The United States’ “war on terror” was a multifaceted effort to prevent the spread of terrorist ideologies and activities. Framed by President George W. Bush and his administration as an attempt to destroy both state-specific and international terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Hezbollah, the war on terror mostly took the form of extended military operations, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. It also included intelligence operations throughout the world, as well as domestic intelligence gathering. Like the "war on drugs" and the "war on poverty," the war on terror has been considered an ideological war; however, unlike other ideological wars, the war on terror includes active military operations. While President Barack Obama declared the official end of the global war on terror framework in 2013, ongoing conflicts and operations continued to focus on antiterrorism.

Many critics claim that the blow inflicted to the civil liberties of Americans as a result of the United States’ antiterror legislation has been too high a price to pay for curbing the spread of terrorism. In addition to the extensive wiretapping conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), various arms of the American government have conducted questionable interrogations of terror suspects throughout the world. Additionally, some critics claim that efforts to suppress terrorism around the world have in some cases increased support for radical groups. Meanwhile, supporters of the war on terror claim that sacrificing some personal liberties for the greater cause of preventing terrorism is worthwhile. Rather than merely fighting and killing terrorists, the war on terror is designed to prevent the governments of the world from supporting organizations that operate using terrorist tactics.

Understanding the Discussion

**Abu Ghraib:** A prison in Iraq, formerly part of Saddam Hussein’s prison system, controlled by the United States military during the occupation of Iraq. Several thousand Iraqis, including high-ranking members of the insurgency as well as petty criminals, were held in Abu Ghraib once American forces secured it in 2004. The prison eventually became the site of some of the worst instances of prisoner abuse perpetrated by the American military.
Al-Qaeda: A militaristic Sunni Islamist organization dedicated to eliminating non-Muslim influence on the world, and killing people they have deemed to be "infidels." Al-Qaeda is blamed for the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States. Osama bin Laden was considered the face of the organization until his death in May 2011. Because Bin Laden was at the center of an international manhunt for over a decade, it is believed that his colleague and confidant, Ayman al-Zawahiri is al-Qaeda’s leader. Other members of the organization are believed to be operating al-Qaeda cells throughout the world. Al-Qaeda is thought to operate in a decentralized manner that is not significantly dependent on a titular head of operations. There are many unconnected, unaffiliated al-Qaeda organizations throughout the world that use the name because of its reputation and connotations.

Guantanamo Bay: A US-run prison in Cuba used for the detention and interrogation of suspected criminals and terrorists. US officials have claimed that the prison is home to the "worst of the worst" global terrorists. However, critics claim that the facility has imprisoned innocent individuals without legal representation for many years and has also been used to interrogate detainees by way of torture.

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS): A fundamental Sunni Islamist terrorist group that took control of significant territory in Iraq and Syria in the mid-2010s and declared itself a global caliphate, though its claims of statehood went unrecognized by the international community. The group is also known as the Islamic State (IS), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Daesh, and also has branches and affiliate groups in several other countries. It has conducted military campaigns as well as more traditional terrorist activity, gaining notoriety for broadcasts of beheadings and the destruction of cultural sites it deems blasphemous. Its conquests in the Middle East and its organization of terrorist attacks around the world have prompted intervention from numerous countries, including the United States, which led the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL and its Operation Inherent Resolve beginning in 2014. ISIS has also come into conflict with al-Qaeda and other rival terrorist groups.

Operation Iraqi Freedom: The official name of the United States’ military effort in Iraq. US President Barack Obama officially declared an end to this military mission in August 2010. Nonetheless, American troops remained in Iraq as part of an "advise and assist mission," the goal of which was to train and help legitimize Iraqi police and security forces.

Terrorism: A method of unconventional warfare that relies on creating fear within a population and unexpected attacks on civilian, as well as military, targets. Terrorism is usually a label applied by those being attacked, and is often considered a subjective term, considering that many "terrorist acts" may also be considered "freedom fighting" or "revolution" depending on one’s perspective. Terrorism may be carried out by an individual or a group, but is almost always intended to create a specific result, or bring out specific goals that the terrorists do not think can be achieved in other ways.

USA PATRIOT Act: Usually referred to as simply as the "Patriot Act," the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act, passed into law shortly after September 11, 2001, sought to increase the powers and reduce the restrictions of US governmental agencies attempting to fight terrorism. In the wake of the September 2001 terrorist attacks the act had almost universal support in the country, but it soon became a very controversial piece of legislation as legislators and citizens came to more fully understand its implications. After the revelation that the act was being used to authorize wiretapping of American citizens making domestic phone calls, the legality of the act was called into question. Congress extended the act for 90-days when it reached its expiration date in February 2011. In May 2011 Congress extended the act until June 1, 2015. Parts of the law were carried into its successor, the USA Freedom Act.
Inevitably invoked whenever the subject of terrorism is raised, the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States served as the spark that set off the Bush administration’s war on terror. President Bush and his administration used the term "war on terror" to characterize the US conflict with Islamic extremists. Relations between the United States and Iraq, as well as between the United States and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, were already strained, especially in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. But the September 2001 terrorist attacks prompted President Bush to take action against terrorism, which he viewed as a problem not just for the United States, but for all free, democratic nations.

