The History of the War on Terror

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U.S. Navy Seabees participate in a live-fire range exercise prior to deploying to Iraq in support of the global war on terror.

Photo by: James Finnigan

The war on terrorism, or war on terror, is the name of the American-led global counterterrorism campaign started in 2001. It was launched in response to the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. The attacks were carried out by a terrorist group called al-Qaida.

In its reach, cost and impact on international relations, the war on terrorism was comparable to the Cold War. It was intended to represent a new phase in global political relations and has had important consequences for security, human rights, international law, cooperation and governance.
The war on terror is a multidimensional campaign of almost limitless reach. Its military dimension involved major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. There were also secret operations in Yemen and elsewhere, large-scale military-assistance programs for cooperative regimes, and major increases in military spending.

Program targeted terrorists around the globe

America's intelligence-gathering organizations were reorganized and expanded. The United States began a global program of capturing terrorist suspects and keeping them at Guantánamo Bay. They also expanded cooperation with foreign intelligence agencies as well as the tracking and interception of terrorist financing.

The war on terror's diplomatic dimension included continuing efforts to construct and maintain a global coalition of partner states and organizations. It also included an extensive public diplomacy campaign to counter anti-Americanism in the Middle East. On U.S. soil, the war on terrorism meant new antiterrorism legislation, such as the USA Patriot Act, which increased monitoring of people in the country, as well as new security institutions, such as the Department of Homeland Security. Thousands of suspects were held before entering the
country, and the National Security Agency, or NSA, began to monitor and gathering more information about people with the help of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or FBI, and local authorities. Security measures for airports, borders and public events were also increased.

**Early success in war on terror**

There were some successes of the first years of the war on terrorism. Hundreds of terrorist suspects around the world were arrested and there was no other large-scale terrorist attacks on the American mainland. The Taliban regime in Afghanistan, a fundamentalist Islamic group, was removed from power, while terrorist training camps in Afghanistan were closed and many of al-Qaida’s senior members were caught.

However, critics argued that the failures of America’s counterterrorism campaign outweighed its successes. They argued that the war in Afghanistan had effectively scattered the al-Qaida network. Now, they were even harder to fight against. American attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq have increased anti-Americanism among the world’s Muslims. This seems to increase and justify the messages of fundamentalist Islamic groups who want to fight against America. Other critics alleged that the war on terrorism was just a cover for the U.S. to try to control global oil reserves, increase defense spending and expand the country’s international military presence.

**Drawbacks of military campaign**
By the time of U.S. President George W. Bush’s re-election in 2004, the drawbacks of the war on terrorism were becoming apparent. In Iraq, U.S. forces had overthrown the government of Saddam Hussein in 2003. The U.S. war planners had underestimated the difficulties of building a functioning government from scratch. They had neglected to consider how this effort could be complicated by Iraq’s inner tensions, which had been held in check by Saddam’s repressive regime but were unleashed by his removal. By late 2004, it was clear that Iraq was sinking into chaos and civil war. Between 2004 and 2007, more than 200,000 Iraqi civilians were killed in the violence. U.S. casualties in this period outnumbered those that occurred during the first 2003 invasion. Afghanistan, which for several years had seemed to be under control, soon became unstable as well. By 2006, the U.S. was facing a full-blown insurgency in the country, led by a reformed Taliban.

Bush administration faced criticism about tactics

The Bush administration faced domestic and international criticism for its actions. Critics considered the measures used to combat terrorism to be immoral, illegal or both. These measures included the detention of accused enemy combatants without trial at Guantánamo Bay and at several secret prisons outside the United States. At these prisons, torture was used on detainees in an effort to extract intelligence. For the first time, combat drones, or unmanned aircraft, were used to kill suspected enemies in countries far beyond the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan.

By the last years of Bush’s presidency, public opinion had turned strongly against his handling of the Iraq War and other national security matters. This discontent helped Barack Obama, an outspoken critic of Bush’s foreign policy, win the presidency in 2008. Under the new administration, the expression “war on terrorism” quickly disappeared from official communications. Obama made his disapproval clear in a 2013 speech. He stated that the United States would no longer engage in a boundless, vaguely defined “global war on terrorism.” Instead, the country would take more focused action against specific hostile groups. Under Obama, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were gradually wound down, although at the end of Obama’s presidency in 2016 there were still U.S. troops in both countries.

Obama did continue some of Bush’s policies

It is worth noting that beneath Obama’s rejection of the war on terrorism in his speeches and as a framework for national security, he actually continued several of Bush’s policies. The Obama administration, for example, greatly expanded the campaign of targeted killings carried out with drones. He even authorized the attacks on several U.S. citizens abroad who were deemed threatening. Special operations forces were greatly expanded and increasingly deployed to conduct low-profile military missions in countries outside of acknowledged war zones. The U.S. security agencies continued to monitor people the way they had during the Bush administration despite protests from civil liberties groups.