

Obama's Boundless War

John Mueller | May 29, 2013





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In a speech last week, President Obama expressed some distaste for what he called the “boundless” global war on terror. But in some important respects, his vision of the enterprise seems even more boundless than previous definitions of the terrorism fight.

The Obama administration has been at some pains to downplay the rhetoric of war as it deals with terrorism. Yet Obama’s desire to use the weapons and methods of war against terrorists now requires him to plunge into that rhetoric and in the process extravagantly to hype the threat that terrorism presents.

He began by declaring that that we have been at war ever since 9/11. He deems that war to be going rather well, but he concludes it must necessarily continue because “our nation is still threatened by terrorists.”

Musing on the “future of terrorism,” he acknowledges that “the threat has shifted and evolved” somewhat. But he insists a war against it will be required as long as there are Al Qaeda affiliates out there, as long as there are threats to diplomatic facilities and businesses abroad, and as long as there are “homegrown

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extremists” willing to set off bombs or shoot at people.

Whether there will always be violent groups saying they are affiliated with Al Qaeda is uncertain. But it seems fair to suggest that there will always be people who threaten American diplomatic facilities or businesses abroad and that there will always be extremists at home—however trivial and pathetic—who will try from time to time to do violence to other people to advance a political cause.

Consequently, the war will continue forever.

But there is more. In one of the more arresting passages in the speech, Obama points out that the terrorism threat we have now is much like the one we faced in the 1980s and 1990s, listing off a number of terrorist outrages during those decades. Therefore he seems to suggest that we must have been at war with terrorism in those decades as well even if nobody exactly noticed. Moreover, a similar litany of terrorist excesses could be brought out for just about any decade in U.S. or world history.

Consequently, not only have we been at war with terrorism for “over a decade,” not only will we be at war with it for the rest of eternity, but we have previously been at war with it for the whole of time.

That sounds pretty boundless to me.

Rather inconsistently, however, Obama ends his speech with what might be taken to be a glimmer of hope. While realistically acknowledging early in the speech that he cannot “promise the total defeat of terror,” he ends it by positing that we can still somehow achieve victory against it. We’ll know we’re there, he says, if (1) parents take their kids to school, (2) immigrants come to our shores, (3) fans take in a ballgame, (4) a veteran starts a business, (5) city streets bustle, and (6) a citizen shouts at a president.

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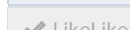
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Well actually, we do these things now, can easily do so in the future, and have done so repeatedly not only over the last horrible decade—but for all of history before that.

Maybe if we all start shouting at the president, he'll declare boundless victory.

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