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## The Worst Mistake America Made After 9/11

How focusing too much on the war on terror undermined our economy and global power.

By Anne Applebaum

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On Sept. 11, 2001, the post-Cold War era that began so euphorically on [Nov. 9, 1989](#), abruptly ended. The long decade that stretched from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the fall of the World Trade Center was marked by military spending cuts, domestic political scandals, and a general sense that American foreign policy was adrift. President George H.W. Bush had talked of the "New World Order" but had no policy to fit the clever phrase. President Bill Clinton had a clutch of policies but never found a neat way to describe them.

In the wake of al-Qaida's attack on New York and Washington, an organizing principle suddenly presented itself. Like the Cold War, the new "war on terror," as it instantly became known, clearly defined America's friends, enemies, and priorities. Like the Cold War, the war on terror appealed both to American idealism and to American realism. We were fighting genuine bad guys, but the destruction of al-Qaida also lay clearly within the sphere of our national interests. The speed with which we all adopted this new paradigm was impressive, if somewhat alarming. At the time, I marveled at the neatness and cleanliness of this New New World Order and observed "[how like an academic article everything suddenly appears to be.](#)"

The events of 9/11 reverberated through many spheres of American life but nowhere more profoundly than in American policy toward the outside world. Slowly, the supertanker that is the American foreign and defense establishment turned itself around, creaking and groaning, as Americans prepared to face new enemies. During the subsequent decade, we created a vast new security bureaucracy, encompassing some 1,200 government organizations, 1,900 companies, and 854,000 people with security clearances, according to a [Washington Post investigation](#) carried out last year. We launched two wars, in Afghanistan and Iraq. We organized counterterrorism operations in far-flung places such as the Philippines and Yemen, changed the culture of our military and reoriented our foreign policy. We sharpened our focus on al-Qaida and its imitators. And we spent, according to one estimate, \$3 trillion.

And we were, in the terms defined by the war on terror, successful: Ten years after 9/11, al-Qaida is in profound disarray. Osama bin Laden is dead. Fanatical Islam is on the decline. Our military remains the most sophisticated and experienced in the world. And yet, 10 years after 9/11, it's also clear that the war on terror was far too narrow a prism through which to see the entire planet. And the price we paid to fight it was far too high.

In our single-minded focus on Islamic fanaticism, we missed, for example, the transformation of China from a commercial power into an ambitious political power. We failed to appreciate the significance of economic growth in China's neighborhood, too. When President George W. Bush traveled in Asia in the wake of 9/11, he spoke to his Malaysian and Indonesia interlocutors about their resident terrorist cells. His Chinese colleagues, meanwhile, talked business and trade.

We also missed, at least initially, the transformation of Russia from a weak and struggling partner into a sometimes hostile opponent. Through the lens of the war on terror, Vladimir Putin, president of Russia in 2001, looked like an ally. He, too, was fighting terrorists, in Chechnya. Though his was quite a different war against quite different terrorists (and not only against terrorists), for a brief period he nevertheless convinced his American counterparts that his struggle and their struggle were more or less the same thing.

Thanks to the war on terror, we missed what might have been a historic chance to make a deal on immigration with Mexico. Because all of Latin America was irrelevant to the war on terror, we lost interest in, and influence on, that region, too. The same goes for Africa, with the exception of those countries with al-Qaida cells. In the Arab world, we aligned ourselves closely with authoritarian regimes because we believed they would help us fight Islamic terrorism, despite the fact that their authoritarianism was an inspiration to fanatical Islamists. If we are now treated with suspicion in place like Egypt and Tunisia, that is part of the explanation.

Finally, we stopped investing in our own infrastructure—think what \$3 trillion could have done for roads, research, education, or even private investment, if a part of that sum had just been left in taxpayers' pockets—and we missed the chance to rethink our national energy policy. After 9/11, the president could have gone to the nation, declared an emergency, explained that wars would have to be fought and would have to be paid for—perhaps, appropriately, through a gasoline tax. He would have had enormous support. It's hard to remember now, but I could just about fill the tank of my car for \$20 back in 2001. At the time, I'd have been happy to make it \$21 if it helped the marines in Afghanistan. Instead, the president cut taxes and increased defense spending. We are only now paying the price.

Plenty of other mistakes have been made, both abroad and at home, since 9/11, and I'm sure that plenty of people will use this anniversary to reargue Iraq, Guantanamo, or the shocking wastefulness of homeland-security spending. But our worst mistake was one

of omission. In making Islamic terrorism our central priority—and in some times and places our only priority—we ignored the economic, environmental, and political concerns of the rest of the globe. Worse, we pushed aside our own economic, environmental, and political problems until they became too great to be ignored.

Let me repeat: The U-turn that American foreign policy made after Sept. 11 was not a failure. But under President Bush, we narrowed our horizons, stopped thinking in broader strategic terms, and paid little attention to future competitors and even less attention to our own domestic weaknesses. President Obama, dealt a bad hand from the beginning, hasn't had the energy, the resources, or the willpower to do much better. Ten years after the events, I now find myself asking: Could it be that the planes that hit New York and Washington did less damage to the nation than the cascade of bad decisions that followed?

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