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

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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](#).”

Benjamin is hardly wrong that how a government handles “a genuine terrorist event” is certainly *an* important test of CT policy. Members of the public, however, might place a higher premium upon the *prevention* of such events in the first place. It is the ambition of CT policy, after all, to be prophylactic, rather than just effectively responsive. Particularly in light of U.S. authorities’ confusion and failure to act – despite being warned ahead of time, by the underwear bomber’s own father, of the perpetrator’s *jihadist* predilections – Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano was rightly derided for having smugly proclaimed after the failed attack that “[the system worked](#).”

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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 *the* top – national priority. This was emphatically *not* merely the usual vapid public policy rhetoric of "war" – an ultimately quite conventional attempt to signal political commitment by invoking the military trope of combat – as one had seen it employed in the longstanding U.S. "war on drugs" or the yet older "war on poverty." Instead, after September 2001, counter-terrorism was really felt to *be* war: a war the United States could not afford to lose. Threat perceptions were extraordinarily high, and U.S. officials displayed a correspondingly high willingness to act vigorously, expeditiously, and sometimes mercilessly to forestall further catastrophes.

By this yardstick, the Obama Administration is far less focused upon CT than its predecessor. It will not admit any diminution of focus and effort, of course, and depicts itself as simply doing CT "smarter." It is clear, however, that the near-absolute prioritization of CT illustrated by the Bush Administration's "war paradigm," especially in its first term, is no longer present. This is not necessarily a criticism, for some such

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 was quite another. After 9/11, no extremist of any stripe could be allowed to get into a position to administer an attack with WMD. As the 2002 *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction* put it, "[w]e will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes and terrorists to threaten us with the world's most dangerous weapons." The concept of preemptive counter-WMD defense used to justify the Iraq invasion of 2003 was, therefore, in some sense a logical extension of, or corollary to, post-9/11 CT policy.

The Obama Administration clearly has no desire to be *defined* by CT imperatives, and Obama has invested a vast amount of political capital in *not* being seen as being anything like George W Bush in this regard. Preventing terrorist attacks is hardly seen as unimportant, but the new administration clearly has higher priorities than CT, particularly as it pursues its domestic political and economic agenda. As a consequence, CT has, in practice, moved noticeably down the list of U.S. policy priorities.

III. *Plus ça change ...?*

The situation is far from simple, however. One still relatively little-remarked story of Barack Obama's presidency is the extent to which he has *not* adopted an entirely new approach to CT. For all the new administration's ostentatious political distancing from Bush Administration CT "excesses" it is striking how *little* change there has been in all but the political atmospherics – especially by comparison to President Bush's somewhat exhausted second term.

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 has not closed the Guantánamo Bay detention facility as it promised to do, and still seems likely to continue detaining *some* terrorist combatants indefinitely without trial. Other terrorist suspects, it turns out, will be tried by military commissions of the sort Obama angrily decried on the campaign trail and promised to close, the procedures of such tribunals having been only slightly tweaked since Bush days.

Harsh interrogation practices such as "waterboarding" the very highest-value terrorist prisoners – a grim technique of simulated drowning – have not been used on terrorist suspects under Obama, but these practices had already long been stopped under Bush. Obama's Justice Department says it will prosecute CIA interrogators for interrogation abuses, but it turns out that this will only apply to any who can be shown to have *exceeded* the permissive guidelines adopted by the prior administration. (Waterboarding by the book, in other words, apparently incurs no prosecution.) And a much-touted plan to try key *al-Qa'ida* figures such as 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) in U.S. civilian courts seems to have fallen into confusion and disarray. Media reports now even indicate that the Obama Administration has rediscovered the virtues of legally-unaccountable detention centers. With the Supreme Court having changed existing legal precedents in this regard concerning Guantánamo, the administration is said to be considering an expanded program for detaining terrorists at Bagram in Afghanistan because – as the *Los Angeles Times* recounts officials confessing – it has "[few other places to hold and interrogate foreign prisoners without giving them access to the U.S. court system.](#)"

Meanwhile, with Obama-era politics having generally *publicly* turned against detentions, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) "renditions" reportedly continue to help supply captured foreign terrorists to foreign governments that may have their own idea about interrogation standards, while airborne drone vehicles launch missiles and drop bombs on terrorist suspects in places such as Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia with notably *greater* frequency than under George W. Bush. (If one does not wish to hold and interrogate such persons, it is apparently felt more expeditious simply to kill them. This was, in fact, apparently the reason for at least one attack: U.S. officials told the media that terrorist leader Saleh Ali Saleh Nabhan was simply killed by U.S. Special Operations forces in Somalia in part out of "[uncertainty over where to hold him](#)" if he had been captured.) Obama's expanded program of targeted killings via drone aircraft is clearly testament to the continuity of at least *some* "war paradigm" thinking in U.S. CT policy. As Daniel Benjamin told Congress recently, "[we must continue to take the fight to al-Qa'ida and its allies wherever they plot and train.](#)" Interestingly, the Obama Administration [recently added a U.S. citizen – an American-born radical cleric now active in Yemen – to the CIA's list of international terrorists the Agency is permitted to capture or kill.](#) This is allegedly the first U.S. citizen to be put on the CIA's hit list.

