In the eyes of history, the 10 years from December 25, 1991, until September 11, 2001, may become known as the interwar years. Just as the 20 years from 1919 to 1939 have no organizing principle to define them, so too the last 10 years may be independently unrecognizable to the future. From the day the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin until the day the twin towers collapsed, the shape of the world to come was impossible to imagine. Granted, new trends distinct from the Cold War were emerging. A limited, regional war in the Persian Gulf had gathered together one of the major coalitions in the history of warfare. Three major actors—the United States, Russia, and China—worked with a curious mix of cooperation and confrontation. Intrastate wars were blooming in the Balkans, Indonesia, Central Asia, and Africa, but ethnic rivalries were hardly the only feature of these conflicts, even in the chaos of Africa. Globalization was an economic, rather than strategic, concept and its very meaning remained elusive. The information revolution was changing the nature of conflict, but exactly how was difficult to assess. Simply stated, no clear picture was emerging from these different elements.

One thing, however, was already clear: by the end of the last century, hopes concerning a “new world order” had vanished. The strategic literature was full of “new threats.” Rapid change was indeed feared by many, particularly with the appearance of two additional declared nuclear powers in 1998, with the intractable problems posed by Iraq and North Korea, and with the modernization of the Chinese military. Possible failures of deterrence were often contemplated, and missile defenses were supposed to protect people and troops at...
home and abroad. The question at the beginning of September 2001 was whether such defenses would increase international security or insecurity.

The vocabulary used to describe the international situation did not reflect the striking difference between expectations at the beginning and at the end of the 1990s. For want of something better, observers retained the term “post–Cold War” as the least imperfect way to name the 10 years that followed the Soviet Union’s breakup. Now, something different, something unrecognizable, something irreconcilable with concepts inherited from past experiences of either war or terrorism has come into being. This new phenomenon, however, does have a name: asymmetric warfare. Significant thought had already been given to asymmetric threats before September 11, but it had been nothing but a way of thinking. Such an extraordinary attack, in real time and real space, gave asymmetry a horrific shape.

The Terrorist Agenda

Those who planned the attacks seem to have operated from a list detailing the striking differences between the United States and themselves and to have played on those differences as much as they could. Their strategy can be described as follows:

• *Have no center and strike at the heart of the superpower.*

Although the United States may have become increasingly non-Clausewitzian in its approach to warfare, the terrorists adhered to the old recipe of warfare’s most famous theoretician: inflict the most powerful blow at the center of gravity of your enemy. The World Trade Center, as a symbol of U.S. economic might and U.S.-led globalization, was precisely that point. The decapitation of U.S. political and military power with strikes on the Pentagon and possibly the White House or the Capitol was supposed to finish off the task. President George W. Bush correctly described the terrorist attack as an act of war. This trauma has been far worse than during the 1950s when Sputnik revealed the vulnerability of U.S. territory. Although that threat was much more serious, putting the entire United States within a fraction of an hour’s journey of Soviet nuclear missiles, it remained unreal because it was theoretical. Today’s threat is no longer “potential”: lower Manhattan lies in ruins. The terrorists correctly calculated the psychological effect.

• *The United States wants life at any cost? Kill as many civilians as possible.*

In his first *fatwa*, or religious declaration, Osama bin Laden in 1996 urged Muslims to kill U.S. military men abroad. In 1998, he expanded this “religious duty” to all U.S. citizens, civilian and military. Shortly after the second *fatwa*,...
hundreds died in the Kenyan and Tanzanian embassy bombings, most of them Africans. The latest escalation on September 11 is impressive. The terrorists so shocked the U.S. psyche that Bush received unprecedented popular support (91 percent of the U.S. population) even after he said that no victory would be possible without casualties, most probably heavy ones. As the conflict unfolds, more frightening scenarios surface, involving unconventional means. This enemy has no moral limits.

- **Reveal U.S. vulnerability to rustic means of war.**

To defeat the high-tech superpower, knives, fuel, and planes would suffice. The hijackers conducted a live demonstration for would-be terrorists. The message is clear: do not fear the United States’ power; the United States is a giant with feet of clay. Worldwide eavesdropping can easily be defeated and the most effective missile shield provides no protection against this type of attack. Does this notion mean that the terrorists did not use modern technology? Certainly not. They used the Internet for communication and encryptions. They made electronic money transfers from Dubai to the United States and back until just before the attacks. Moreover, networking, an essential component of postmodern society, was key to the terrorists’ strategy. Yet, in the minds of terrorists, highly developed technology cannot defeat those committed to the cause, and willing to die for it, no matter how simple their methods.

