

Anti-Terror Strategy after the War on Terror

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

Posted: April 9, 2009 07:11 AM

Rudy Giuliani seems to have joined Dick Cheney among the ranks of political has beens who still think President Obama will make us more vulnerable to a terrorist attack because he prefers a more thoughtful approach to the bluster and fear tactics upon which the previous administration relied. While [Giuliani's comments](#), specifically his arguments that, based on Obama's address to the Iranian people, "terrorists will say, we can take advantage of the guy (Obama)," and attack the US, should not be taken too seriously, they offer an interesting insight not just into a man whose moment has come and gone, but into how political epochs come and go. The ridicule which greeted Cheney's comments and the comparative silence that greeted Giuliani's indicate that the War on Terror is over. President Obama's decision to abandon the term only underscores this.

It is more or less conventional wisdom that although Roosevelt's New Deal had an extraordinary impact on our economy, it was only World War II which fully got the US out of the great depression. One wonders whether historians decades from now will say that security checks, military adventurism, and civil rights abuses may have characterized the War on Terror, but it was only the crash of 2008-2009, that really ended the War on Terror. This is not to say, by any means, that the threat to terrorism no longer exists, but the notion of a War on Terror is no longer an organizing principle of our domestic politics of foreign policy.

Presidents and other policy makers will still have to be concerned about the threat of terrorism and will have to craft policies that minimize this threat and enhance our security. These policies, however, will no longer occupy the central role in our national political psyche. Already, we have seen a president who speaks less about terrorism, a congress which spends almost no time on the issue, and even a Republican Party that has, if you will pardon the phrase, moved on from the fervent emphasis of anti-terrorism of a few years ago. In this context comments like those made by Giuliani, while offensive and ludicrous on the surface, can perhaps be viewed more charitably as a cry for relevance by a politician whose moment has passed.

The post-War on Terror anti-terrorist policy will require reforms not just in how we combat terror, but in how we locate the campaign against the terrorist threat in our broader foreign, and domestic, policy. The outlines of the former are already clear. The Obama anti-terror strategy will be more multilateral, legal, and focused than that of the Bush administration, but will also likely draw on a combination of military, intelligence gathering and higher security that is not radically different than the Bush administration's approach. The polarizing and combative language of the Bush administration, and of politicians like Giuliani who seem to think that adolescent displays of machismo and tough talk are a wise approach to international relations, however, will not have a role in the new anti-terror strategy.

The latter question, of where fighting terrorism fits into broader policy is perhaps more interesting and will demonstrate a more dramatic change. Combating terror will no longer be used as the *raison d'etre* for any and all aspects of American foreign, and at times domestic, policy. This is an enormously important step forward. The Obama administration has already recognized that the global economic crisis, and the potential for instability in many different countries arising from the downturn present, a more serious threat to the US than terrorism. This observation has been greeted with little controversy, but as late as 2007, the notion that anything could supplant terrorism as the primary threat to the US would have been almost unthinkable to the Bush administration, and even more generally among our country's political elite. Similarly, the number of people who continue to compare the threat of terrorism to that of Soviet Communism of World War II era fascism is much fewer than it was a few short years ago.

Removing terrorism from the center of US policy will continue to make it possible to question and review aspects of the War on Terror that were beyond question during the Bush administration. By 2008, the rhetoric and politics of the War on Terror was hindering anti-terror strategies, but that is no longer true. Ironically, but not altogether surprisingly, the new freedom within our government to talk to a broader range of international actors, the recognition that the immediate threats may be somewhat overstated at times, the corresponding ability to take a more thoughtful longer term and strategic approach to fighting terrorism and the declining potency of the War on Terror as a means to stifle debate or creative foreign policy thinking may make it possible for the US to form a stronger anti-terror strategy.