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November/December 2006

Policy Report

Vol. XXVIII No. 6

War of the Worlds?

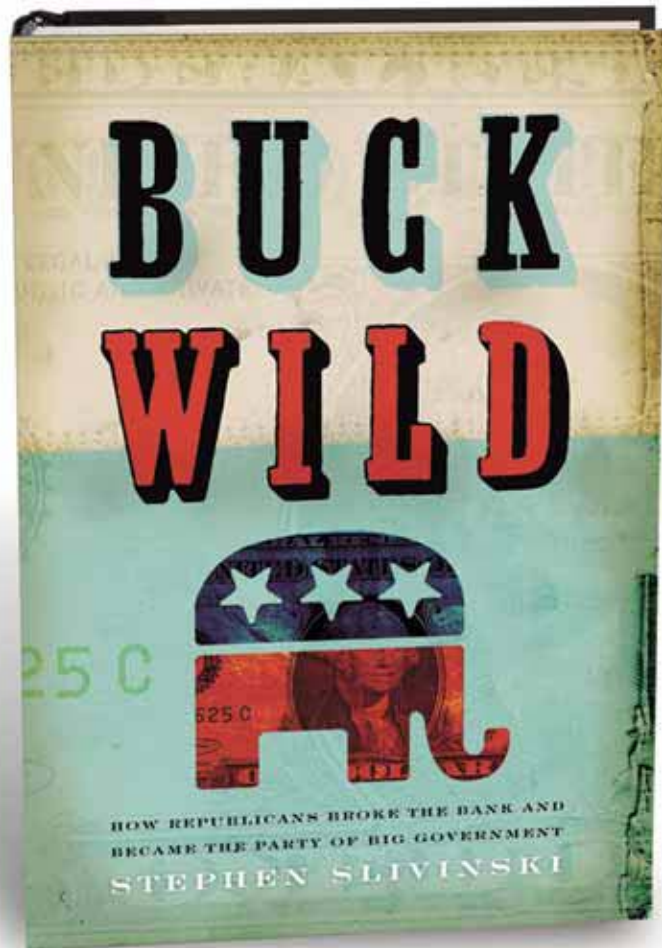
BY CHRISTOPHER PREBLE

Newspapers and opinion journals are littered these days with apocalyptic predictions of an impending—or even ongoing—world war. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger called on Europe to unite with the United States to “deal with the common danger of a wider war [in Iraq] merging into a war of civilizations.” Former speaker of the house Newt Gingrich warns that World War III has already begun. Norman Podhoretz, publisher of *Commentary* magazine, has penned three different essays on how to fight and win World War IV (the Cold War, in his view, having been World War III).

The jumping-off point for such discussions is the undisputed world wars, World Wars I and II, which killed perhaps as many as 100 million people. The Cold War claimed far fewer lives but lasted nearly five times longer than the first two world wars combined.

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“For chapter and verse on the administration’s betrayal of fiscal conservatism, look no further.” That’s how *The Economist* described *Buck Wild* by Stephen Slivinski in its October 21 issue. Slivinski offers all the data and a very readable narrative of “how Republicans broke the bank and became the party of big government.” **MORE ON PAGE 16**

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How likely is it that the war on terrorism will be looked upon through the long lens of history as comparable to the world wars of the 20th century? Not very. The casualties caused by international terrorist incidents since September 11, 2001, and the prospects for future casualties, pale in comparison with the death and destruction visited upon the planet between August 1914 and November 1918 and again between September 1939 and August 1945. The violence and bloodshed that can be unleashed by modern industrial states is an order of magnitude greater than that caused by non-state actors.

If there is a historical analogue for the radical Islamist terrorist threat of the early 21st century, it is the anarchist movement of the late 19th century. Like the modern-day terrorists, the anarchists spread chaos and disorder by blowing up bombs in crowded places and by inciting riots. Anarchists succeeded in assassinating a number of world leaders, including Czar Alexander II of Russia, Empress Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary, and even U.S. President William McKinley, but they did not achieve any sort of victory.

