

# The Myth of George W. Bush's Foreign Policy Revolution

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CHIN-KUEI TSUI, DEC 2 2012

Much literature has been written about President George W. Bush's War on Terror, however discussion regarding President Ronald Reagan's 'War-on-Terrorism' discourse (Jackson, 2005, 2006; Winkler, 2006, 2007) and President Bill Clinton's counterterrorism initiatives, in particular the discursive construction of 'catastrophic terrorism,' has been minimal (Winkler, 2006). The dominant theme in the literature on the American-led War on Terror is the assumption that the war and its discourses originated with the Bush administration (Collins & Glover, 2002; Murphy, 2004; Silberstein, 2002), and that there was a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy after 9/11 (Daalder & Lindsay, 2003; Leffler, 2004; Mann, 2004). This article challenges this understanding and demonstrates that the American-led War on Terror can actually be traced to earlier administrations. President Reagan and President Clinton both stressed the terrorist threat and implemented counterterrorism initiatives during their administrations, many of which were continued by President Bush after the 2001 World Trade Center attack.

### Reagan's War on Terrorism

Jackson (2005, 2006) and Winkler (2006, 2007) argue that Reagan's War-on-Terrorism discourse actually provided a rhetorical foundation for the Bush administration's response to the 2001 World Trade Center attack. Throughout the 1980s, the Reagan administration broadly employed a 'war' metaphor to construct its terrorism discourse, particularly focusing on the threat of international terrorism and so-called state-sponsored terrorism (Winkler, 2006, 2007). President Reagan stated that terrorism is a 'new kind of warfare' (Reagan, 1984) and that 'international terrorism is indeed a form of international warfare' (Reagan, 1985b). Reagan also claimed that 'the war which terrorists are waging is not only directed against the United States, it is a war against all of civilized society' (Reagan, 1985c). An examination of Reagan's political rhetoric reveals that the Cold War narrative was frequently utilised to frame and structure U.S. terrorism and counterterrorism discourses. According to Reagan, 'terrorism is the antithesis of democracy' (Reagan, 1985a) and an act of war that was supported by the Soviet Union, as well as by some terrorist states. Reagan's discursive construction of terrorism was seen and argued as providing a useful framework for his successors—namely, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush—to respond to terrorist attacks in a very specific way. That is, terrorism and terrorists were officially defined and interpreted as 'enemies of peace' who severely challenged the United States, its citizens, and the American way of life. In addition, this 'plague of terrorism' (Leeman, 1991: 130), according to Reagan, would 'spread like a cancer, eating away at civilized societies and sowing fear and chaos everywhere' (ibid.). That there is no cure for the terrorist threat makes it especially frightening, and thus it must be carefully monitored and controlled. To tackle the threat, a military approach is perceived and adopted as indispensable by many Washington's elites because this cancer (terrorism/terrorists) has to be 'eliminated' and 'cut out.' The specific interpretation of terrorism as a common enemy to all civilised societies—and a dangerous disease—shaped our understanding of so-called terrorist threats and encouraged the public to notice the imminent peril posed by modern terrorism, which should be 'contained' and 'eradicated.'

### Clinton's Counterterrorism Initiatives

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Based on President Reagan's War-on-Terrorism discourse, President Clinton created and reformulated the 'new-terrorism' discourse, which is characterised as borderless and possessing the catastrophic threat of weapons of mass destruction. Using presidential rhetoric, Clinton claimed that terrorists come from 'within or beyond our borders' (Clinton, 1995a: 832) and terrorist acts have 'become an equal opportunity destroyer, with no respect for borders' (Clinton, 1996b: 1257). In other words, there was no longer a clear boundary between external and internal terrorism. Terrorist attacks could strike a foreign ally or even a specific target on U.S. soil. Aside from this claim, Clinton's discourse on terrorism highlighted the potential threat of cyber-terrorism and successfully associated the terrorism issue with so-called rogue states and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Rogue states, according to Clinton, were allies of terrorists, who hated the United States. In his remarks at a World Jewish Congress dinner, Clinton stated:

Nations like Iran and Iraq and Libya [...] aim to destabilize the region. They harbour terrorists within their border. They establish and support terrorist base camps in other lands; they hunger for nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction. (Clinton, 1995b: 616)

Clinton's discourse on 'new terrorism,' or 'catastrophic terrorism,' was adopted by George W. Bush and the key figures of his administration in order to respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Both Clinton and Bush directly associated terrorism with the threat of rogue states and weapons of mass destruction. In his State of the Union address, Bush remarked:

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constituted an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. (Bush, 2002: 131)

It is obvious that, based on the rhetorical foundations established by Clinton, Bush used the same political language to label U.S. enemies and emphasise the threat of catastrophic terrorism posed by rogue states and weapons of mass destruction. In the name of counterterrorism, the Bush administration justified and rationalised its overseas military interventions, such as Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001 and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. Bush's war-on-terror discourse also placed a clear boundary around what can meaningfully be discussed and comprehended in regards to the subject of terrorism.

