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Blowback

America's costly, counterproductive War on Terror.

Peter Suderman | May 6, 2011

It took nearly a decade after 9/11 to catch and kill Osama bin Laden. During that time, America launched two wars and a new cabinet-level security agency while funneling money into the defense budget at record levels. This was the United States government's response to bin Laden, yet very little of it contributed to his capture. We know what bin Laden cost us: thousands of American lives, a sense of safety and security for millions more. But now, with bin Laden finally dead, America and its leaders must also come to grips with what we have chosen to spend reacting to his acts of terror—and the sad fact that most of it wasn't worth the price.

In the decade since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has added roughly \$950 billion in additional base spending to the defense budget. That's not total spending; it's merely the increase over the baseline versus if we'd held military spending constant starting in 2000. Nor does that number include the cost of two major wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—almost \$1.3 trillion as of March 2011—or the \$359 billion spent on the Department of Homeland Security, a sort of meta-agency created in 2002 to help coordinate the federal government's tangled web of security initiatives.

It's a massive commitment of time, money, and manpower, and it costs taxpayers dearly. Annual defense spending increased 84 percent between 2001 and 2011 in 2005-constant dollars. On an individualized basis, the United States spends vastly more than any other country on national

security, with more than \$2,000 in per capita spending. The United Kingdom, by contrast, spends less than \$1,000 per capita.

Not all of this new spending can be directly attributed to 9/11. But much of it can—especially the wars. What are we getting for all that money? Not as much as one might hope. In fact, if the goal is to protect the nation from terrorist threats in the future, much of the post-9/11 response may have actually undermined our interests.

“We are spending today more in real inflation adjusted dollars on our military than we spent at any time during the cold war,” says Christopher Preble, the director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, “Yet in terms of Department of Defense spending, Pentagon spending, the cost of base budget, and the wars, very, very little of it has helped much in terms of counterterrorism. And it’s probably been counterproductive in many cases.”

The nation’s biggest post-9/11 mistake? “Invading and occupying Iraq for 10 years,” Preble says—and, along the same lines, thinking that terrorism is a problem best addressed with large-scale military action. “We respect the military. I do. Most Americans do. And yet the military really hasn’t played a large role in counterterrorism operations, even since 9/11. And the cases that we think of where the military has played a very large role—I think in retrospect those cases not only haven’t helped with counterterrorism, they’ve made the problem worse.”

The problem isn’t just that wars cost American lives and money. It’s that they divert resources that could be spent more productively on decidedly less bombastic activities, such as monitoring electronic communications, infiltrating terror cells, and securing loose nukes. But these actions aren’t as visible. Wars, in other words, can make nations feel powerful while helping to render them powerless.

That’s doubly frustrating because there are effective, if less showy, actions that America can and should be taking in order to protect its citizens from terrorism. Preble says that killing or capturing top terrorist agitators is “important.” And if we’re looking to perfect our terrorist takedowns, we ought to be scrutinizing the details of the operation that led us to bin Laden.

“We should really strive to understand the bin Laden case,” he says, as well the makeup of operations that took out other top Al Qaeda leaders. When we do, he suspects that we’ll find that the techniques involved are sometimes time-intensive, but not particularly expensive—certainly not in the way that most long-term military responses tend to be. “Yes, there are costs associated with training and recruiting sources,” he says. “But it’s several orders of magnitude away from having a division, a combat brigade, in a foreign country stationed there for a year or more.”

Just as important is that those techniques don’t manifest themselves as disruptions in the everyday lives of American citizens. “What about the other things we’ve done that haven’t been

military related?” Preble asks. He delivers a laundry list. “The Patriot Act. Airport screening. Warrantless wiretapping. Indefinite detention of American citizens. The president putting out a contract on an American citizen, which we now have effectively. Were any of those things essential, or even instrumental in capturing bin Laden? I haven’t seen any evidence that this is the case.”

Hunting terrorists the most effective way, he says, “does not inconvenience Americans. It does not inhibit their liberties.” But as is all too clear, that’s not the way we chose to pursue our response to 9/11. Bin Laden cost us plenty, and he deserved to pay for his crimes. But the response we chose cost us dearly too.

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