by the Truman administration, which was trying to figure out whether the Soviet Union, the only other great power to emerge from WW2, was a threat to America, what kind of threat it was, and what

America's response to it ought to be. I don't want to go into the origins of the Cold War, or whether the whole thing might have been avoided with better statesmanship. I simply want to note here that it was a serious conflict and, regardless of whose fault it was—and I believe it was more the Soviet than the American fault—American leaders were correct to try to contain the Soviet Union. That country clearly threatened American interests: its armies occupied central Europe, which bordered vital U.S. allies in Western Europe; it sought and gained nuclear capability in 1949; and it was actively spreading its influence via communist parties, first in China (which became a Soviet ally in 1950), then when Khrushchev came to power in the middle 1950s in what became known as the Third World as well. Saying that the Soviets felt similarly threatened by the United States is beside the point.

- Now, most of what I will say about U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East follows from my acceptance of containment as the correct U.S. strategy. Where the Soviets exerted influence, the United States had a strong interest in somehow countering that influence. This interest obtained even though containment necessarily alienated many people, particularly societal elites in the Third World who saw it as American imperialism.
- Let me take one case that is evidently directly relevant to the current war on terrorism: U.S. aid to the mujahideen (“strugglers”), the multinational group of Muslim guerrillas who fought to defeat the Afghan communist government and the 100,000 Soviet troops that propped it up, between 1978 and 1992. The most effective help America gave was providing the Afghan rebels with anti-aircraft Stinger missiles, fired from the shoulder; these missiles helped neutralize Soviet air power.
- We frequently hear today that the United States created the current problem—created Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, in effect—by funding and arming the mujahideen and by helping create a power vacuum in Afghanistan that the Taliban eventually filled. There is much truth to these assertions. But before calling U.S. support for the mujahideen a mistake, let's think through the probable consequences had the United States not supported the mujahideen.
- Why were Soviet troops in Afghanistan to begin with, and what did their presence amount to? In 1978 a communist coup d'état took place in Afghanistan. The communist party was unpopular, however, and asked the Soviets to help it subdue the country. The Soviets obliged by sending troops, tanks, aircraft, and so on. By 1982 the U.S.S.R. controlled most Afghan cities. Soviet power thus had been extended into a large country that bordered Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan was no democracy, but was aligned with the United States. Now, had the United States not aided the Afghan rebels, there would have been a higher probability that the Soviets and the Afghan communists would have won, and Pakistani security would have been seriously degraded, perhaps leading Pakistan to realign with the Soviets. Iran, meanwhile, is to the west of Afghanistan, and in principle a similar outcome might have obtained there. Those who doubt that these outcomes were possible must explain why the Pakistani and Iranian

governments also aided the Afghan rebels: like the United States, the governments of these countries feared a Soviet-controlled Afghanistan. So one counterfactual of an American refusal to help the mujahideen is a decisive shift in southwest Asia in favor of Soviet power.

- This may sound silly to us; after all, the same Soviet Union was to collapse in 1991. But was that collapse inevitable, at least as early as 1991? Or might it have been facilitated by U.S. support of the mujahideen? In fact, this was a second, more strategic rationale for aiding the Afghan rebels. Because those rebels were so determined, Washington—specifically the Reagan administration—saw an opportunity to exploit what was becoming a Soviet vulnerability. The United States decided to make the Soviets pay a price for their imperialism, just as the Soviets had done to America during the Vietnam War. Aid to the mujahideen was designed to cause the Soviets to devote more resources to the Afghan War than they could afford.
- And it worked: the Afghan rebels won, probably in part due to the U.S.-supplied Stinger missiles. The Soviets withdrew in 1988. The Afghan War sapped both the treasury and the morale of the Soviet Union, and probably contributed to the general conviction there in the 1980s that the entire Soviet system had to be reformed. Gorbachev, the great reformer, didn't have to come to power, after all. Gorbachev's reforms, of course, contributed to the downfall of the Soviet Union itself. So it is plausible that aid to the mujahideen contributed to the end of the Cold War. This is no small matter. The second counterfactual I offer, then, is that had the United States not supported the Afghan rebels, the USSR may not have reformed itself or collapsed as quickly as it did.
- It is a classic instance of 20-20 hindsight to assert that U.S. policy makers should have seen that aiding the Afghan rebels would lead to 9/11. The Pakistani intelligence service, the ISI, went to great lengths to hide from the CIA just how anti-American many of the mujahideen were. Indeed, the hope among American policy makers was that in aiding the rebels, the United States would be making friends. Is that so unreasonable a supposition? We now know that that was impossible; but who can blame us for supposing otherwise 17 years ago?
- So much for Cold War containment. What about U.S. policy *after* the Cold War, after Soviet power had been reduced or eliminated? The United States continues to exert power and influence around the world, including in the Middle East. It continues to thwart and engender the hatred of various actors who have rather different visions for their countries, the Muslim world, and the larger world. Should America stop being such a bully?
- Here another case comes up that is directly relevant to the terrorism of 9/11: the Gulf War of 1991. Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. In January through March 1991, a coalition led by the United States forcibly drove Iraqi troops from Kuwait. Now, to be in a position to be able to do so, America placed some thousands of forces in Saudi Arabia, home to Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina. This, we are told, greatly