- **Fight the kind of war the United States hates: an elusive enemy who uses guerrilla tactics.**

From the terrorists’ standpoint, the only possible responses to the September 11 attacks would be either that of 1998, which proved totally ineffective (perhaps because of Pakistani betrayal); a Soviet-style invasion, which would lead to a second disaster for another major power; or guerrilla-style warfare, where the United States is not at its best. Lessons from experiences in Vietnam and more recently in Somalia were not lost on the terrorists. Afghanistan presents a particularly difficult and inhospitable terrain. Even the Soviet “Speznats” were unable to defeat the mujahideen. Granted, the United States has also learned lessons—not just from 1998, but also from Soviet errors—and has new technologies that allow it to destroy key military infrastructures immediately and trace fighters even in difficult terrains. Still, what exactly does the U.S. technological advantage provide in a fight against a tribal army in its mountainous homeland?

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**Allies have actualized the notion of collective defense in an unprecedented manner.**
• The United States makes military plans years ahead, so surprise them continuously.

Surprise has always been the nightmare of the military, but the U.S. military may particularly hate it. If no consistent strategy is recognizable, if no anticipation can be expected, preparation is almost impossible. With strikes both at home and abroad, domestic support may prove more fragile over a long period, particularly if unconventional means are used against unprotected civilians. Adapting to surprise might become an important element of future planning.

• Because the United States worries about collateral damage, fight unrestricted and total war.

In February 1999, China’s People’s Liberation Army published a document entitled “War without Limits.” The authors, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, two senior colonels from the younger generation of Chinese military officers, advocated a multitude of means, military and nonmilitary, to strike at the United States. Liang presented the document with the following description: “The first rule is that there are no rules, with nothing forbidden.” At the time of publication, reports implied that the authors, deliberately ignoring the laws of war, were promoting terrorism. This characterization might have been unfair, but the methods that bin Laden follows do fit conceptual “war without limits.” He acknowledges no laws of war whatsoever. Since September 11, numerous articles have been published about biological and chemical threats on U.S. or European soil. They attest to a spreading public fear, but bin Laden’s past statements justify it. He has made no mystery about his quest for weapons of mass destruction and his readiness to use them. The danger is therefore a real one.

The attack most probably involved a mixture of state and nonstate action.

• The United States places a premium on transparency, so act like a secret sect.

In the United States’ vision, the networked society, with its global information-sharing ambition, creates transparency and disincentives for conflict. Criminal clandestine networks, however, operating in the midst of postmodern societies, constitute a dark side of globalization that is difficult to detect and destroy. These dispersed units can penetrate, disrupt, and then evade. Nonstate actors can gain a significant edge over state systems if they choose to fight “netwars,” as a recent RAND study suggests.¹
New Assets to Fight Terrorism

The terrorists’ conviction in the ultimate success of their plan can be carried too far. The attacks have brought to light new factors with the ability to shift the conflict in a different direction.

• Impetus for cooperation.
  The commitment of the United States’ allies to collective defense has become more assertive. With NATO’s first-ever invocation of its founding treaty’s Article 5 on September 12, and with Japan’s decision to send Self-Defense Forces to the Indian Ocean, the allies have actualized the notion of collective defense in an unprecedented manner. Germany, in a dramatic recasting of its policy, declared that the time had come to show a new international responsibility. Further, the composition of alliances and coalitions is changing. The first telephone call Bush received after the attacks was from Russian president Vladimir Putin. Russia opened its airspace and bases and went so far as to suggest that it might reconsider its negative position on NATO enlargement. Does this response indicate that, in the future, NATO might become a broad political alliance, leaving military operations to “coalitions of the willing?” A new, closer relationship might emerge between the Cold War adversaries. As for China, not only did it vote in favor of the United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions condemning the attacks, but it also assured Washington of its support. Furthermore, China expressed its understanding of Japan’s deployment of an Aegis-type destroyer to the Indian Ocean for monitoring and surveillance. Even if Beijing acts out of the belief that the current conflict will weaken the United States, its political cooperation with Washington is significant. The actions of these major powers set into motion an unprecedented coalition to fight international terrorism, and maintaining it will be as great a challenge as defeating terrorism itself.