When an assassin affiliated with a Pan-Slavic terrorist organization killed the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, in Sarajevo in June 1914, that single event precipitated the global conflict that resulted in more than 30 million casualties. That provides a useful lesson for the present day, but not the one that Podhoretz and Gingrich want you to learn: namely, that the overreaction to threats can have far-reaching, and often horrific, effects.

After interviewing dozens of counterterrorism experts over a period of several months, the *Atlantic Monthly*'s James Fallows came to a similar conclusion. Al-Qaeda's "hopes for fundamentally harming the United States," he writes in the September issue, "now rest less on what it can do itself than on what it can trick, tempt, or goad us into doing."

Modern technology can make radical Islamists such as Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri more dangerous than

the anarchists. Even though there are perhaps no more than a few thousand al-Qaeda operatives, there is a small chance that they may someday get their hands on a mass-casualty weapon. Gingrich argues, "In the age of nuclear and biological weapons, even a few hateful people can do more damage than Adolf Hitler in the Second World War."

But Gingrich doesn't speak to the likelihood that al-Qaeda or some other terrorist organization might get its hands on a nuclear weapon (much less multiple weapons) and figure out how to detonate the device in a heavily populated area, and his apocalyptic warning that "the loss of two or three American cities to nuclear weapons is a real threat" strains credulity to the breaking point. The scope of destruction from an act of nuclear terrorism would be greater than anything ever before witnessed on U.S. soil, and we must take steps to ensure that nuclear material does not wind up in the hands of terrorists. Such efforts require diplomacy and cooperation with other countries and might include additional measures to clamp down on nuclear proliferation and to enhance security of existing arsenals, but rarely military action. Al-Qaeda might aspire to possess nuclear material, or even a nuclear device, but such designs can best be disrupted by targeted action based on timely intelligence.

Lenin, Hitler, . . . bin Laden?

Is the world war thesis useful if we envision Osama bin Laden as the second coming of Lenin or Hitler? How likely is it that bin Laden could seize control of a modern nation-state, complete with an industrial base and a functioning military, and then use that state as a base for waging mass murder?

According to President Bush, that is a very real prospect. In his speech to the

nation on September 11, 2006, the president outlined the terrorists' goals, articulated as a series of stages by al-Qaeda's number-two, Ayman al-Zawahiri: "The first stage: expel the Americans from Iraq. The second stage: Establish an Islamic authority or emirate, then develop it and support it until it achieves the level of Caliphate."

We know that al-Qaeda would like to do that, but could they? Countless kooks and fanatics have aspired to global domination, but the vast majority of those individuals merit barely a footnote in history books.

The president emphasizes the exceptions, especially Lenin and Hitler. "History teaches that underestimating the words of evil and ambitious men is a terrible mistake."

We must not underestimate bin Laden, but we also shouldn't exaggerate his capabilities or his appeal. For example, despite Bush's warning that al-Qaeda might take over Iraq, that outcome is highly improbable. The vast majority of Iraqis do not support al-Qaeda's methods or objectives. A poll taken in September by the Program on International Policy Attitudes found that 94 percent of Iraqis had an unfavorable view of al-Qaeda, with 82 percent expressing a very negative view. Al-Qaeda's standing in Iraq will not improve after the U.S. military leaves. As an Iraqi insurgent leader, Abu Qaqa al-Tamimi, told *Time* magazine, "One day, when the Americans have gone, we will need to fight another war, against these jihadis."

And what of bin Laden's appeal elsewhere? 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 bin Laden's support within the wider Muslim world has actually slipped further in recent years. "They keep killing Muslim civilians," terrorism expert Peter Bergen told Fallows. "That is their Achilles' heel. Every time the bombs go off

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and kill civilians, it works in our favor.” When suicide bombers attacked three hotels in Amman, Jordan, in November 2005, killing 60 people, opinion throughout Jordan turned decisively against al-Qaeda.

What of Muslim extremists more generally? It might be true that bin Laden and al-Qaeda have no reasonable chance of gaining control over a nation-state and of then using that territory as a staging ground for future attacks on the West. And it is true that their methods engender hatred and resentment, often among their putative target audience. But might another charismatic leader, one not prone to strategic miscalculation, succeed where bin Laden is failing? That also seems unlikely. 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 recent National Intelligence Estimate titled “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.”