shocked and offended Osama bin Laden: infidel troops, instruments of the most powerful infidel country, occupied the heart of the Muslim world. Particularly offensive to bin Laden was, apparently, the presence of female American soldiers. These offenses apparently drove bin Laden into being what is euphemistically called a “Saudi dissident”: he turned against the Saudi government for what he regarded as a profound betrayal of Islam. Exiled, he moved to Sudan. In 1993 he allegedly masterminded the World Trade Center bombing. The rest, as they say, is history. So it is conceivable that America might have avoided 9/11 had it not fought the Gulf War, because the way we fought that war further radicalized bin Laden.

- But then what would have happened had America not fought the Gulf War? Well, bin Laden would not have been pleased about an Iraqi victory; he regarded Saddam Hussein as one of those immoral atheistic Arab leaders who had to go. But let’s think about American interests. Iraq had taken over Kuwait, giving Hussein possession of 20 percent of the world’s oil reserves. Iraq was poised to attack Saudi Arabia itself, a large wealthy desert country but one with a small population and an army no match for that of Iraq. Had he conquered Saudi Arabia, Saddam Hussein would have controlled 40 percent of the world’s oil reserves. To be sure, Hussein would have sold the oil, but he would have been more likely to cut production and hence raise prices.
- Furthermore, Iraq had clearly acted aggressively. What would other countries with similar ambitions elsewhere in the world have done, had the United States not gone to war? It may be the case that the earlier U.S. policies facilitated Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. E.g., the U.S. ambassador infamously told Hussein earlier in 1990 that America took no position on Iraq’s dispute with Kuwait. Too, the United States had tilted toward Iraq during its war with Iran (1980-1990). But America had good reasons for doing that as well; and in any case, the question is not why the Gulf War happened, but rather what America should have done about it.
- Finally, we now know that Hussein was building weapons of mass destruction: nuclear, chemical, biological. For at least a few years after the war, the international community was able to check his ability to develop these weapons. Does anyone really think the Middle East would be safer if Saddam were able to fire nuclear or chemical warheads at Israel? Or Iran? He used chemical weapons on Iran in their war.
- Conclusion: U.S. foreign policy has been mistaken in many instances. But it’s easy to be a critic. Many, me included, often cite how hypocritical U.S. foreign policy is: we claim to support freedom, yet aid despots in the Middle East and elsewhere. Yet in politics, avoiding hypocrisy means never doing anything. No, that’s not right either, for if it always stood aside America would rightly be accused of sins of omission. Identifying the moral and material costs of a policy is easy, and by itself does not invalidate the policy. One must make a compelling case that pursuing an alternative policy would have led to a better outcome. I am unconvinced that any better alternatives to general U.S. policy in the Middle East have

- been available. America's victories over Soviet communism and Iraqi aggression are not to be despised, even if they made the very serious threat the country faces more likely.
- But I may be mistaken. Perhaps the United States ought not to have supported the Afghan rebels, or fought the Gulf War. We cannot run history back and try things differently. Regardless of whether I'm right or wrong—regardless of how America and the world arrived at our current terrifying situation—the country did not deserve the horrors of September 11. And it must now act with force, in concert with likeminded governments, to defeat terrorism. If your next-door neighbor threatens your family with a gun because you have injured him in some way, you may regret the injury; but you had better protect your family. That is, in simple terms, our situation.

Recommended reading:

Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict 1990-1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

_____, *We Now Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).