• The world recognizes that extraordinary means are necessary to fight terrorism.
  In the past, counterterrorism has been fought with minimal military involvement, but now Article 51 of the UN Charter, which justifies action in cases of self-defense, backs Washington’s military response. There is broad agreement that a campaign on international terrorism, sustained over a long period, must be fought and won. In the process, states sponsoring or supporting terrorism will also face consequences, military or otherwise. Beyond Afghanistan, Somalia and Sudan are nations frequently cited in connection with bin Laden, as well as Iraq, but no hard facts link Baghdad to the September 11 attacks so far.
The globalized economic environment allows a worldwide counterattack to eradicate funds of terrorist organizations. To win this battle, the banking system is adopting new forms of transparency, and restrictions on the flow of international capital are being contemplated. Governments are likely to alter the freedom of movement of goods and individuals, and even the most liberal of all nations, the United States, will have to accept limits to globalization and free trade. At its October 2001 meeting in Washington, the Group of Seven nations pledged to crack down on the financing of terrorism. It also endorsed making the fight against terrorism a new focus of international agencies that have been combating the laundering of drug money.

Concerted intelligence has already begun to play a crucial role in the battle. Before September 11, warning signals were few, but immediately after the attacks, intelligence gatherers made substantial breakthroughs in a matter of days, with wide international cooperation in Europe but also in the Middle East, Pakistan (albeit a questionable source), India, and Southeast Asia. Domestic and foreign intelligence are now connected in an unprecedented manner. Because the lines between terrorism and global crime are not very clear, all kinds of illicit trafficking are likely to pay a heavy price in this campaign. A good ploy might well be to enlist the talents of the international criminal world to help apprehend terrorists (just as the underworld was enlisted in Fritz Lang’s famous film M).

Failed states are now a strategic challenge that should be addressed urgently.

Civil defense, long considered secondary, will be reinforced. The boundaries between military and civil defense are being blurred. The increasing need to protect civilians from terrorist attacks, possibly involving weapons of mass destruction, will lead the most-developed countries to give a new priority to civil defense, making it harder for the terrorist to strike in the middle of cities and easier for governments to deal with limited unconventional attacks.

No country can afford a U.S. defeat, for it would throw the world off balance, into terror and chaos. This belief undoubtedly is the main strength on which the United States can rely during this most difficult conflict.
A Disturbing New World

To where is the new world leading? The September 11 attacks provide confusing messages.

• **A frightening imbalance.**

To think that the leading world power would have found itself in the extraordinary position of needing to mobilize four aircraft carriers and 400 planes to oppose a nonstate threat is astonishing. Since 1991, the trend had been toward interethnic conflicts, even though the Persian Gulf War had been an example to the contrary and Africa had experienced a few cases of bloody state conflicts (between Ethiopia and Eritrea, for instance). To launch such a major military force against al Qaeda is a truly radical version of asymmetrical conflicts. After the Gulf War, the United States came to the conclusion that Saddam Hussein had made the major mistake of confronting the U.S.-led coalition on its own terms, ending in Iraq’s resounding defeat. This lesson was also not lost on the enemies of the United States.

• **The distinction between state and nonstate actors may not be as relevant as it had been.**

We now face a corruption of state power in Afghanistan by nonstate actors. The possible use of nonstate actors by states to further state ends, however, must now also be seriously considered. In the September 11 attacks, al Qaeda may have received support from foreign intelligence services (reportedly from those of Pakistan and Iraq). Evidence exists that certain terrorists have had contacts with undercover services on several continents (in Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia) and that some provided the terrorists with the Social Security numbers of deceased people. The latter is typical of state agents’ work. Moreover, the terrorists’ ability to defeat U.S. eavesdropping, monitoring, and counterintelligence over an extended period of time also suggests that undercover specialists may have assisted the perpetrators. Thus the attack most probably involved a mixture of state and nonstate action. Incontrovertible evidence of any state complicity might never surface, however, further complicating the mission to eradicate international terrorism. This lesson for the future is a dire one: states may learn that they can use nonstate actors to inflict major blows on an adversary without having to be held accountable for their actions.

• **The strategic challenge of failed states.**

The fact that large expanses of territories in so-called failed states escape government control need no longer be considered a regrettable feature of
the postmodern world, but rather a strategic challenge that should be addressed urgently. Anarchic countries are both a breeding ground and a haven for terrorists. Apart from Central Asia, Africa comes to mind as a dramatic illustration of a locale that cannot be left any longer in its too-often chaotic shape. Nation-building and peacemaking, far from being secondary tasks that can be easily dismissed, should become central not only in European but also in U.S. security policy.