Apart from the discursive achievement of 'catastrophic terrorism,' during the 1990s, the Clinton administration and his national security team indeed implemented and completed many counterterrorism initiatives, in particular the legislation of Presidential Decision Directive 39 (PDD-39) and the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996 (AEDPA of 1996), the enhancement of aviation security and safety, and the military strikes aimed at Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda accomplices after the 1998 African Embassy bombings.

## The Formulation of the First Term Counterterrorism Strategy: 1993–1996

On June 21, 1995, President Clinton signed PDD-39: U.S. Policy on Counterterrorism, which reiterated the U.S. government's 'no concessions' policy on terrorism and terrorists (Clarke, 2004: 92), that had been violated by the Reagan administration in the 1980s, as evidenced by the implementation of its arms trade with Iran in an attempt to solve the hostage crisis (ibid). In this specific document, the Clinton administration claimed that the United States would act decisively and adopt both defensive and offensive actions to 'reduce the terrorist capabilities' and 'reduce vulnerabilities at home and abroad' (Presidential Decision Directive 39). The new guidance of counterterrorism measures illustrated that the 1995 Tokyo sarin gas attacks by Aum Shinrikyo and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombings profoundly affected the elites' political thinking about the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the rising threat of new terrorism, especially so-called home-grown terrorism. The Clinton administration asserted and argued that there was no higher priority than preventing the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction by terrorists (ibid.).

On April 24, 1996, the U.S. Congress approved the AEDPA of 1996, which was formulated by the Clinton administration in order to tackle the terrorist threat at home and abroad and deal with potential terrorist attacks involving weapons of mass destruction, such as those experienced by the United States (e.g., the 1993 World Trade Center and the 1995 Oklahoma City bombings) and its allies (e.g., the 1995 Tokyo, Japan attack). The AEDPA of

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1996 emphasised an increase in the capability of law enforcement agencies to combat the 'new' terrorism, which was characterised by its lack of borders and unexpected mass casualties. Specifically, it provided broad new federal jurisdiction to prosecute those who committed terrorist attacks, banned fundraising in the United States that would support particular terrorist groups, required plastic explosives to contain chemical markers so that the authorities could easily track down and prosecute the criminals who utilised them for violence, and enabled the government to issue regulations requiring that chemical taggants be added to other types of explosives as well so that law enforcement agencies could easily trace bombs back to their makers (Clinton, 1996e: 630–1). The AEDPA of 1996, according to Warren Christopher (1998: 446–7), Clinton's first-term secretary of state, was seen as an important step forward in the federal government's continuing efforts to combat terrorism, and improved and sharpened the counterterrorism capabilities of U.S. law enforcement agencies.

With regard to international cooperation on the issue of weapons of mass destruction, during the first term of Clinton's presidency, the United States completed the extension of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in 1995 and the ratification of the CWC in 1996 (Dumbrell, 2009: 144; Walt, 2000: 72). Building upon President George H. W. Bush's policy, President Clinton submitted the treaty for Senate ratification in November 1993, and it was finally approved by Congress in the early part of his second-term presidency (Walt, 2000: 72). The CWC prohibited the development, production, acquisition, stockpiling, transfer, and use of chemical weapons. With the approval of the CWC, as Clinton stated, the United States was 'committed to protecting [its] troops, to fighting terror, to stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction, to setting and enforcing standards for international behaviour, and to leading the world' (Clinton, 1997: 388). The relevant antiterrorism efforts illustrated that, through the production and reproduction of discourses, a counterterrorism 'reality' was constructed and constituted.

