How to Fight a Superpower

Al Qaeda as an NGO

By Tod Lindberg

President Bush has described the struggle against terrorism in which we are engaged as the first war of the twenty-first century. Presumably he means more by that designation than a nod to the calendar. He is also referring to a new kind of war. But what kind? Well, the novelty is that the United States finds itself at war for the first time against a non-governmental organization.

Such conflicts are not entirely without precedent. Governments have often fought guerrilla movements bent on their overthrow, for example. And history also offers examples of conflicts in which military force has been systematically deployed against non-state actors, for example in the suppression of piracy and the slave trade, or, more recently, in the "war" against drug trafficking. But still, the current war against terrorism is different.

First of all, Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization is not a guerrilla force bent on our overthrow. The United States has the power to force "regime change," as international relations scholars would say. The terrorists do not. Neither are they pirates, slavers, or narcotraffickers. All of the latter are or were pursuing merely private aims, namely, winning riches (and, one must add, getting their kicks). There is no sense in which the terrorists can be construed to be acting for private gain (though they and their sympathizers no doubt took private pleasure in the attacks). The motivation of pirates was not to threaten British interests by interfering with the right of free passage on the high seas. This threat was a byproduct of the plundering of booty. The purpose of the slavers wasn't to strike a blow at believers in newfangled rights of man. Again, the offense against human dignity, requiring an urgent response, was a byproduct of actions undertaken for entirely different reasons. The case of the narcotraffickers is analogous. In all three examples, the private character of the motives of the malefactors invites us to view them as criminals and the government actions against them as police work, even if conducted by military forces.

Some are inclined to view the terror attacks through this same prism of criminality. But this misconstrues the terrorists' motivation. Those who plan and perpetrate such attacks want to inflict harm on the United States for political reasons. They want us out of the Middle East. In their view, and they are surely correct, the best means of coercion they have at their disposal is the terror attack. Therefore, they attack with terror. And therefore, we respond to them as an external enemy, albeit one with agents on our soil—an enemy that is neither merely criminal nor, in any meaningful sense, revolutionary. We wage war, and the fact that our enemy is not necessarily or even mainly a particular state does not make what we are doing anything less than waging war. But it is a new kind of war—the first war against an NGO.

The 1990s saw the dramatic rise of the non-governmental organization, or NGO. The influence and prestige such organizations have come to enjoy across a whole range of issues is really quite remarkable. From the dashing and glamorous *Médecins sans Frontières* to the proliferating human rights watchdog groups worldwide, from the increasingly visible groups courageously delivering humanitarian assistance in conditions of absolute misery to the explosive growth of missionary Protestantism in Latin America, from the international profusion of "civil society" groups to the almost unstoppable ability of the major environmentalist groups to set the international terms of discussion in their area of interest, NGOs are on the march. The classic example is the case of Jody Williams, the woman from Vermont who, by means of the Internet, all but singlehandedly created a network of NGOs campaigning for a ban on land mines, for which she shared the Nobel Peace Prize in 1997.

Professors of government at elite campuses nationwide report that for students, at least before September 11, the keenest area of interest is not international rela-

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tions or comparative politics, but international NGOs and the "soft" security issues with which they have become associated: the environment and global warming, AIDS, globalization and its discontents. Conferences of NGOs can rival in size and attention meetings of the G-8 or the International Monetary Fund. Nowadays, it is quite common for the presence of NGOs to overwhelm the official national participants at world meetings of all kinds. Indeed, some have joked—and it's really not a joke—that the government of Canada has essentially turned itself over to NGOs. These organizations have achieved an unprecedented degree of respect and legitimacy internationally.

Why? Or rather, why now? Many have propounded theories on the subject, but the theories often suffer from the defect that those putting them forth are also cheerleaders for NGOs—as a new way for people to make their voices heard, as a new route to direct political participation, as a response to new challenges globally and locally, as a way to pressure nations to think beyond national interest, as the only institutions left with the hope of humanizing the global advance of capitalism, etc. No doubt this is all true to some degree. But there is another explanation for the rise of the NGOs that has the virtue of allowing us to see why al Qaeda and its terrorist brethren can properly be said to constitute the dark side of the NGO. It is no accident that NGOs and al Qaeda increased vastly in significance in the decade after the end of the Cold War. They are a logical response to a world that is essentially unipolar.

