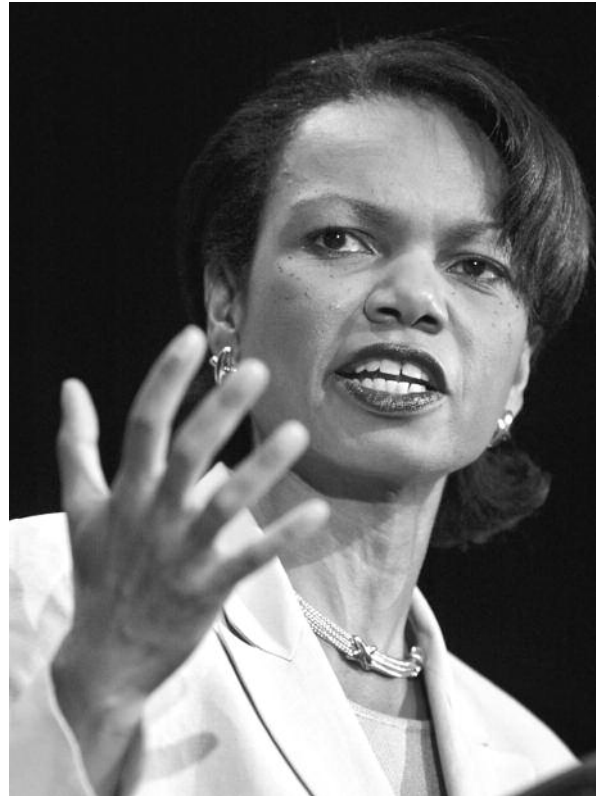


The Candidates and the Security Debate in the United States

Leonardo Curzio*



Larry Downing/Reuters



Joe Skipper/Reuters

Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice, the main actors behind U.S. National Security strategies under the Republicans.

Something is wrong when a senator as well known as Edward Kennedy is stopped by security before boarding a plane because he is on a list of people suspected of links with terrorism.

Something is wrong when after three years of unrelenting pursuit, the most wanted man in the world, Osama Bin Laden, still has not surfaced dead or alive.

Something is wrong in the world when Tom Ridge's office has to periodically raise the alert level based on vague information because they really have not managed to neutralize the forces of

international terrorism that continue to threaten the West.

And what is wrong is nothing less than the security system of the world's most powerful nation. In the months immediately after the September 2001 attacks, Americans closed ranks around their president to confront the terrorist threat. With profound patriotism, Democrats supported the president's mea-

* Researcher at CISAN. The author wishes to thank Laura Elena Cervantes, who always finds exactly the right document.

asures, since what was at stake was national security. Some of these measures, like the approval of the Patriot Act and the war against Iraq, have created polemics both inside the United States and abroad because neither has brought forth visible results that increase Americans' sense of security, but they have spurred criticisms and recriminations. The anti-terrorist alert levels continue to rise, frequently very high, and the tension can be felt in U.S. streets and airports. The treasured prize of tranquility has not been recovered.

Shortly after the 2001 attacks, society, the media and even the Democratic Party opted to avoid criticisms that could be wrongly interpreted. They trusted the government with the responsibility of guiding and developing the security strategy and supported it in the decisions that the executive considered fundamental for guaranteeing the nation's security. In that context of national unity, criticism was buried and formulated discretely to avoid any hint of mistrust or reservations.

However, like in any consolidated democracy, and particularly the U.S. one, unrestricted support for the government is of limited duration, and, given the scant results and numerous problems that Bush's policy has posed, in this electoral year, the entire government strategy for dealing with security threats has been drawn into the debate by candidate John Kerry. The methods used to neutralize the problem have been roundly criticized and, from the Democratic viewpoint, the results of the war on terrorism have been meager.

Another important element that contributed to opening up the discussion about the issue was the work of

the 9/11 Commission presided over by Thomas H. Kean and Lee H. Hamilton. Thanks to this commission, whose findings were published recently,¹ the U.S. public was able to appreciate the deficiencies of its security system and decision-making process.

THE ELECTORAL DEBATE

President Bush knows that an important slice of the U.S. electorate still thinks he is the ideal person to continue handling U.S. security matters. That is why he has said that he is a war president and has tried to steer the elec-

toral debate toward issues of national security.

Kerry, who knows himself to be weaker on this issue in the public mind, has taken up the gauntlet with vigor and precision.² He says that it is possible to develop a more comprehensive, effective strategy to win the war on terrorism. Among the main criticisms made since the beginning of the year are those centered on the impossibility of arresting the head of Al Qaeda and the mistakes in the Afghanistan campaign. The first of these errors was turning over the waging of the war to Afghan leaders, who basically had neither genuine loyalty to the United States nor a true interest in trapping Osama.

The second mistake is not having understood in time that international terrorism is not a single, perfectly hierarchical organization based in a specific territory. It is rather a swarm of

tiny, highly autonomous, radicalized groups that plan their attacks erratically.

Another issue that causes disquiet today is the thesis that terrorism is a clash of civilizations, an irremediable struggle between the West and the Muslim world. One of the most important contributions of Richard Clarke's book is precisely the need to understand the dynamic and the conflict within the Muslim nations.³ For his part, Kerry maintains that terrorism cannot be situated as a clash of civilizations. The true dilemma is between civilization and barbarism.