- **Possible failures of deterrence.**
  Deterrence, in the context of asymmetric warfare, is probably less relevant than in more classical scenarios, because surprise and shock are essential part of asymmetric strategies. Failures of deterrence should particularly be considered in the case of nonstate actors engaged in unrestricted wars, whether they act alone or with the sponsorship of a nation-state, because they have little to lose, particularly when suicide is used as a weapon.

- **Defenses could be equally ineffective.**
  This precept is notably true if the main preoccupation in the United States remains long-range ballistic missiles. Long-range ballistic missiles, in fact, appear less threatening than cruise missiles, which have been mentioned only rhetorically so far. About 80,000 cruise missiles are deployed in 70 countries. A dozen countries retain land-attack cruise missiles and antiship cruise missiles; unmanned aerial vehicles are proliferating. All the key cruise-missile technologies are widely available, and the end-products of that technology are all potential delivery systems for chemical and biological agents. Cruise missiles present air defense systems with an enormous challenge, to detect the missile early enough to mount an effective defense. A new emphasis on protection against cruise missiles is needed now.

- **The strength of an absolute ideology against our moderate societies.**
  The danger of “religious” wars is greater than that of wars between “civilizations” because religions have a significantly greater power than civilizations. Al Qaeda uses religion not only to be able to recognize God as the sole constituency, but also to use the absolute power of religious faith in countries where literacy does not allow people even to read the Qur’an. Al Qaeda’s declared ambition is to annihilate not just religions other than Islam (the destruction of the ancient Bamiyan’s Buddhist statues in February 2001 is an eloquent testimony), but also anyone who does not accept its perverse version of Islam (bin Laden’s people have burned Shi’ites alive in Afghanistan). No concession, however great, would be enough to end bin
Laden’s “mission” because, unlike many previous terrorist organizations, it
does not intend to create a state nor does it wish to introduce political re-
forms. Its objective is metaphysical: a titanic struggle between “good” and
“evil” forces, in which any means can be used to achieve the end.

• A new world is taking shape.
   All conflicts have one quality in common: they all contribute to reshaping international
relations, sometimes in dramatic ways. This conflict, by starting out to destroy al Qaeda
and other terrorist organizations with global reach, may end up reshaping the world. Waging
the fight with this new world in mind is essential. An increased potential for miscalcu-
lation and surprise will probably occur in the future. Predictability should therefore be im-
proved whenever possible during this conflict, especially in areas where
strong tensions exist. In Europe’s past, differences in strategic approach
have resulted in grave errors, but the odds of misinterpretation between
countries with different cultures are incomparably greater. The Bush admin-
istration has been wise to refute the vague and dangerous concept of “wars
of civilizations,” but words are not enough. Second, U.S. security will de-
pend increasingly on its ability to keep alliances alive, to build coalitions,
and to sustain multilateralism. The world will be policed collectively or not
at all.

Containing violence has always been the key to security. In Leviathan, Tho-
mus Hobbes argued that people needed the state to insulate them from vio-
dent death. In the twentieth century, one of the most violent in history, the
state itself was the major vehicle that produced violence through wars and
revolutions. During the Cold War, the concept of mutual assured destruc-
tion expressed an unprecedented magnitude of violence between the two
superpowers, contained at great risk with nuclear weapons. The world now
faces a different, highly dispersed form of radical violence that results most
identifiably from the failures of politics throughout the planet. If the ability
to contain violence, particularly in its most extreme forms, is a common ob-
jective, then those failures should now be addressed. Otherwise, terrorism
will destroy society, first in the Muslim world, where it is most threatening,
and then elsewhere as well.

Addressing past failures will require significant changes. First, political
courage is needed: where terrorism is concerned, there should be no room
for ambivalence or tolerance. A dramatic reassessment of past policies in a
large number of countries will be necessary. Some Muslim leaders have already dared to say that groups that call themselves Islamic “hijacked” their countries in order to further destructive political goals; the veil of secrecy that covers the activities of such groups should now be removed. On the Western side, the end of support for corrupt and repressive regimes that sponsor terrorism, such as Saudi Arabia, appears essential.

Second, when this campaign is fought, vague confidence in free markets and political liberalism will not meet the challenge of a lasting peace. Nothing less will do than a return to the origins of political values in ethics. A new international order based on justice and arbitration is the only way to avoid clashes liable to unleash the devastating potential of the twenty-first century’s violence and war technologies.

**Note**