When the United States emerged as the "world's sole superpower" following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many theorists and commentators thought that American preeminence would be short-lived. A bipolar world characterized by superpower rivalry might be fairly stable, and a multipolar world based on balance-of-power politics could potentially be stable, but a unipolar world? Surely this was a recipe for strife, as other powers would rapidly join forces to balance the biggest power. While the end of the Cold War might have ushered in a "unipolar moment," it was apt to be little more than a moment.

It turns out that this analysis was wrong. The definitive essay on the subject, by William C. Wohlforth, appeared as the lead article in *International Security* in summer 1999. In it, he swept away decades of international relations clutter and established that a unipolar order was likely to be stable, durable, and peaceful in terms of relations among states. His analysis comports perfectly with the evidence of the past decade, and in this regard, September 11 changed nothing. Where the United States has taken an interest—which is not everywhere in the world and in everything going on—the United States has had decisive influence. Sometimes this has taken the form of military action (Iraq, Bosnia, Kosovo), sometimes of the extension of security guarantees (in Europe through an expanding NATO, in East Asia, in the Middle East), and sometimes, as in Central and Latin America, there has been a long commitment to intervene to keep foreign powers out. U.S. dominance extends well beyond the sphere of security; no other country has nearly the influence of the United States in writing rules for international conduct in areas from trade to the Internet to bank secrecy. And again, what is equally striking is that there is no area in which the United States takes *any* interest in which it does not also have dominant influence.

It seems difficult to the point of impossibility for the United States to act as if it were any less powerful than it is. To a degree, and especially in areas that have long been of only peripheral concern, the United States can forswear action. U.S. non-intervention in response to the horrendous slaughter of 800,000 Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda in 1994 is one such example, as was the Clinton administration decision to abandon Somalia following an October 1993 gunfight in Mogadishu with local militia that left 18 American soldiers dead. The breakup of Yugoslavia teaches a related lesson. In the effort to stop the bloodshed and ethnic cleansing there, the United States at first tried to defer to the leadership of European governments. But it turned out that Europeans did not have the means to broker and enforce a peace, and this failure transformed what started as a crisis on the periphery of Europe into a full-blown European crisis. The United States finally took the lead, having learned that the failure to do so results not in others' taking the lead but in no leadership at all.

There was a time when other governments could effectively oppose and sometimes humiliate the United States. Most of these instances, from the Vietnam war to the "Brezhnev Doctrine," had a Cold War backdrop, in which the principal antagonist was not just the local adversary but also the Soviet Union (the taking of U.S. hostages by revolutionary Iran was an exception). But it is, in truth, no longer possible for other governments to plague the United States in this fashion, certainly not without the risk of overwhelming retaliation. One of the most striking details of the Somalia debacle, in Mark Bowden's brilliant telling in *Black Hawk Down*, was the near-certain expectation among Somalis that the United States would return in huge force to avenge the American dead. Our retreat came as quite a surprise to them.

What is true of security is also true in other areas, starting with diplomacy. The United States was once powerless to stop the United Nations General Assembly from passing a resolution equating Zionism with racism. In response to the nuclear threat, the United States found itself in protracted and bitter negotiations with the Soviet Union, the product of which were arms control agreements deemed by a significant segment of American opinion to be disadvantageous to the United States. Now, the United States is essentially at liberty to make drastic unilateral cuts in its nuclear arsenal while at the same time breaking out, with no more than pro forma Russian opposition, from the model of nuclear deterrence embodied in the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

The inability of other governments to effectively oppose the United States extends to the whole slew of international agreements on subjects ranging from land mines to chemical weapons to the establishment of an international criminal court to global warming. In all of these cases, the configuration is essentially the same: The United States stands alone against the governments of most (if not all) of the rest of the world. And the result is that the United States prevails, or at least is not imposed upon. Many have decried this as a case of uniquely bad American manners—an unwillingness as a matter of principle to work with other nations or to join world opinion. But the United States is not behaving doctrinally. It acts in accordance with the reality of its power. After all, matters that arise before the "international community" look different to its far-and-away most powerful member than they do to the array of lesser powers. A ban on land mines is controversial for a country with 35,000 troops stationed across the demilitarized zone from North Korea in a way that it simply is not for any other country, not one of which has a remotely comparable security agenda.

