



Why Al-Qaeda Won

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With the tenth anniversary of the crime that was 9/11, the question inevitably crops up: who won, the United States or al-Qaeda? According to the politically correct answer, although al-Qaeda has been decimated, it has been a Pyrrhic victory for Washington. In defeating al-Qaeda, the U.S. government engaged in many unnecessary violations of human rights and due process that diminished America in the eyes of both its citizens and the world.

Hardly anybody, whether on the left, the middle, or the right dares to claim that al-Qaeda actually won. The reason is, most likely, the fear that such an assertion could be taken as legitimizing al-Qaeda's reprehensible act. Yet, viewed with a cool eye that looks beyond its undoubtedly perverse ethics, al-Qaeda, despite being on the run and its leader Osama bin Laden killed, clearly came out ahead on points, and the United States may have won the battle but lost the war.

And when we talk about losing the war, we are not simply talking about the moral erosion of the polity but about a strategic debacle.

## **Osama's Vision, Bush's Opportunity**

As I argued in a piece I wrote in the aftermath of 9/11, Osama bin Laden operated with something like Che Guevara's "foco theory." Guevara believed it was necessary to show peasants that guerrillas could defeat the military in order to convince them of the possibility of victory and encourage them to join the revolution. Bin Laden, operating on a global stage, saw the September 11 events as an act that would expose the vulnerability of the Great Satan and inspire Muslims to join his jihad against it.

It did not quite work out that way. Instead of being inspired, most Muslims were horrified and distanced themselves from the terrible deed. Still bin Laden lucked out, thanks to George W. Bush and the neoconservatives that had come to power with him in Washington. For them, Osama's attack was a god-given opportunity to teach both America's enemies and friends that the empire was omnipotent. Ostensibly waged to go

after the “roots of terror,” the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were in fact what the Romans called “exemplary wars,” and the aim was to reshape the post-Cold War global environment along the lines articulated in the infamous 2002 National Security Strategy paper.

These invasions were the first steps in a demarche that would eliminate the so-called rogue states, compel greater loyalty from dependent states or supplant them with stronger allies, and put strategic competitors like China on notice that they should not even think of vying with the United States.

## **The View from Abbottabad**

Disregarding the lessons of Vietnam and the British and Soviet debacles in Afghanistan, the Bush administration drove the United States into two unwinnable wars against highly motivated insurgents in the Middle East as bin Laden watched with satisfaction, living unperturbed under the protection of an American ally, the Pakistani military, in the peaceable garrison town of [Abbottabad](#). It was not the scenario he had envisaged, but he was not about to quibble if the Bush administration, owing to its drive for unipolar hegemony, placed the United States on the road to overextension, which was, after all, his strategic aim.

What was a godsend for Osama was a nightmare for Colin Powell, Bush’s first secretary of state, who, as the armed forces chief of staff under President Clinton, had promoted a policy of ensuring that available military resources would not be consumed in the effort to achieve ambitious military goals. The so-called Powell Doctrine, which distilled the lessons Powell derived from the American debacle in Vietnam, was ripped to shreds as a sense of omnipotence gripped Bush and his henchmen. Enemies that were supposed to be dispatched in record time in Afghanistan and Iraq exhibited tremendous staying power, the result being an extended war of attrition that exacted a high cost in terms of both military capacity and morale.

Prolonged occupation demanded boots on the ground, and as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage [saw it](#), “The Army, in particular, [is] stretched too thin...fighting three wars—Afghanistan still, Iraq, and the global war on terrorism.” At the height of the Iraq War, defense analyst James Fallows [wrote](#), it was “only a slight exaggeration to say that today the entire U.S. military is either in Iraq, returning from Iraq, or getting ready to go.” Most of the Army’s maneuverable brigades were overseas, and those left in the United States were too few to maintain the contingency reserve or the training base necessary. Even the famed Special Forces were degraded, with their actual numbers in the field coming to hundreds at the most. Lack of human resources led the high command to call on the Reserves and the National Guard. As might be expected, morale plummeted, especially as tours of duty were extended and casualties mounted in lands to which these part-time soldiers had never expected to be assigned.

