

US less confident, secure and free

By Doug Bandow

It has been a decade since that beautiful September day when terrorists brought down the World Trade Center, damaged the Pentagon, and killed thousands of Americans. Unfortunately, in important ways the terrorists have won.

The U.S. is less confident, less secure, and less free. America has suffered through a disastrous decade.

The 9/11 attacks were an atrocity, impossible to justify whatever the grievances of others against America. Terrorism — targeting civilians to achieve political ends — is an immoral means, irrespective of the end.

Yet that catastrophic day demonstrated that Americans were not invulnerable, exempt from retaliation as their government intervened around the world. Polls indicate that it is primarily Washington's policies, not America's people, freedoms, or products, which others loath.

Terrorism long has been a political tool of those who are weak. In June 1914 a terrorist killed the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, triggering World War I. Terrorists, including suicide bombers, more recently have targeted India, Israel, Sri Lanka, and Russia.

Seeking to understand terrorism does not mean justifying murder. But policies can be adjusted to minimize antagonism. Sometimes it is necessary to make enemies. However, it is foolish to make enemies without good reason.

Unfortunately, former President George W. Bush took the popular but deluded position that Americans were killed because they were so free. Even ex-Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said the deployment of U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia had “been a huge recruiting device for al-Qaida.”

Failing to diagnose the cause of the attacks turned America's legendary confidence into paranoia. Yet truth be told, terrorism never posed an existential threat to America.

The U.S. government dramatically over-reacted, turning American society upside down, militarizing foreign policy, doubling Pentagon spending, curbing civil liberties, creating vast new security bureaucracies, and placing terrorism at the center of politics. The Bush administration's policy smacked of panic.

Indeed, President Bush guaranteed failure by adopting the neoconservative agenda as his own. It was imperative that Washington punish the Taliban for hosting al-Qaida, but the administration focused on Iraq, which had no connection to 9/11 and no weapons of mass destruction.

Of course, many people believed the latter, in large part due to the administration's careful molding of equivocal and contradictory evidence. Unfortunately, the quick shift from Afghanistan to Iraq left the former conflict unfinished. Whether creating a stable and effective central government in Kabul was ever possible is impossible to know, but President Bush made failure likely despite President Barack Obama's desperate attempt to recover lost ground.

Even worse, the Bush administration initiated a completely unnecessary war of choice in Iraq based on ignorant assumptions, unrealistic expectations, and costly illusions. In a master understatement, former Secretary of State Colin Powell observed that administration officials “did not prepare for what happened after the fall of Baghdad.”

The presumed “cakewalk” destroyed Iraqi society. The Iraqi Body Count reports that officially recorded civilian deaths run between 102,000 and 112,000, but figures the actual death toll to be at least twice as high. Other estimates race upwards toward a million. More than four million Iraqis were displaced from their homes, many forced overseas.

Iraq also acted as a marvelously effective recruiting tool for al-Qaida. Overall, Washington's post-9/11 policies made America less safe.

Ironically, it took Barack Obama to dramatically demonstrate the shortsightedness of the Bush administration's “war-first” policy. A mixture of enhanced intelligence, international cooperation, and Special

Forces did the most to weaken al-Qaida. These tactics also killed Osama bin Laden, nearly a decade after the Bush administration failed to close the net around him in Afghanistan.

At the same time as it was making war in the Middle East and Central Asia, the Bush administration was turning the American heartland into a battlefield. Increases in government power should be carefully limited to steps necessary meet serious and real threats, and constrained by effective oversight and accountability.

President Bush demanded power, but largely without limits. Indeed, the administration ostentatiously claimed the president to possess essentially unlimited "war powers" authorizing him to do anything believed necessary to defend the U.S., including order the arrest of an American on U.S. soil and his incarceration without limit and with no recourse to an attorney or the courts.

In the two and a half years that he's been in office, President Obama has changed the tone of the war on terror. However, he has left his predecessor's militarist international strategy largely intact. Nor has the president has done much to restore lost civil liberties at home.

The U.S. once was "a shining city on a hill," as President Ronald Reagan oft-said. But America has changed since 9/11. Sadly, that nation's most grievous wounds are self-inflicted. And America's transformation may be permanent.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire" (Xulon). He can be reached at ChessSet@aol.com.