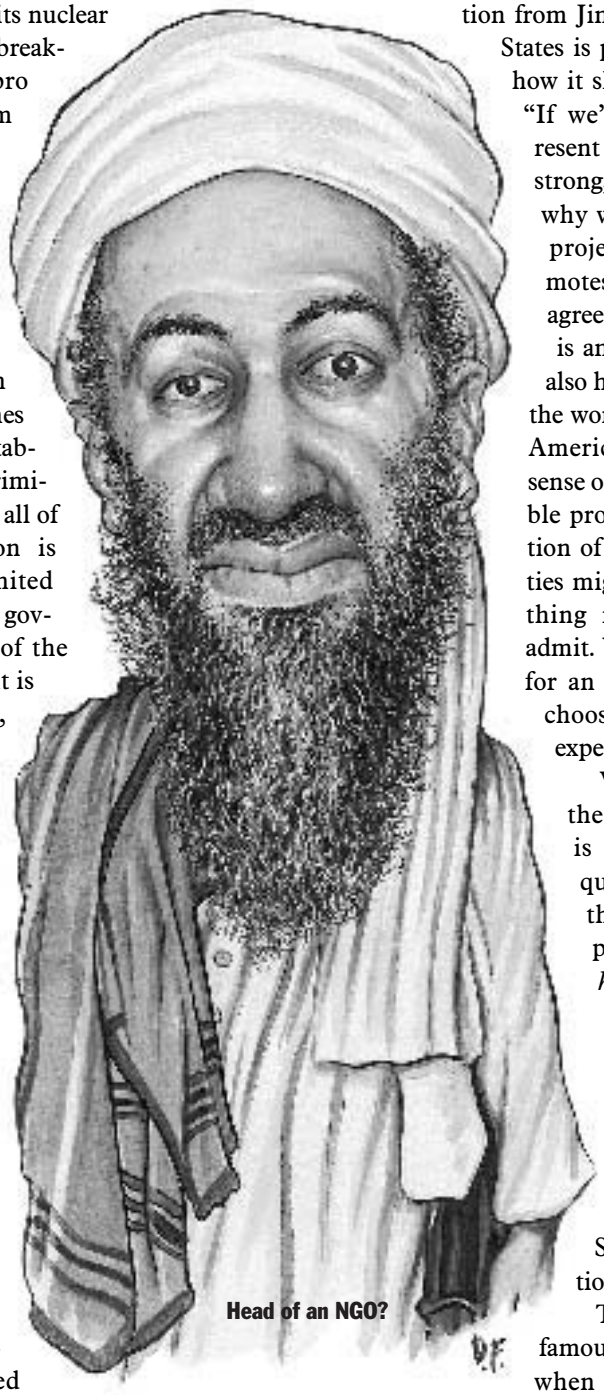

Illustration by Drew Friedman

Some call this arrogance. The French foreign minister, Hubert Védrine, has famously dubbed the United States the "hyperpower." This rankles Americans, who do not like to think of themselves as arrogant and resent it when others think of them in this way. Candidate Bush made this point with some insistence in one of his debates with Vice President Gore. In response to a question from Jim Lehrer about how the United States is perceived around the world and how it should conduct itself, Bush said, "If we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us. If we're a humble nation, but strong, they'll welcome us. And that's why we've got to be humble and yet project strength in a way that promotes freedom." Gore, interestingly, agreed: "I think the idea of humility is an important one. But I think we also have to have a sense of mission in the world." This is the quintessentially American outlook: humility *and* a sense of mission in the world; the humble projection of strength and promotion of freedom. That these two qualities might not be reconcilable is something neither man was prepared to admit. Yet there is not much doubt that for an American president, forced to choose, it's the humility that's expendable.

Védrine is profoundly right. But the arrogance in question—if that is the word for it—is neither a quality of national character nor the cumulative result of discrete policy choices but a byproduct of *hyperpuissance*. In practical terms, its meaning is that in the areas in which the United States engages—and other countries have remarkably little influence on the United States in deciding what those areas will be—the United States meets no effective opposition from other governments.