Broad electronic surveillance for terrorist suspects has also continued under President Obama, pursuant to legislative authorities President Bush acquired in his second term in an effort to regularize much of the warrantless monitoring program begun

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 predecessor. Simply put, Barack Obama cannot be Barack Obama – or at least not the "transformative" and "change"-focused Barack Obama he wishes the world to think him – if he does not at least *pretend* to have a new and more relaxed CT policy than President Bush.

So while actually preventing terrorist attacks remains a key substantive priority, *not* focusing *too much* on hard-nosed CT remains for the Obama Administration a key political priority. The aim, it would seem, is to preserve as much of Bush-era CT policies as can be accomplished without *seeming* to be doing so, and without being held politically accountable for "Bush"-style approaches. This is a delicate political dance, especially in light of the terrorists' continuing efforts to inflict more large-scale bloodshed, for the public theatrics of Obama's anti-Bush CT posturing would positively *invite* a political backlash if the terrorists finally stop being unlucky and eventually manage actually to set off one of their bombs.

IV. *Social Welfare and "Values" as CT*

[The present administration insists that we do not face any tradeoff between "our values" and "our security;"](#) this, we are told is a false choice. The extent of the Obama Administration's quiet, almost stealthy, ratification of so much of the Bush CT agenda, however, suggests that this doctrine of "false choices" is itself a false doctrine – at least insofar as it is the Obama Administration itself that has helped define Bush policies aimed at "security" as being antithetical to American "values." In fact, the new administration continues to do what essentially *all* U.S. administrations have always done: navigate the tension between counterpoised values by making tradeoffs as the circumstances seem to warrant.

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, 19th-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 – is with regard specifically to preventing *nuclear* terrorism. Preventing nuclear terrorism was a high priority for the Bush Administration too, of course. This impulse was the origin of such Bush-era policy innovations as the 77-nation Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, and the establishment by the U.N. Security Council of a series of requirements, legally binding upon all United Nations members, designed to prevent non-state actors from acquiring access to nuclear materials. The Obama Administration, however, says it is doing even more.

Citing longstanding intelligence reports that *al-Qa’ida* seeks to acquire the means to mount a nuclear attack – which is not, of course, the same thing as concluding that the terrorists are in any immediate danger of doing so – President Obama hosted an enormous Nuclear Security Summit in Washington, D.C., that elicited from attending heads of state further promises to secure vulnerable nuclear materials. Taking its cue from a similar promise in his famous Prague speech of April 2009, the summit attendees pledged to secure all vulnerable nuclear materials worldwide “within four years.” The administration claims that the risk of nuclear attack has actually *increased* since Cold War days on account of terrorism risks, and its 2010 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) declares that nuclear terrorism is “today’s most immediate and extreme danger.”

It is still unclear, however, whether the U.S. effort will really match this breathless identification of today's "most immediate and extreme" threat. Attack by a radiological dispersal device or so-called "dirty bomb" – a much more *likely* terrorist threat than actual nuclear weapons use – was deliberately left *off* the agenda of the Security Summit. Nor were attendees asked for the sort of financial or in-kind contributions of expertise that would be needed to follow up years of work securing nuclear materials in the Former Soviet Union (FSU) with an expansion of such programs on a global basis. The administration's four-year timeframe also suggests some lack of seriousness: U.S. work in the FSU took 16 years and is even now said only to be 90 percent completed. Due to the continuing production of nuclear materials and the obvious need to *keep* them secured irrespective of circumstances, moreover, no one should expect the effort to be "completed" in four years even with an improbably enormous commitment of resources. (A more honest appraisal would admit that if we are serious about securing vulnerable materials we – or at least someone – will have to keep at it for a very long time, if not essentially forever.) Some observers worry that the Obama Administration's aim is more to make a big show of effort on this nuclear-related agenda than to accomplish anything too lasting or serious; such criticism is somewhat unfair, but not *completely* so.

As with traditional CT and social policy, it may be that nuclear CT is being subtly co-opted by, or pressed into service in support of, a different political agenda – in this case, nuclear disarmament. The Nuclear Security Summit seems part of effort to show the administration is "making progress" on nuclear threats, one component – and, notably, the least domestically controversial one – of a broader agenda of being "transformative" by leading the world toward zero as President Obama promised to such fanfare in Prague. Disarmament policy advocates and activists such as former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, for example, have suggested that the Summit was essential to demonstrating immediate progress on the broad anti-nuclear-weapons agenda of the disarmament community – a critical area "[on which we need to get some runs on the board right now if we are to maintain the momentum for disarmament which was generated by President Obama last year, after a decade of international sleepwalking on this issue.](#)" Emphasizing *terrorist* risks in order to catalyze movement within the policy community on this nuclear agenda – as the Obama Administration did repeatedly in the lead-up to the Summit – is useful, but seems almost secondary; prioritization of CT is derivative and instrumental.

VII. *Conclusion*

As with conventional and nuclear CT policy, there seem to be relatively few genuinely new elements in the Obama Administration's disarmament push, but the *posture* of newness is indulged fanatically. And, withal, the carefully-cultivated perception of change feeds broader agendas not fundamentally related to CT. Whereas the Bush presidency was defined by terrorism, President Obama seems to be trying to redefine counter-terrorism itself through the interpretive lens of his chosen policy

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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