

## 'War on Terror' finally over

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Updated: September 10, 2011 - 2:12 PM

Ten years after that fateful September day, the War on Terror is finally over.

It did not end when Barack Obama took office and stopped using that poisonous slogan. But it finally did end two and a half years later -- not with a bang, not even with a whimper, but with a whisper.

The military, financial and ideological struggle to contain Al-Qaida and its autonomous, like-minded affiliates around the world continues. But the war on terror went well beyond that.

The slogan itself mattered less than the logic and narrative for which it was a shorthand. That logic associated U.S. national security with a grand crusade to remake the world, to rid it of extremist purveyors of fear and hatred, and to replace them with tolerance and liberty.

That narrative cast the United States as the blameless victim on 9/11 of those who hate our freedoms. These constituted the basic prism through which the United States made sense of the world for the next decade.

Even as public enthusiasm for nation-building ventures dimmed, the war on terror dominated our nation's bipartisan rhetoric. Even as 9/11 became a

distant memory, and even as the slogan itself receded, the war on terror continued to structure our nation's national security debate.

And now -- quietly, without any public ceremony or even an obituary -- it is gone. It lives on in some circles, and it may even rear its head again during the 2012 campaign. But it is no longer an organizing principle of our political discourse.

Its demise was announced at the end of June in the release of the Obama administration's National Strategy for Counterterrorism.

President Obama pointedly rebuked his predecessor: "The United States deliberately uses the word 'war' to describe our relentless campaign against al-Qa'ida.

However, this Administration has made it clear that we are not at war with the tactic of terrorism or the religion of Islam. We are at war with a specific organization -- al-Qa'ida.

"To defeat al-Qa'ida," the president declared, "we must define with precision and clarity who we are fighting, setting concrete and realistic goals tailored to the specific challenges we face in different regions of the world"--unlike a war on terror that left the adversary vague, laid out overly ambitious and unachievable goals, and presented a one-size-fits-all strategy.

For the Obama administration, the threat of terrorism is just one among many -- "we have



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placed our CT [counterterrorist] campaign in a context that does not dominate the lives of the American people nor overshadow our approach to the broad range of our interests."

Globe-straddling doctrine is out. Context-specific pragmatism is in. The Obama administration has bid adieu to the war on terror.

It took time for good reason: Politicians across the political spectrum had long been complicit in reproducing the war on terror.

Rather than seizing the rhetorical opportunities that repeated setbacks in Iraq provided, Democrats, including then-Sen. Obama, typically criticized the Iraq war from safer political terrain.

They argued that Iraq had distracted the United States from the "real" war on terror in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

During the 2008 campaign, Obama even echoed the Bush administration in portraying the 9/11 attacks as a turning point in global politics, suggesting that transnational terrorism threatened the nation's survival, depicting terrorism itself as the enemy and laying out an apocalyptic vision of "the next attack."

The danger of terrorism was, he declared, "no less grave" than that posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Little changed when Obama became president. His inaugural address declared the nation to be "at war

against ... those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents."

To be sure, he would as president avoid the slogan, which had come to be seen among Muslims as a euphemism for a war on Islam. But breaking with the deeper discourse came only gradually.

Even as Obama narrowed the campaign to a war against "al-Qa'ida and its affiliates," he still embraced the rhetoric of a broad struggle against "violent extremism." The National Counterterrorism Strategy marks the president's full and complete break with the war on terror.

Critics aplenty -- and not just doves -- thought the proclamation of a "war on terror" misguided from the start. Some of their fears were off-base. There is no evidence, for instance, that calling it a war legitimized Al-Qaida or its cause, as many worried.

But others were justified -- that the demonization of terrorists would alienate populations sympathetic to their grievances, that it offered a rhetorical cloak behind which regimes would hide murderous repression, that it sustained an atmosphere of crisis antithetical to our aims abroad and disastrous for liberty at home.

Beyond all that, though, the war on terror made a vigorous debate at home about national security strategy impossible. Strategy requires aligning limited national means with foreign ends. Because we cannot do everything we might like, we need to prioritize.

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The globe-encircling logic of the war on terror left decisionmakers unable to justify the hard choices that strategy entails. With all "ungoverned spaces" -- areas in which state authority was weak or invisible -- potential terrorist havens, the war on terror committed the United States to an endless list of state-building projects the world over.

Today Afghanistan, where it was central to Gen. Stanley McChrystal's counterinsurgency plans. But implicitly tomorrow Pakistan, then Yemen, followed by Somalia.

The end of the war on terror does not solve all our problems. But it gives American officials greater freedom to criticize repression even when directed against alleged terrorists.

It makes possible (well, perhaps not during the presidential campaign!) a national conversation about strategy -- necessary even when the economy is humming, all the more so in an era of financial constraint -- and thus about not doing some things we might otherwise be tempted to do.

Expensive, unattainable, global solutions have lost their place at the table.

How then can the United States counter Al-Qaida?

Here, too, the end of the war on terror can help. Experts have long advised the United States to cultivate and work with local allies -- not only because direct military action is costly, in blood and treasure, but because only they have the credibility

to wage the battle of ideas.

Finding reasonably reliable local allies, however, has been a problem: those willing to work with the United States often lack legitimacy, and those who have legitimacy fear seeming an American stooge. The end of the war on terror may make the United States a more palatable partner.

There has been a silver lining to the Great Recession. It gets the credit for allowing the Obama administration to break with the dominant narrative of the past decade.

But the silence that greeted the end of the war on terror is equally the product of our nation's economic anxiety, and it is worrying. We should not mourn the demise of the war on terror, but we should reflect upon it.

Or we may find ourselves replacing an overweening imperialism with a crabbed nationalism.

\* \* \*

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