

# The Gathering Storm

Here's a prediction. When all is said and done, the conflict in Afghanistan will be to the war on terrorism what the North Africa campaign was to World War II: an essential beginning on the path to victory. But compared with what looms over the horizon—a wide-ranging war in locales from Central Asia to the Middle East and, unfortunately, back again to the United States—Afghanistan will prove but an opening battle.

We do not for an instant minimize the difficulties and the dangers to our forces of the current mission in Afghanistan, especially now as the Bush administration wisely moves closer to the more aggressive use of U.S. ground forces. We are glad that President Bush is apparently following the Pentagon's advice to accelerate the military campaign to unseat the Taliban, without waiting for the State Department to name the cabinet and sub-cabinet officials in an as-yet imaginary "post-Taliban government." Nor do we doubt the vital importance of victory in Afghanistan—a victory defined by the unequivocal destruction of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden.

But this war will not end in Afghanistan. It is going to spread and engulf a number of countries in conflicts of varying intensity. It could well require the use of American military power in multiple places simultaneously. It is going to resemble the clash of civilizations that everyone has hoped to avoid. And it is going to put enormous and perhaps unbearable strain on parts of an international coalition that today basks in contented consensus.

The signs that we are on the precipice of a much wider conflict are all around us. Although various parts of the government seem bound and determined to deny it, the high-grade anthrax popping up around the country suggests that the same terrorists who destroyed the World Trade Center also acquired a biological weapon too sophisticated to have been concocted in a Trenton basement or an Afghan cave. Richard Butler, the respected onetime head of the U.N. inspection team in Iraq, suggests Iraq may well have been the supplier. If this proves true, the Bush administration will have no choice but to embark on an effort to remove the man who easily qualifies—anthrax or no anthrax—as the world's most dangerous dictator. And with evidence in hand, Bush will be able to persuade Tony Blair and other European allies to support American action against Saddam.

But the Arab world will be a different matter. Last week's assassination of Israeli cabinet minister Rehavam Zeevi by a branch of the Palestine Liberation Organization operating within the sphere of Yasser Arafat's nominal control has (justifiably) turned a vast majority of the Israeli population against any further cooperation with Arafat and his corrupt, terrorist-shielding and terrorist-sponsoring Palestinian Authority. At the State Department they may still have the gall to demand that the Israeli people turn the other cheek. But we wonder how many Americans these days would think a major political and military response inappropriate. In any case, Israelis will no longer be deterred from fighting terrorism against their citizens any less vigorously than the American government responds to terrorism against Americans. The Palestinian Authority has no cleaner hands than the Taliban. Within a week, we may see a partial reoccupation of the West Bank by Israeli troops. We may also see efforts to depose Arafat and his government, and perhaps even to drive them out of the territories.

The Arab reaction is not hard to predict. Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak, who was already routinely excoriating the Sharon government, could well decide to abrogate the peace agreement with Israel and join other Arab states in declaring a state of war against Israel. This, in turn, might provide the opportunity Saddam Hussein has been waiting for to "lead" the Arab world in a new war against Israel. What form this war would take is hard to predict. Arab states probably lack the means or the will for a conventional assault. But they do not lack the means, and Saddam in particular does not lack the means, for unconventional strikes involving biological or chemical warfare and other forms of terrorism.

With or without a new Arab-Israeli war, it is possible that the demise of some "moderate" Arab regimes may be just around the corner. Dictatorial governments in Saudi Arabia and Egypt have long been propped up by American aid and support, and have long been channeling popular discontent away from themselves by promoting or tolerating all varieties of anti-Western radicalism—even to the extent, in the case of the Saudis, of supporting the Taliban. American policy should long ago have attempted in the Arab world what it has done successfully elsewhere—to press for democratic change. A great opportunity was missed this past decade, when the end of the Cold War low-

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ered the risk of promoting reform.

Now it may be too late. Now we may get political change whether we like it or not, and it may be change for the worse. Today and in the months to come, Mubarak, the Saudi royal family, and the king of Jordan will be forced to choose between supporting the American-led war on terrorism and continuing to pamper and feed their increasingly radicalized populations, for some of whom bin Laden is a hero. They will, of course, try not to choose, but the balancing act will prove difficult, and the possibility that one or more of these regimes may collapse is not to be dismissed. The stake the United States has in preventing the rise to power of a radical Islamic regime in any of these countries—which would produce an Afghanistan with money and power—is enormous. American intervention in some form would be a near certainty.

These are just the dangers visible on the horizon today. There will also be what Secretary Rumsfeld astutely calls the “unknown unknowns,” events and crises yet unimaginable. We live in times of turmoil and uncertainty. We have been surprised, horribly surprised, once. We will be surprised again. No one can imagine that the latest anthrax attack is the terrorists’ last move.

All this calls for seriousness on the part of our government, all parts of our government. More seriousness than we have seen so far. Even if only part of what we have suggested in fact materializes, we will need to beef up our military capacities far beyond what is currently planned. What if we really do have to fight two good-sized wars in two separate theaters? Secretary Rumsfeld has already

acknowledged that we don’t have nearly what we need.

Seriousness will also require abandoning the State Department’s tiptoe through the tulips approach to this war. The wider conflict ahead will have to be fought with or without the approval of every single member state of the United Nations, or every tribe and clan of every ethnically divided nation in Central Asia and the Middle East. Colin Powell’s grand coalition will have to give way to a narrower coalition of the willing, the capable, and the committed—committed, that is, to the security of the West.

And at home, we will need to get serious about domestic security, and (unfortunately) about public health, in ways the government has barely begun to do. What we have seen so far on the homefront is moderately incompetent reactions to the new world we live in by public health and law enforcement agencies, unreassuring attempts at reassurance by cabinet officers, and very little recognition of the need to rethink public policies in areas like immigration and counter-terrorism. And, of course, we have the ludicrous spectacle of 435 of our elected representatives fleeing anthrax in Washington, presumably to spend their long weekend at home giving speeches to their constituents urging them to be calm and courageous. The war at home is as deserving of serious presidential attention, resolute political leadership, and rigorous executive competence as the war abroad. For in the case of both the war at home and the war abroad, the challenges have just begun. We are not even at the end of the beginning.

—Robert Kagan and William Kristol