Shortly after the September 11 attacks, another terrorist act occurred. Anthrax-laced letters were mailed to the offices of two US senators and several news media outlets. The toxic letters, seven in total, claimed the lives of five Americans and according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) constituted the worst biological attack in the country's history. The confluence of these events led to sweeping changes in the United States' foreign and domestic policy, including the drafting of the USA PATRIOT Act and the formation of the Department of Homeland Security, both of which were designed to overhaul the country’s surveillance and intelligence operations. In 2008, the FBI was close to filing charges in the anthrax cases against Bruce Edwards Ivins, a vaccinologist and senior biodefense researcher. However, Ivins committed suicide before formal criminal charges could be levied.

Two weeks after the September 11 attacks, President Bush called on Afghanistan’s Taliban government to hand over Osama bin Laden, the alleged architect of the attacks, and other al-Qaeda members thought to be in the country. The Taliban refused to comply. As a result, President Bush opted to initiate combat operations in Afghanistan in October 2001. Although the military action in Afghanistan focused on the Taliban, President Bush used the attacks as justification for a US-led fight against all forms of terrorism throughout the world.

Reaction to the Bush administration’s war on terror was swift. Groups such as Amnesty International warned that new domestic policies being enacted in the name of combating international terrorism were unnecessarily invasive and were being conducted without public knowledge. Many expressed concern that American civil liberties could be severely restricted or abused in the name of protection against terrorism.

Public backlash to the September 2001 attacks was also swift and, often, misguided. Many American radio stations erroneously reported that American Muslims were celebrating the destruction of the World Trade Center and the deaths of Americans. As a result of this and other inflammatory misconceptions, an estimated 540 Arab Americans were attacked, either verbally or physically, in the week after September 11. The FBI handled reports of at least ninety hate crimes directed at Muslims, Sikhs, Arab Americans, or Middle Eastern–looking people. Islamophobia would continue to contribute to hate crimes in subsequent years.

In 2002 President Bush updated the decade-old sanctions that had been placed on Iraq in order to prevent its development of weapons of mass destruction, citing Saddam Hussein’s alleged terrorist associations and his acts of violence against Iraq’s Kurdish minority. The Bush administration initially suggested a link between al-Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, but later admitted that no such link existed. However, United Nations weapons inspectors in Iraq were shut out of key facilities and found much of the information that Iraq had released on its weapons capabilities to be out of date, which fueled claims that Hussein was developing biological or nuclear weapons illegally. Bush continued to warn Hussein and Iraqi officials that military action against the Iraqi government would take place if inspections were not allowed to continue. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Colin Powell and British Prime Minister Tony Blair pressed for military action against Iraq and the removal of Hussein at the United Nations and in meetings with other world leaders. On March 17 President Bush issued an ultimatum to Hussein in which he stated that the Iraqi leader should step down or face war.

A US-led military effort against Iraq began on March 20, 2003. Many critics found the timing of the invasion of Iraq peculiar. Even though most recognized the danger that Saddam Hussein’s reign posed, many in the
The United States felt that Hussein's links to other terrorist groups were not enough to link him to al-Qaeda, and that he did not constitute the same kind of immediate threat that Osama bin Laden did.

In March 2006, President Bush reauthorized the Patriot Act, despite major debate and delay in Congress. In the years that followed, some of the provisions expired, although much of the original act, including deferral of warrants, remained in place.

The war on terror was still a relatively young initiative when President Bush left office in January 2009. Upon taking office, the administration of US president Barack Obama stopped using the term "war on terror" as part of its foreign policy language. Obama declared an end to the Iraq War on August 31, 2010. All troops were withdrawn by December 2011. US troops returned to Iraq in June 2014, however to assist the Iraqi government at its request as it faced attacks by the group known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS had risen as an affiliate of al-Qaeda, but branched off in the aftermath of the Iraq War and eventually came to rival the older group.

When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, President Bush believed that the Hussein regime had ties to al-Qaeda. This claim was later debunked by improved intelligence. Bush's other rationale for the Iraq War was the destruction of the country's weapons of mass destruction. In the years following the initial invasion, no such weapons were found. In February 2009, President Obama announced an increase in the number of American forces in Afghanistan in the effort to prevent ongoing suicide attacks against coalition forces and a resurgence of Taliban offensives.

Some critics argued that US military action in Iraq and Afghanistan galvanized terrorist groups by more clearly defining the United States as their enemy, and also inspired ire from the international community. When the Palestinian group Hamas won the majority of the seats in the Palestinian Authority’s (PA) parliament in early 2006, the United States withdrew all its support for the PA, because Hamas has been classified as a terrorist group, thus leading to further tension in Israel.

