

Goodbye, good riddance to the global war on terror

BRIAN FLEMMING

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The decade-long global war on terror, which effectively ended with the killing of Osama bin Laden, has been the strangest war since the War of Jenkins' Ear between Great Britain and Spain in the mid-18th century. And, as in the War of Jenkins' Ear, there has been no clear winner.

From its bizarre, confused beginnings in the days following the stunning attacks on New York's twin towers and the Pentagon, the global war on terror always seemed to possess a surreal quality. How could one be at "war" against an abstract noun like "terror"? And how could a country be at "war" with "terrorism," which is nothing more than a technique that has been used from time immemorial to strike fear into human populations?

The careless interchangeability of the words "terror" and "terrorism" on the lips of politicians and commentators only served to further blur their meanings, and to spawn a slipperiness few seemed eager to analyze seriously. George Orwell would have had a field day, trying to fathom the real meaning of these fuzzy words. And changing the name of the global war on terror to "Overseas Contingency Operations," as the Obama administration has tried to do, is beyond Orwellian.

One of the worst features of the global war on terror was the failure of all the countries "at war" to ask for serious sacrifice from their citizens. There was no draft of eligible "warriors," nor was there any rationing of anything. There were neither war bonds nor "temporary" war taxes. Unlike the Vietnam War, for example, the global war on terror never reached into either the pockets or the lives of the urban upper classes of America. No British "spirit of the blitz" resilience was engendered in the citizenry of "combatant nations." The ultimate aims of the global war on terror were never as clearly articulated as the objectives of the Second World War or the Cold War. In many important ways, the global war on terror was a faux, not a real, war.

The overwhelming lesson of the global war on terror was this: Unless a country is fighting a barbaric, totalitarian, Nazi-type regime, no war should be waged unless it is financially feasible. The Soviet Union was finally finished off financially in Afghanistan, a process aided and abetted by American-financed "freedom fighters" such as Osama bin Laden. After the USSR fell, and in a halo of hubris, Mr. bin Laden decided he could also defeat another great world power, America. And so the planning for 9/11 began. Despite his alleged great wealth, Mr. bin Laden decided to fight a "Wal-Mart war," not a "Tiffany war." The return on investment from 9/11 for Mr. bin Laden and al-Qaeda has been staggering: hundreds of thousands of dollars for him versus trillions for America.

In the United States, money that should have been spent on lowering taxes, building infrastructure and improving health care and education has been sent to the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan – and is never coming back. And for what?

War, the great historic change-agent, has, once again, worked its “magic.” For America, in particular, there can never be a return to the status quo ante of 2000. It is even conceivable the global war on terror could turn out to be the biggest financial and military disaster for America since the Civil War. The jury is still out on that question.

The most difficult question for “warriors” in a shadowy war like the global war on terror is about the effectiveness of the money spent fighting it. When one spends a fortune installing a security system in a McMansion, and no burglars break in for a decade, one is never sure whether they tried and failed, or whether they gave up and never tried. The results look exactly the same. Accordingly, those who claimed that many great benefits were (secretly) achieved by the global war on terror should have been made to prove those assertions more rigorously than they did.

Another great lesson of the global war on terror was “Clausewitz-ian.” There was a constant failure by those in charge to remember that war was the conduct of politics by another means. There was, particularly in Afghanistan, a reluctance to admit that Taliban “scumbags” had political as well as military objectives. The hard truth now is that the local military and police in Afghanistan are today no better equipped to beat the Taliban than their counterparts in Vietnam were able to defeat the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese after the last helicopter lifted off the American embassy roof in Saigon in 1975.

The Duke of Wellington once said “a great country ought not to make little wars.” By any definition, the global war on terror was a “little war” and hardly worth the candle. Its eventual victims could even include both NATO and the United States. Fighting the global war on terror certainly turned out to be a sad way to start a new century. It’s time to move on.

Brian Flemming is a Fellow of the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute. In 2002, he was the founding CEO and chair of the Canadian Air Transport Security Authority and, in 2005, was a founding member of the federal Advisory Council on National Security.