True, the United States suffered a famous diplomatic blow in May 2001 when it was voted off the United

Nations Human Rights Commission. This was said to be comeuppance for, precisely, our international arrogance: Other nations rallied to teach the United States a lesson. But this interpretation of events exactly misses the point. The necessary condition for depriving the United States of a seat on the commission was that the voting was by secret ballot. The supposed comeuppance was administered by nations that, if they had to vote openly, would have been unwilling to oppose the United States. These governments could only act furtively—a further illustration of the difficulty in challenging U.S. power.

The profusion of international non-governmental organizations during the 1990s can therefore be seen as a quest for influence in a world overwhelmingly dominated by the government of the United States. The supporters and funders of this movement, besides their immediate policy goals, hope to establish the legitimacy of non-state international actors in their efforts to circumscribe or bypass national governments. Two conclusions follow. First, the structure of the system is such that national governments are inadequate vehicles for their ends. Second, insofar as the current system is one in which the United States dominates and intends to continue dominating, dissatisfaction with this system is willy-nilly dissatisfaction with the United States.

Now, to be sure, there are any number of NGOs operating in the world today that seek to advance some of the ideas with which the United States has long been associated, including democratic politics, market-based economics, religious pluralism and tolerance, and trade liberalization. It's striking, however, that such NGOs generally have as their object the reform of national policies, country by country—bringing particular nations more into line with the world order the United States has long been promoting. Their activism reflects a fundamental satisfaction with the status quo, including U.S. dominance, and seeks from other governments greater conformity to the norms of the status quo. NGOs of this sort, though they may operate in more than one nation, are largely national in focus. Note that there is, for example, no mass, international "pro-globalization" movement. As long as the U.S. government is pro-globalization, such a movement would be superfluous.

The truly international NGOs (INGOs, in the lingo) therefore tend to be arrayed against the status quo. Does it go too far to suggest that a structural characteristic of INGOs is opposition, in one form or another, to the continuing dominance of the United States? Perhaps it does go too far, in the way of other such quasi-Marxist analyses. But it does not go too far to say that INGOs have become the premier vehicle for opposition to the status quo—and not just for socialists. Also for the likes of Osama bin Laden.

In *International Civil Society*, an intelligent Marxist analysis (unburdened by cheerleading until its concluding pages) of how INGOs have influenced world affairs, Alejandro Colás defines a "social movement" as "a sustained and purposeful collective mobilization by a group of people in pursuit of socioeconomic and political change." Such movements, "[b]y espousing and propagating universal ideologies; by providing examples of how collective action can be meaningful across the globe; and, most importantly, by organizing internationally, . . . have for decades been extending the boundaries of political action beyond the territorial state. It is in this sense that international civil society becomes the relevant site of world politics." Just so. And it is clearly not just the relatively benevolent likes of the global environmental movement that meet these criteria. Nothing in Colás's descriptions excludes al Qaeda.

Colás is not taken in by the starry-eyed "progressive" presuppositions common among cheerleaders of the INGO movement—for example, that "global civil society is . . . representative of an otherwise marginalized 'global people's power' or a disenfranchised 'global citizenry.'" Notably, he points out that "many agents of international civil society are themselves thoroughly unaccountable and undemocratic."

I think Colás runs into trouble trying to subsume too many disparate social movements under the rubric of class struggle provoked by the global spread of capitalism. But he is not wrong to point to a common element of dissatisfaction. The INGOs, to put it politically, are dissatisfied with the U.S.-dominated status quo and determined to work around it in order to work against it.

But how successful in finding a way around the state system, ultimately, are the INGOs—and the DONGOs (donor-organized non-governmental organizations) and the BONGOs (business-organized NGOs) and the QUANGOs (quasi non-governmental organizations) and now, we may perhaps add, the TONGOs, the terrorist-organized non-governmental organizations? Is it really true that the state system is in decline as a result of a profusion of non-state actors and the vast increase in the influence they wield?

