

World War IV: The Long Struggle against Islamofascism

Norman Podhoretz

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“9/11 constituted an open declaration of war on the United States and ... the war into which it catapulted us was nothing less than another world war.” So says Norman Podhoretz in the opening passage of this alarmist, rambling screed. The enemy is Islamofascism, a “monster with two heads, one religious and the other secular.” This scourge, Podhoretz warns darkly, may be “even more dangerous and difficult to beat” than Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union.

Podhoretz admits most Americans disagree. So, too, do most terrorism and foreign policy experts. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to repudiate the collective wisdom of both the chattering classes and the public, and rally support behind the policies of George W. Bush, who invited Podhoretz to the White House to discuss the book in August of last year, and his presumptive heir, John McCain, whom Podhoretz hopes to influence. Each of the particulars that Podhoretz cites to buttress his claim that we are in the midst of a new world war is easily refutable

His argument, such as it is, runs off the rails before the train even leaves the station. The central problem is Podhoretz's conception of the enemy, the so-called Islamofascists, which draws heavily from the writings of Daniel Pipes. Quoting Pipes, he notes that they have "potential access to weapons of mass destruction." But don't we all? Nuclear weapon designs can be downloaded from the Internet.

He stresses that the Islamofascists have a religious appeal and repeats Pipes's contention that their "ideology [is] capable of appealing to Muslims of every size and shape." But their appeal is in fact extremely limited. While many Muslims believe that Islam should have a prominent role in political life, solid majorities in predominantly Muslim countries—including Morocco, Turkey, Indonesia, and Pakistan—worry about Islamic extremism. A National Intelligence Estimate on "The Trends in Global Terrorism" explained: "The jihadists' greatest vulnerability is that their ultimate political solution—an ultraconservative interpretation of shari'a-based governance spanning the Muslim world—is unpopular with the vast majority of Muslims."

Podhoretz implicitly endorses Pipes's view that the Islamofascists have "an impressively conceptualized, funded, and organized institutional machinery," when in fact they have nothing of the sort. The 9/11 commission concluded that the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon cost not more than \$500,000 to plan and execute, and the 7/7 attackers in London mixed the chemicals for their backpack bombs in a bathtub.

Beyond his grossly exaggerated conception of the threat, there is Podhoretz's equally flawed prescription for mitigating it. Podhoretz never explores the *likelihood* of everyone's worst-case scenario: terrorists get their hands on a functioning nuclear device, and then detonate it in a heavily populated area. For most terrorism and

homeland security experts, this is a real concern, best dealt with by securing and carefully monitoring nuclear material.

For Podhoretz, such a strategy is tantamount to surrender. Instead, Podhoretz would wage war against any person, group or nation-state which professes hatred for the United States and which *might* someday gain possession of nuclear weapons.

Who is this potential enemy, exactly? The reader is unsure, but Podhoretz appears to adopt Pipes's claim that 10 to 15 percent of all Muslims are committed Islamofascists "dedicated to the destruction of the freedoms we cherish and for which America stands." By this arithmetic, Islamofascism commands the loyalty of as many as 200 million people.

This exaggeration would be amusing were it not for his clear implication that the entire Muslim world is out to get us, a claim supported by disconnected rants and sophomoric discussions of the nature of Islam. This suggests that Podhoretz would have us wage war not against the tiny group of people who attacked America on 9/11, but on all practitioners of the attackers' religion.

He doesn't come out and say this, of course. Not in so many words. But while he avers that World War IV should not be conceived of as a war against all Muslims, he claims, incorrectly, that no leading Muslims spoke out against the attacks of 9/11. He alleges, again without any evidence, that "leading Muslim clerics all over the world had been celebrating suicide bombers as heroes and martyrs—not excluding those who had crashed into the WTC and the Pentagon." Later he writes, "Almost to a man, Muslim clerics in their sermons assured the faithful that in striking a blow against the 'Great Satan,' Osama bin Laden had acted as a jihadist, or holy warrior, in strict accordance with the will of God."

He is particularly focused on Arab Muslims. Citing an extemporaneous remark by an al Jazeera television anchor who opined—two months *before* the 9/11 attacks—that "maybe even 99 percent" of all Arabs were bin Laden supporters, and then seizing on a single comment by a Syrian writer who felt "relief" at seeing the Twin Towers brought down, Podhoretz avers that this "is how the Arab/Muslim world largely felt about 9/11."

The implication is despicable. And it is demonstrably false. A poll taken in late 2005 in six predominantly Muslim Arab countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United

Arab Emirates) by Shibley Telhami, an expert in Arab public opinion, found that only 7 percent of respondents supported al Qaeda's methods and only 6 percent supported al Qaeda's goal of creating a Muslim state in their home country. And more recent surveys by the Pew Research Center find that support for bin Laden and al Qaeda within the wider Muslim world has slipped even further in recent years, in large part because their methods so often kill innocent Muslims.

Such facts are mere inconveniences for Podhoretz, who prefers to draw on a small faction of preferred experts and pundits for a snippet here, a paragraph there, after which he moves on to his next assertion. The pace is uneven, the prose disorganized, almost stream-of-consciousness.

Podhoretz recognizes his ideas garner little support among the public at large. Why? Podhoretz has an answer: the mainstream media's bitter hatred of George W. Bush. As Podhoretz sees it, treasonous elements inside the United States have subverted U.S. national security by deliberately sapping the public spirit. If this sounds familiar, it should; it borrows a page (many, actually) from Podhoretz's explanation for America's failure in Vietnam.

Indeed, it is unclear if there is even a single original idea in this entire book. It is common practice for authors to repackage ideas contained in other journals and newspapers, and Podhoretz is no exception. Much, perhaps most, of this book has appeared elsewhere. But Podhoretz has also elaborated the republishing of other people's ideas to an art form. He gives credit [or blame] to the other authors, but the book does not contain a single footnote. It is a polemic masquerading as serious analysis.

Take, for example, Podhoretz's sweep through the recent past that is occasionally inaccurate and always incomplete. It is hard to say which is worse. It is also shockingly unoriginal. An amateur historian, or anyone, for that matter, with a lot of time on his hands, could string together the pleasing tales told on Fox News, or in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Weekly Standard*, and republish them virtually verbatim.

Every person who has had the temerity to challenge George W. Bush is vilified. Like a defense attorney trying to rescue his client's battered reputation, Podhoretz relies on misdirection, but especially obfuscation by sheer volume of assertions, claims, and counter-

claims. The kitchen sink approach requires prosecutors and members of the jury to separate relevant facts from irrelevant ones, and truths from outright falsehoods. But the vast majority of Podhoretz's readers are already inclined to believe that George W. Bush is innocent of all charges against him, and that the prosecutors are the true criminals. If nothing else, Podhoretz knows his audience, and he knows how to play to preconceived notions.

Beyond the thinly veiled hate mongering, there is also the underlying subtext of primal, visceral fear. Throughout the book, Podhoretz builds a sense of our complete isolation, of the whole world against us, with no friends or allies to rely upon. It is a genuinely scary scenario. And it is genuinely absurd.

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