The Death of Osama bin Laden

On May 1, 2011, President Obama announced that Osama bin Laden had been killed in a raid conducted by US special forces in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Upon hearing of Bin Laden's death, large crowds gathered at the White House and the former site of the World Trade Center in New York City to praise Obama and the US military and pay tribute to the victims of terrorist attacks. Former US President George W. Bush congratulated President Obama on the elimination of al-Qaeda's leader, and numerous world leaders made public statements praising the special forces mission, stating that justice had been served in his death. However, some analysts warned that Bin Laden's death could result in revenge attacks by al-Qaeda or by those loyal to al-Qaeda's ideology.

The fact that Bin Laden was living in a populated and well-developed Pakistani neighborhood, close to a Pakistani military base, was questioned by analysts and members of the media who wondered whether or not the government of Pakistan knew of his whereabouts at some point during the decade he spent as a fugitive.

In the wake of Bin Laden's death, some analysts questioned how relevant al-Qaeda would remain in an Arab world that had just recently witnessed political revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and popular uprisings in Syria and Libya. However, many global security analysts stated that although al-Qaeda had lost its philosophical figurehead in Bin Laden, the group would likely continue to operate as a decentralized, international terror organization and remain a threat to the US and its allies for the foreseeable future.
After the death of Osama bin Laden in May 2011, President Obama established an aggressive plan to withdraw troops from Afghanistan by 2014. Likewise, Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta released a statement in February 2012 that said by mid-year 2013, American forces would significantly decrease their combat role in Afghanistan in preparation for a complete withdrawal. In September 2012, approximately 33,000 troops returned to the United States, leaving 86,000 in Afghanistan. Despite the plan to end the occupation, Afghanistan was stricken by a series of Taliban attacks in 2012, including an attack on a large airfield in eastern Afghanistan in December 2012.

The United States withdrew American forces from Iraq in December 2011; however, a year later, the country experienced a turbulent battle between the Iraqi government and the Kurdish government in the north. A number of attacks in Iraq have been carried out by Sunni insurgents (a close relative to al-Qaeda), including a succession of attacks in June 2012 that resulted in the deaths of more than 150 people. In June 2014 US troops returned to Iraq at the request of the Iraqi government in response to attacks by ISIS, which had taken territory in northern Iraq. Operations against ISIS were widely seen as a new phase in the war on terror, whether considered under that term or not.

War on Terror Today

The debate over American antiterrorism policy continues. President Obama condemned the use of harsh interrogation techniques and the torture of alleged terrorists. In 2014 a Senate Select Committee on Intelligence criticized the CIA’s detention and interrogation program, particularly for its use of torture and treatment of detainees. President Obama announced in the early years of his administration that the prison at Guantanamo Bay would be closed, yet such plans faced strong opposition from Republicans in control of Congress and made little progress.

On the other hand, President Obama continued to prosecute the war on terror in much the same way as his predecessor. The Obama administration continued the transfer of prisoners to other countries without any legal rights. Further, Obama’s administration continued to use the state secrets doctrine as a means to withhold sensitive information from public view and it has not rejected outright the future use of military commission trials. Some of President Obama’s policies on the war on terror have thus been called by Bush’s critics as "Bush redux."

The situation regarding global terrorism grew more complicated for President Obama in early 2011, following the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the continued unrest throughout the Middle East, particularly in Syria. Policy analysts stated that Obama faced the challenge of supporting regional allies while advocating for the establishment of democracy where it does not exist. In 2013 Obama officially declared an end to the war on terror strategy, claiming that his policies would shift away from broad-based opposition to terrorist tactics toward a focused effort to destroy specific groups intent on attacking the United States. However, the emergence of ISIS as a powerful player in both regional conflict in the Middle East and international terrorist operations opened a new chapter in antiterrorism efforts. While Obama resisted committing ground troops to the fighting in Iraq and Syria, the United States was compelled to renew bombing campaigns and other military activities. A series of terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe linked to ISIS also led to increased attention to domestic policies to combat terrorism.

The ongoing threat of ISIS and increased fears of lone-wolf and homegrown terrorists played a significant role in the 2016 presidential election. While Obama and other Democrats, including presidential candidate Hillary Clinton, avoided using the term "radical Islamic terrorism" in fear of stoking Islamophobia, many Republicans pressed to acknowledge that many terrorist groups were closely tied to Islamic ideology. The eventual Republican presidential nominee, Donald Trump, supported the latter view, and his campaign included promises to crush ISIS and other terrorists in order to keep America safe. He also suggested policies such as
banning Muslims from entering the United States, which drew heavy criticism. When Trump won the presidency in the Electoral College despite losing the popular vote by nearly three million votes, experts predicted significant shifts in US antiterrorism policy. Trump hinted at a closer relationship with Russia, which had conducted its own bombing campaigns against ISIS in Syria, though many defense experts questioned the effectiveness of such a plan and cited evidence that Russian airstrikes in fact targeted rebels opposing the Syrian government, rather than ISIS fighters.

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