Consider the puzzlement in the early days after September 11 surrounding the very idea of striking back at the elusive al Qaeda. Some worried about how effective U.S. military power could ever be against a loose collection of terrorist cells operating across national bound-

aries—in this asymmetrical war, our TONGO enemy could strike at will, at any place or time, and all our conventional power, it was said, would be useless as the enemy faded into the surrounding mists. But if true, this line of reasoning has some interesting implications. For example, there is no doubt that in terms of sheer military power, the United States could topple any government (i.e., effect "regime change") in any country in the Middle East or Central Asia (though not necessarily with impunity; there could be grave consequences). Which is to say that if Osama bin Laden became the ruler of Saudi Arabia, for example, the United States could defeat him handily. But does that really mean that bin Laden is more dangerous and formidable operating on the run from caves in Tora Bora than he would be presiding in the state with the world's largest oil reserves? Would Saddam Hussein be an all the more implacable foe were he operating not out of innumerable palaces in Baghdad but as head of an international Baathist conspiracy? Of course not. This reasoning is simply wrong.

Thomas Friedman of the *New York Time*s has theorized about the replacement of superpowers by "super-empowered individuals," actors unconstrained by the limitations traditionally affecting states. Long before September 11, Osama bin Laden was one of his prime examples. And while there is no doubt that his contention has been amply confirmed by the events that day, the days since have demonstrated that the concept needs refinement. Bin Laden is an individual, but what "super-empowers" him is not his individual ambition or capability but the network, the TONGO, he created.

Moreover, it quickly became apparent that the workings of al Qaeda were intimately bound up with the actions of at least one state, the Taliban government in Afghanistan. It is still unclear whether it is more accurate to say that the Taliban had some control over al Qaeda or that al Qaeda in fact controlled the Taliban; what is undeniable is that the first objective of the U.S. war against the al Qaeda TONGO was toppling the Taliban government. President Bush has put other states on notice that harboring terrorists will bring similarly dire consequences. So it is unlikely to be a fluke of Afghanistan that the first U.S. war against a non-governmental organization should quickly turn into a war between states.

Once again, this is but the limit case of a general pattern. With regard to the immense influence of NGOs on the government of Canada, one must ask: Doesn't this tell us more about the government of Canada than about NGOs? The NGOs didn't muscle their way into Ottawa; they were invited. In accounting for the phenomenon, shouldn't one look first to the particular circumstances that might lead Canada to welcome their arrival and influence, rather than to supposedly immutable powers of incursion on the part of the NGOs? Canada has a number of special characteristics, one of which is complete physical security, thanks to the United States, and another of which (the flip-side of the coin) is concern about maintaining national identity next to its oversized neighbor. The former may serve as the grounds for a strategy to deal with the latter: If the United States is the preeminently arrogant power, Canada has nothing to lose by distinguishing itself as the world's most humble power. Inviting in NGOs and embracing multinational institutions are a means to this end.

Or consider the Kyoto agreement on global warming. NGOs were immensely influential in raising concerns about the effects of global warming in general and for that matter in helping to draft the treaty itself. But once the treaty was drafted, its fate was in the hands of states, and in particular, in the hands of the most powerful state, the one whose rejection of Kyoto effectively scuttles it. Revealingly, the most cutting denunciations of the Bush administration announcement that the United States would not seek to ratify Kyoto came not from NGOs but from European governments committed to the treaty. Indeed, the nation most enthusiastic about the new role of NGOs, as Christopher Caldwell has written in *Policy Review*, is France. But this is assuredly not a French passion to be like Canada. France has global ambitions of its own, and one means of pursuing them is by advancing the cause of NGOs—precisely as a bulwark against the hyperpower.

Revealingly, the most cutting critics of the Bush administration's scuttling of Kyoto were not NGOs but European governments.

Again, Colás is on point: "While international relations cannot be reduced to relations between states alone, very few actors in world politics operate without the mediation of the state." Or: "The experience of world conferences during the 1990s suggests that, to adapt a phrase, 'global civil society is what states make of it.'"

And in particular, global civil society is what the United States makes of it. This is because it is above all U.S. predominance to which the proliferation and the increasing salience of the NGOs is a response. Undeniably many of these non-state actors are benevolent. But undeniably, too, it's as NGOs that our adversaries will increasingly organize themselves and through which they will try to work. ♦