Another significant U.S. counterterrorism initiative was the effort to enhance aviation safety and security. Clinton's efforts involved a number of approaches, such as the articulation of new legalisation and strategies, the creation of new institutions and agencies, and the special allocation of budgets and human resources. Following the tragedy of Trans World Airlines (TWA) Flight 800 in 1996, President Clinton established a special commission, led by Vice President Al Gore, which was aimed at developing a comprehensive strategy to improve aviation safety and security. On September 9, 1996, the commission presented its initial report and proposed 20 recommendations to the administration (*Final Report To President Clinton: White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security 1997*). Essential points of the recommendations included the establishment of consortia at 450 commercial airports in the United States, the requirement of criminal background checks, and FBI fingerprint checks of all airport workers (Clinton, 1996a: 1506). Most of the recommendations proposed by the commission were adopted by the administration. On October 9, 1996, Clinton signed the Federal Aviation Reauthorisation Act of 1996. This articulation of aviation security, as well as the creation of new structures within the government, institutionalized Clinton's counterterrorism practises and broader strategy. Clinton claimed that the authorisation bill would 'improve the security of air travel' (Clinton, 1996c: 1794) and simultaneously 'carry forward our fight against terrorism' (ibid.).

In summary, during the first term of Clinton's presidency, U.S. counterterrorism initiatives were mainly concentrated on three fronts: (1) at home, by giving law enforcement officials the most powerful counterterrorism tools available, such as the new antiterrorism legislation of the AEDPA of 1996; (2) abroad, through closer cooperation with allies of the United States, such as economic sanctions toward Iran and multilateral cooperation with regard to the issue of prohibition against money laundering; and (3) by improving security at American airports and on American planes (Clinton, 1996a: 1506; 1996d: 1561).

## The Second Term Counterterrorism Policy: Bin Laden, Al Qaeda, Regime Change in Iraq and the Use of Force

In contrast to his first-term counterterrorism policy, Clinton's second-term policy toward terrorism was more aggressive and military-based in terms of the language used by key figures of his administration and the real practises of counterterrorism implemented by the administration. Following bin Laden's religious fatwa and declaration of war in February 1998, which called on Muslims to kill all Americans—whether innocent civilians or not—anywhere they could (*The 9/11 Commission Report: 47*), President Clinton issued two new PDDs on counterterrorism, PDD-62: Protection Against Unconventional Threats to the Homeland and Americans Overseas

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and PDD-63: Policy on Critical Infrastructure Protection. PDD-62 contributed to the establishment of the Office of the National Coordinator for Security, Infrastructure Protection, and Counter-Terrorism; Richard Clarke was simultaneously nominated as its first director (see Presidential Decision Directive 62).

However, despite the efforts of counterterrorism, in August 1998, bin Laden and his al Qaeda accomplices bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Bin Laden's declaration of war and the U.S. embassy bombings in Africa prompted the Clinton administration to actively address the threats posed by bin Laden and al Qaeda, either through diplomatic or coercive means. As Sandy Berger, Clinton's second-term national security advisor, and Richard Clarke claim, the United States has been dedicated to monitoring, tracing, and assassinating bin Laden and the top levels of al Qaeda since the mid-1990s (Chollet & Goldgeier, 2008: 263; Clarke, 2004). An example of this dedication was the U.S. cruise-missile strikes on Sudan and Afghanistan in 1998, although these missions eventually failed. In short, Clinton's policy toward bin Laden was very simple, as he clearly told the 9/11 investigators, 'I wanted to see him dead' (Chollet & Goldgeier, 2008: 267; Dumbrell, 2009: 138); to achieve this goal, the use of force was necessary. When justifying his military decision to the U.S. public, Clinton claimed:

The United States does not take this action lightly. Afghanistan and Sudan have been warned for years to stop harbouring and supporting these terrorists groups. But countries that persistently host terrorists have no right to be safe havens. (Clinton, 1998a: 1461)

This pre-emptive strike doctrine was accepted and followed by President George W. Bush to respond to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and to rationalise his global War on Terror (Dumbrell, 2009: 138). Clinton's military revenge, targeted at bin Laden and al Qaeda, demonstrated a clear continuity of the American-led War on Terror, which may indicate a limited capacity for change between the Clinton and Bush administrations. Since the 1990s, a coercive and military-based counterterrorism policy has been discussed and accepted by the key figures of U.S. administrations to address the threat of terrorism. Like President Clinton, President Bush accused the Afghan Taliban regime and the Saddam Hussein regime of harbouring terrorists. By interpreting the severe and imminent threat of terrorist attacks, Bush and his aides insisted that the War on Terror was indispensable.