A Clash of Civilizations?

Tragically, however, some Muslims are embracing radical political Islamism, and a few are resorting to violence to beat back what they see as Western encroachments on their politics and culture. The recent National Intelligence Estimate on global terrorism trends reported that “activists identifying themselves as jihadists, although a small percentage of Muslims, are increasing in both number and geographic dispersion.” If the West and Islam become further estranged, it could lead to a clash of civilizations on the order of the world wars.

Such a prospect is hardly inevitable, though. It is exceptionally difficult within Islam to fashion a single unifying theology capable of rallying a following that transcends ethnic divides and nationalistic pride. But some Western commentators reject that point. They warn that Muslims are already

united, that Islam has traditionally been spread by force, and that this tradition is alive and well in the 21st century. For example, when President Bush explains that Islam is a religion of peace, and that a tiny minority have hijacked the religion to advance their evil aims, Robert Spencer, founder of the website Jihad Watch, dismisses such views as naive. Spencer believes that the judgment of Western political leaders with respect to Islam has been clouded by a “fog of political correctness.”

According to Spencer, the author of several books, including *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades)*, “Islam is the only religion in the world . . . that mandates violence against unbelievers.” That mandate, Spencer explained in a television interview, derives from a literalist interpretation of the Koran that constitutes “marching orders for all believers.”

Spencer is in effect endorsing the interpretation of the political Islamists, who condemn tolerant and peaceful Muslims as untrue to Islam. But that is precisely the disputed issue—whether Islam is compatible with liberalism, capable of coexisting with other religions, and accommodating of dissent. There are many voices and traditions that argue that it is. Islamic civilization has known both tolerance and oppression, as have other civilizations, and the great struggle within Islam today is over which path to take.

The intellectual ferment within Islam presents both a challenge and an opportunity for the West. On the one hand, non-Muslims have only a very limited capacity to shape the debate in a positive direction. As the 9/11 Commission report concluded: “We must encourage reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity, even though our own promotion of these messages is limited in its effectiveness simply because we are its carriers. . . . The United States can pro-

mote moderation, but cannot ensure its ascendancy. Only Muslims can do this.”

On the other hand, and paradoxically, while we cannot “ensure the ascendancy” of moderate Muslims, we do have a great capacity for influencing the debate within Islam in a negative direction, empowering extremists and marginalizing moderates. As Professor Akbar Ahmed, chair of Islamic studies at American University, warns, the debate within Islam “is shifting away from . . . inclusivity to a more exclusivist tendency,” and he worries about the potential for “producing a monolith of Islam,” where today one does not exist. “Your challenge in the United States is to understand what’s happening in the Muslim world,” he explained to C-SPAN’s Brian Lamb, “because if you don’t, and if you treat all Muslims as potential terrorists according to [the thesis] that there are no moderates, then . . . you will push a lot of moderates . . . into the extremist camp.” Even the sole superpower of the world, he warns, “cannot take on 1.4 billion people.” Endorsing the interpretation of the political Islamists and demanding that a billion people choose either our liberal politics or the faith of their fathers is as strategically suicidal as it is philosophically and theologically unfounded.

On Not Making the Problem Worse

The West’s troubles with the Islamic world are indeed great, and growing, but they do not—at least not yet—constitute a clash of civilizations. However, some of the policies adopted by the Bush administration since the 9/11 attacks have created ill-will within the Muslim community, and we would be wise not to repeat those mistakes. The leading source of resentment is the U.S. war in Iraq, which has led to growing suspicion of U.S. motives in the war on terrorism.

The war metaphor itself conceals and confuses the nature of U.S. efforts to hunt down violent extremists. With the exception of the U.S. military operations to depose the Taliban and disrupt al-Qaeda camps in Afghanistan, the most successful counterterrorism operations do not involve

“Comparisons between the war on terrorism and the world wars are exaggerations.”

the U.S. military. The disastrous invasion and occupation of Iraq—cited in the recent National Intelligence Estimate as the “cause célèbre” for jihadists, “breeding a deep resentment of U.S. involvement in the Muslim world and cultivating supporters for the global jihad movement”—stands in stark contrast to the successful nonmilitary operations that enabled the United States to capture such al-Qaeda figures as Ramzi Binalshibh and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the key plotters of the 9/11 attacks.

