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The United States of Permanent War

By Edward Hunt
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As the foreign policy establishment continues to grapple with the consequences of Trump's election, U.S. officials can still agree on one thing. The United States is a nation that is waging a permanent war.

In December 2016, President Obama reflected on the development in a speech that he delivered to US soldiers at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. "By the time I took office, the United States had been at war for seven years," Obama said. By continuing that war, "I will become the first president of the United States to serve two full terms during a time of war."

Notably, Obama did not issue his remarks to criticize the United States. He only made his point to note that Congress had never provided him with authority to perpetuate the wars of the Bush administration. "Right now, we are waging war under authorities provided by Congress over 15 years ago – 15 years ago," Obama said. Consequently, he wanted Congress to craft new legislation that made it appear as if it had not permitted the United States to remain at war forever. "Democracies should not operate in a state of permanently authorized war," Obama said.

The Bush Plan

Regardless of what Obama really felt about the matter, the Bush administration had always intended for the United States to wage a permanent war. In the days after 9/11, President Bush

provided the guiding vision when he announced in a speech to the nation that the United States would be fighting an indefinite global war on terror. “Our response involves far more than instant retaliation and isolated strikes,” Bush explained. “Americans should not expect one battle, but a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen.”

The following year, Director of Policy Planning Richard Haass provided additional confirmation of the administration’s intentions. “There can be no exit strategy in the war against terrorism,” Haass declared. “It is a war that will persist.” In other words, Haass announced that the United States would remain at war against terrorism forever. “There is unlikely to be an Antietam, a decisive battle in this war,” Haass stated. “An exit strategy, therefore, will do us no good. What we need is an endurance strategy.”

As US officials developed their endurance strategy, they also settled on a few guiding principles. For starters, US officials determined that they would have to maintain some kind of permanent presence in Afghanistan. “We’re not leaving Afghanistan prematurely,” Secretary of Defense Robert Gates remarked during the early years of the Obama administration. “In fact, we’re not ever leaving at all.”

More recently, a number of officials in the Obama administration articulated a similar principle for the Middle East. In October 2016, for example, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper noted that the United States would remain in the region well into the future. Even if the Islamic State is defeated, “it is probably not going to go away, and it’ll morph into something else or other similar extremist groups will be spawned,” Clapper said. “And I believe we’re going to be in the business of suppressing these extremist movements for a long time to come.”

This past December, Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter made a similar point, arguing that coalition forces “must be ready for anything” and “must remain engaged militarily even after the inevitable expulsion of ISIL from Mosul and Raqqa.”

In essence, US officials agree that the war against terrorism must remain permanent.

The Trump Turn

Officials in the Trump administration, who are now taking over the endurance strategy, have also remained determined to keep the nation at war. Although Trump promised during his campaign that “war and aggression will not be my first instinct,” both he and his cabinet members have displayed a clear preference for war.

Secretary of Defense James Mattis, who is perhaps most well known for once commenting that it was “a hell of a hoot” and “a hell of a lot of fun” to shoot enemy forces in Afghanistan, argued during his confirmation hearing that the United States should take advantage of its “power of intimidation.” In fact, Mattis pledged to increase the lethality of US military forces. “Our armed forces in this world must remain the best led, the best equipped, and the most lethal in the world,” Mattis insisted.

Furthermore, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has positioned himself as an even stronger advocate of war. For example, Tillerson insisted during his confirmation hearing that the Obama administration should have helped Ukrainian military forces fight Russia after Putin had seized Crimea in early 2014. “My opinion is there should have been a show of force, a military response, in defensive posture,” Tillerson said. In addition, Tillerson insisted that the Trump administration will not permit China to continue building islands in the South China Sea. “We’re going to have to send China a clear signal that first, the island-building stops, and second, your access to those islands also not going to be allowed,” Tillerson said.

Altogether, Tillerson argued that the United States must display a greater willingness to go to war. In the years ahead, the United States will follow “the old tenet of Teddy Roosevelt, walk softly and carry a big stick,” he promised.

Finally, Trump has displayed an even stronger preference for war. In his many public statements, Trump has essentially branded himself as the new face of the permanent war against terrorism. “Radical Islamic terrorism” is something that “we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth,” Trump promised during his inaugural address.

In short, officials in Washington are committed to perpetual war. Although they regularly promise to end war and support peace, they have spent the past 16 years transforming the United States into a nation that is permanently at war.

In fact, “the fighting is wonderful,” Trump has said.