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John Arquilla
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The war on terror may require a long, long time, as the Bush administration insists, but time is not on our side. Continuing attempts by the administration to make a virtue of the prospect of a drawn-out conflict only encourage mistaken thinking. For if the war does last decades, our chances of losing it rise dramatically.

[Podcast: Jim Finefrock with John Arquilla on long war or wrong war?]

Why? Because the illusion that we can take forever to win fosters a do-it-tomorrow mind-set in dealing with a wily, adaptive foe. It gives terrorists the time they need to acquire true weapons of mass destruction.

If this happens, they win. Terrorists who possess even a few small nuclear warheads, for example, will have huge coercive power over us, because their networks of fighters, distributed over the face of the Earth, have no cherished "homelands" of their own to make them vulnerable to our nuclear retaliatory threats. If they can ever credibly threaten to annihilate even one of our cities, we'll have to listen very carefully to their demands to, say, withdraw our troops from all Muslim countries.

When it comes to WMD, long is the wrong way to make war. Very wrong.

Whether the administration is pushing the idea of a long war for political reasons or because it truly believes that, like it or not, we're in for the long haul, it's the wrong strategy if we want to defeat the terrorists. The reasons go well beyond WMD.

Another big problem with thinking that the battle against terrorism will last decades is that the longer the war goes, the greater the world's opposition to us will grow. We see this already in public opinion polls that reflect declining levels of support for the United States. According to the latest Pew Institute study of global attitudes, even our staunchest allies -- the British -- now see us as a greater threat to world peace than Iran is.

So if our main contribution to the 21st century world is a drumbeat calling for an era of perpetual warfare, we can count on the rise of social, political and even military opposition. Even here at home, this notion of protracted conflict is increasingly unpopular, creating fissures. Here, once again, "thinking long" is just plain wrong.

The twin specters of terrorists with nukes and an increasingly antagonized world aside, there is a third major flaw in long war reasoning: It encourages a slavish devotion to the strategic status quo, and the overspending that comes with such a mind-set.

If the Pentagon is led to believe that it has all the time in the world to wage this war, there will be little pressure or incentive to pursue Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's vision of rapid, radical transformation of the armed forces. Why risk making major changes if you have decades to play with? Instead, we can expect to see a lot of nibbling around the edges of innovation, but with little real change.

If it catches on, the long war concept may prove the best bureaucratic defense against having to reconsider the gargantuan

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expenditures that go with hanging on to increasingly ineffectual armaments such as aircraft carriers, main battle tanks and high-tech aircraft. Even though none of these weapons is handy to fight terror networks, and there are no traditional military adversaries that can pose grave challenges to us anytime soon, more than 90 percent of the $1.25 billion we spend each day on national defense goes to these ever more irrelevant systems.

For what President Dwight Eisenhower once called the "military-industrial complex" (and cautioned against), being in a long war is like winning the lottery every week. For years and years.

This amazing defense budgetary windfall, which has so far enjoyed complete bipartisan support in Congress, undoubtedly has a lot to do with why we're being importuned to accept the long war notion. Money talks. Big money talks louder.

There are subtler reasons as well. A new name for the fight was badly needed, because our self-styled war on terror has actually spurred a meteoric rise in terrorist acts worldwide during the past five years. Even though we haven't been struck again at home, countless others from London to Bali have been hit. Bombay was hit hard last week, shortly after the release of another al Qaeda video calling for renewed attacks. We can be sure that other cities are in the terrorists' crosshairs. From this global perspective, it is clear that we are in a "wide war." But it doesn't have to be a long one, too.

One way to begin is by taming the tiger of uncontrolled defense spending, perhaps with mandatory 10 percent cuts each year for two or three years, the military will be compelled to make some hard choices about building the right kind of forces needed to cope with the threats that really imperil us.

Because Rumsfeld has been able to kill only two unnecessary weapons systems in his five years in office (the Comanche helicopter and the Crusader artillery piece), the way to start would be for President Bush to declare a moratorium on all Cold War legacy systems still receiving billions of dollars through the budgetary pipeline. Given that his trusted defense secretary has failed to derail the defense gravy train, it's now up to the commander-in-chief to do some commandeering along these lines.

Tightening the fiscal purse would help take our focus away from the costly, problematic business of trying to change regimes in other nations and, instead, shift our concentration toward the absolutely necessary, more effective, and much less expensive task of tracking down terrorist networks and tearing them apart.

Curtailing defense spending would also make it necessary to withdraw our troops from Iraq quickly, leaving behind a small, residual quick-reaction force of Marines, commandos and attack aircraft to help the more than 250,000 Iraqi soldiers we have now trained and put into the field.

Beyond the military realm, there is much that can be done with diplomacy to keep us out of a long war. Rebuilding confidence among our allies and in the United Nations will encourage others to take forceful action, as NATO is still doing in Afghanistan, and improve the information sharing so necessary for tracking down terrorists. Dropping "regime change" in favor of arms control is a sane way to attempt to keep our enemies from ever being able to hit us with a nuclear knockout blow.

The psychic price of such a new diplomacy is that we stop trumpeting our rhetoric about leading the world, and start talking about the "network of nations" that is banding together to defeat terrorism. Such statecraft will probably also require us to make quiet "no invasion" pledges to North Korea and Iran, in return for their ending their nuclear weapons programs. A no-invasion pledge given by President Kennedy to Fidel Castro worked to get nuclear missiles out of Cuba 44 years ago. The same approach can succeed today.

These solutions are all right in front of us. They should appeal to everyone, liberal or conservative, hawk or dove.

We don't have the luxury of time in this war, so we must transform both our military strategy and our statecraft to a quicker pulse. We must win before terrorists acquire WMD.

The choice is whether to "stay the course" and endure growing risk of losing a protracted conflict, or to make radical changes now, changes that engender little risk but have an enormous potential to crush terrorism soon.

We should choose to fight a smart, short war and not continue this long, wrong one.

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