There are other things that the West can do that could decrease the likelihood of a war of the worlds. Peaceful, noncoercive, person-to-person engagement can be an enormously effective vehicle for promoting understanding. By contrast, policies that inhibit or preclude dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims can have the opposite effect, allowing caricatures of America and Americans to gain traction. This process empowers extremists and marginalizes moderates.

The Pew Research Center’s Andrew Kohut and his coauthor Bruce Stokes have tracked global attitudes toward the United States for many years. In their book, *America against the World*, they explain that, whereas foreigners once drew sharp distinctions between American policies, which were often held in low regard, and the American people and the American way of life, which they embraced, hostility toward U.S. policies is now influencing broader attitudes toward American culture and values.

Those trends can be reversed. Many Americans have reached out to their Muslim neighbors in the five years since September 11, 2001. President Bush set the tone in the days immediately after the terrorist attacks. In his speech before Congress on September 20, 2001, he assured Muslims around the world that Americans respected their faith. “It’s practiced freely by many millions of Americans, and by millions more in countries that America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah.”

It was hardly a foregone conclusion that America’s leaders would exhibit such resolve in preventing the war on terrorism from being cast as a war against Islam. Indeed, some have suggested a campaign of isolation against Muslim Americans along the lines of what was done to Japanese Americans during World War II.

Fortunately, Americans have not resorted to internment camps, nor have they engaged in more subtle forms of persecution and ostracism. We have not, as many European countries have done, systematically isolated and marginalized Muslim populations in ghettos and enclaves. Notably, the riots in Europe and elsewhere—including those associated with the publication of the cartoon depictions of the Prophet Muhammad—did not occur in the United States. Just as a number of people within the American-Muslim community have stepped forward to fight Islamic extremism, many American Muslims have denounced the violent intimidation campaign directed against the European papers that published the cartoons.

That suggests that the United States has much to teach, and the Europeans much to learn, about how to reduce or perhaps even eliminate the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims. Ultimately, however, although the West can take steps to ensure that Muslim communities are not oppressed or victimized, a reformation of Islam that will make space for nonbelievers must come from within.

Keeping It All in Perspective

As we strive to avoid a full-scale clash of civilizations, it is wise to keep exaggerated claims in perspective. Comparisons between the war on terrorism and the world wars are among those exaggerations. Claims that our national survival hangs in the balance, or that the terrorists

pose an existential threat comparable to that of the Nazis or the Soviets, build pressure for policies that do not increase our security but do erode the very liberties that define us as a nation.

We now know that similar policies that diminished freedom in the name of security—from the jailing of anti-war critics such as Eugene Debs in World War I, to the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II, to the harassment of American Communists during the Cold War—were unnecessary or counterproductive. And it makes no sense to adopt similar policies today, when the threat is far less severe. Terrorism poses a frightening threat, but the casualties that might be inflicted in even the worst-case scenario do not approximate those incurred during the two world wars, or that would have ensued had the Cold War turned hot.

We have witnessed over the past half century the dramatic spread of liberalism and free markets around the world. We want to see this process continue because the peaceful, noncoercive, person-to-person contact that flourishes in free and open systems is inimical to extremism and violence. To be sure, there have been setbacks. Some closed systems have proved exceptionally resistant to the spread of freedom. At times, the rapid collapse of autocratic regimes has been followed by periods of chaos and violence. We have even seen free and fair elections that have empowered the least liberal elements in societies struggling to emerge from decades of autocracy and tyranny. And those setbacks have prompted some people to redouble their efforts to promote liberty.

It would be unfortunate if our zeal for promoting liberalism around the world were seen as merely attempts to extend Western political and military dominance. It would be ironic if our efforts to isolate and destroy violent extremists had the effect of making the problem of extremism even worse. Most of all, it would be tragic if we adopted policies that violate our bedrock national values or precipitate a conflict between the West and all of Islam that actually would be on par with the most horrible wars of the 20th century.