And as the prospect of prevailing in the battlefield became more and more distant, public support for the Iraq and Afghanistan expeditions, which was limited right from the start, went up in smoke.

## The Economics of Overextension

Imperial overstretch, as historian Paul Kennedy points out, is not only a result of a mismatch between military goals and military resources but of the increasing inability of the economy to generate the resources to support a political and military strategy.

When the al-Qaeda-piloted commercial passenger planes slammed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, the United States had already entered a recession brought about by the dot.com crash that had followed almost a decade of frenzied speculative activity in high technology shares. Although the contribution of 9/11 to the deepening of the dot.com recession was limited, it triggered a deadly dialectic between political ambition and the economy, the consequences of which only became fully apparent when the government tried to deal with the second financial crisis of the decade that broke out in 2008.

By the end of the Bush administration, the United States had spent nearly \$1.5 trillion on the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to the [estimates](#) of Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz. This was staggering. But as the wars were being pursued, the American public did not realize their true cost because the Bush administration chose to pay for the war via yearly emergency supplemental appropriations, which amounted, as analyst Doug Bandow [put it](#), to a “pay-as-you-go” system.

Bush, in the midst of a recession in the early 2000s, avoided raising taxes to fund his wars since that was a sure fire way of eliciting public opposition to these adventures. Indeed, he cut taxes on the rich. The preferred course of action was massive borrowing, a course that eventually added some \$1 trillion to the national debt. Afghanistan and Iraq were, in turn, part of a massive defense buildup, funded by debt, to achieve the unchallengeable hegemonic position the neoconservatives sought. The defense budget rose 70 percent: from \$412 billion, when Bush entered office, to \$700 billion when he left. Paying for the defense buildup by borrowing was a major factor that contributed to the rise in the ratio of the national debt to gross domestic product from 56 percent in 2001 when Bush took office to 84 percent when he left in 2008. By then, the government owed its domestic and foreign creditors a whopping \$10.4 trillion.

Americans began to feel the costs of the war toward the end of the decade as the economy weakened, then spiraled into recession, bringing to the surface the hard choices that had to be made in a condition of severe indebtedness. As Bilmes and Stiglitz warned in 2008:

The long-term burden of paying for the conflicts will curtail the country’s ability to tackle other urgent problems...Our vast and growing indebtedness inevitably makes it harder to afford new health-care plans, make large-scale repairs to crumbling roads and bridges, or build better-equipped schools. Already, the escalating cost of the wars has crowded out

spending on virtually all other discretionary federal programs, including the National Institutes of Health, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and federal aid to states and cities, all of which have been scaled back significantly since the invasion of Iraq.

But it was under the Obama administration that the full impact of the poisonous economic legacy of the Bush wars was felt. Rising concern over the massive debt—of which war-related debt was a central component—became a severe constraint in crafting a large enough stimulus program to enable the United States to surmount the recession. The resulting \$787 billion stimulus might have prevented the economic crisis from getting worse, but it was not enough to reignite the economy to overcome the 9 percent-plus unemployment that has settled over the country like an incubus over the last three years.

## **The Cunning of History**

Ten years after 9/11, the United States is definitely still the premier global power, but it is a much diminished one. Osama bin Laden's outrageous action did not adhere to the Guevarist playbook of igniting a thousand Islamic fires, but it ended up achieving his strategic aim of bringing about U.S. overextension by providing the opportunity for Bush and the neoconservatives to try to realize their equally implausible dream of achieving unchallengeable military supremacy globally.

But 9/11 triggered a chain reaction that not only resulted, as in Vietnam, in military and political overextension. It also did irreparable and perhaps permanent damage to the economic capability of the United States to wage imperial wars. As former Defense Secretary Robert Gates [put it](#) to West Point cadets last February, "In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should 'have his head examined,' as General MacArthur so delicately put it."

So bin Laden did prevail, but history, with its Hegelian penchant for playing tricks, arranged it so that the al-Qaeda leader's desire would transpire through the agency of George W. Bush and the neocons.