However, despite the counterterrorism measures implemented by the Clinton administration, critics strongly argue that although the administration had noticed the threat posed by bin Laden and al Qaeda in the tenure of its second term and demonstrated a strong intention to solve the problem, Clinton and his national security team still neglected to formulate an effective response strategy (Chollet & Goldgeier, 2008; Clarke, 2004; Patman, 2010). As Chollet and Goldgeier conclude, 'the government bureaucracy proved too resistant and the public's attention was too fleeting' (2008: 272). Apart from that, Clinton's personal foibles hindered his capabilities at precisely the moment he needed the American public to take the warning about bin Laden and al Qaeda seriously (ibid.). Richard Clarke states:

because Clinton was criticized as a Vietnam War opponent without a military record, he was limited in his ability to direct the military to engage in anti-terrorist commando operations they did not want to conduct. He had tried that in Somalia, and the military had made mistakes and blamed him. In the absence of a bigger provocation from al Qaeda to silence his critics, Clinton thought he could do no more. (Clarke, 2004: 225)

Besides, Clinton's scandal with Monica Lewinsky was seen as a diversion that drew public attention away from the terrorist threat. For example, when the president urged the world to combat terrorism and asked that 'all nations must put the fight against terrorism at the top of our agenda' (Clinton, 1998b: 1630) at the United Nations in September 1998, the spotlight focused on his political scandal and impeachment. As Clinton mentioned in his memoirs, 'while I was speaking to the U.N. about terrorism, all the television networks were showing the videotape of my grand jury testimony' (quoted in Chollet & Goldgeier, 2008: 266).

It is also worth noting that the Bush administration's promotion of the regime change in Iraq, which was interpreted and defended by the United States as a crucial component of the global War on Terror, was actually formulated and originated in the second term of Clinton's presidency. Since the 1990s, neoconservatives, led by Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld, John Bolton, Robert Kagan, Elliott Abrams, Richard Perle, and Bernard Lewis, had urged the Clinton administration to topple Saddam's regime (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2007: 243-4); many of these pundits later

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served as key members of Bush's foreign and security policy team. In 1998, Congress approved the Iraq Liberation Act, which was strongly supported by the neoconservatives and aimed at overthrowing Saddam's regime (ibid.: 244). Although the Iraq Liberation Act did not force the Clinton administration to complete the goal of ousting Saddam before Bill Clinton left office, it showed that, at least in the late 1990s, a regime-change plan had become a consensus widely shared by many of Washington's elites (ibid.). Given that the political idea of regime change in Iraq had been urged during the second term of Clinton's presidency, and did affect the elites' political consideration of U.S. foreign policy towards Iraq and the Middle East, it is argued that there is a clear continuity of U.S. foreign policy regarding the American-led War on Terror.

## Conclusion

An examination of Clinton's terrorism-related discourses and counterterrorism policy suggests a strong continuity of the American-led War on Terror, in terms of the discursive construction of terrorism and counterterrorism and the antiterrorism initiatives implemented by this president's administration. Based on Reagan's 'war-on-terrorism' discourse, which discussed the characteristics of international terrorism and state-sponsored terrorism, Clinton constructed a so-called 'catastrophic terrorism' that highlighted the threats of home-grown terrorism, rogue states, and weapons of mass destruction. The Clinton administration also focused its counterterrorism initiatives on nonstate terrorism, such as that practised by bin Laden and his al Qaeda accomplices. It can be argued that the Clinton administration reconfirmed the rhetorical foundation for the Bush administration to formulate its 'war-on-terror' discourse and execute the real practises of counterterrorism, such as legislation of the USA Patriot Act and the overseas military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The discursive construction of catastrophic terrorism also resonated with the American public and was widely viewed as a common-sense approach during Clinton's and Bush's presidencies. In 2002, according to polling data provided by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, more than 85 per cent of Americans worried about the possibility of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers, while 86 per cent of U.S. citizens thought that the proliferation of chemical and biological weapons would threaten U.S. national security (U.S. General Population Topline Report, 2002: 92-3). It is obvious that through the discursive practise—the way that discourse is framed and understood—a catastrophic-terrorism 'reality' was eventually constituted and accepted by the American public, which simultaneously placed boundaries on how the subject of terrorism could be comprehended and discussed. Furthermore, in the name of 'counterterrorism,' the administrations could justify and rationalise their antiterrorism initiatives and promote the global War on Terror.

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