The deepest criticism is formulated from the standpoint of the U.S.'s

Some measures against terrorism, like the approval of the Patriot Act and the Iraqi war, have been polemical, but they haven't increased Americans' sense of security.

allies' growing incomprehension. The doctrine of unilateral preemption has thwarted the support of many countries allied to the strategy. In addition, for political reasons, George Bush has mixed his pre-2001-attack objectives with the fight against terror. The war against Iraq, one of the issues most central to the debate, is proof of that. In the first place, this is because the argument about the weapons of mass destruction could not be proven after the invasion, and it was never proven that there was a link between international terrorism and the regime of the dictator Hussein. But if that war, waged without the backing of the UN Security Council, has caused debilitation, the Iraqi wasps' nest has become one of the Republican administration's weakest points, because peace has not been consolidated there, nor has a precise date been established for U.S.

forces to withdraw. In an interview in *The New York Times* in late August, for the first time the president himself recognized that there had been a miscalculation about the post-war period in Iraq and that the outcome of the military mission there was still not clear.

Throughout recent years, the Republicans have used the fear of terrorism politically, and the Democrats have accused them of having come to a kind of *modus vivendi* in which, while U.S. territory has not been hit again—and this is undoubtedly an achievement—the terrorist threat continues to be present and is frequently used to mobilize public opinion. At

rectly supports terrorists, and above all, developing trustworthy intelligence for making decisions.

Clearly, the main victories in the fight against terrorism have been the result of a combination of U.S. efforts and working with local intelligence services. Experiences in Pakistan, Arabia and Spain have shown that it is not necessary to bomb an entire city to break up whole terrorist cells, but rather to have a good plan for searching, police infiltration, follow-up, reliable information and, although it might seem obvious, a good working knowledge of Arabic. Today, it may be more important to have a good group of case offi-

ble with democratic values and individuals' rights, which are visibly infringed by some parts of the Patriot Act.⁴

The main challenge faced by the United States in the fight against terrorism is situated, in short, on two levels.

The first is guaranteeing cooperation with other countries and assuming the leadership of the free world with clear objectives that are compatible with the respect for human rights, because for the international community, just as important as the fight against terrorism is the need to make sure that human rights and international law are not violated in the name of that fight.

The second is a domestic issue: efficiently coordinating the security agencies so they can pursue common objectives, share information and not wear themselves out in a bureaucratic dispute, and that external intelligence agencies work in a coordinated way with domestic security forces. This is an issue that has been added to the electoral campaign, as we already pointed out, by the 9/11 Commission.

It is surprising that Americans were able to deal politically and institutionally with the work of a commission that literally uncovered a series of weaknesses in the security system.

bottom, the impression still exists that it is in the Bush administration's political-electoral interest to keep terrorism alive—even though at bay—and not implement a decided strategy to fight and defeat it. Beyond speculations leading nowhere, Kerry's proposal hinges on two major elements. The first is working with other countries instead of planting seeds of mistrust and resentment among the allies. Preserving the vital interests of the United States will be guaranteed by having the broad backing of the international community. That is, the idea is to proceed in a fashion diametrically opposed to Bush. The second element is to make sure that the strategy not be based in the main on military power. Kerry's proposal includes renewing alliances, improving law enforcement, particularly in pursuing money laundering that directly or indi-

cers who speak Arabic and are totally trustworthy than thousands of troops laying siege to mosques.

Kerry's plan for homeland security covers five broad issues. The first is improving intelligence systems, particularly operational information about the identity of terrorists, so that it can be used in a timely fashion by all security officers. The second is bettering technology so ports and borders are safe and effective for people crossing with legitimate aims. The third is securing high impact targets that might cause mass casualties (for example, nuclear and chemical plants). The fourth is improving security forces' capabilities in all areas, from their communications systems to training in civil protection. The fifth and last is perhaps the most important: the defense of civil rights and the system of freedoms. The security system must not be incompati-

THE COMMISSION'S WORK

It is surprising that only a few years after the attacks and amidst a situation in which the perception of a threat continues to be very much alive, Americans were able to deal politically and institutionally with the work of a commission that literally uncovered a series of weaknesses and, in some cases, incoherencies, in the security system.

The commission carried out its work publicly. It held 12 hearings in which governors, federal agents, academics, high-level officials and former officials testified. The immense majority of its sessions, including the one

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in which Condoleezza Rice participated, were broadcast live on television to the entire world. This demonstrated the strength of U.S. democratic institutions to world public opinion. For obvious reasons, two of the few hearings held behind closed doors were the ones in which the president and vice-president appeared, but a report has been presented for public perusal, entitled *Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States*.

For the communications media and the public, the issues dealt with during the commission's sessions became an agenda for debate about national security. The first session, held in New York, shook the nation when they heard the testimony of survivors and victims' families, particularly those of the heroic passengers of flight 93 who understood what was happening and rebelled against their captors. The emotional impact of the testimony cast the mistakes in matters of prevention and counterintelligence, also presented before the commission, in a frankly dark tone. In those moments, "America" confronted a naked truth, no patriotic speeches or generic excuses. In addition to the criminal mentality of Al

Qaeda and its determination to profoundly damage the United States, generally speaking, the security system had severe gaps.

The next sessions went deeper into different issues like Islamic terrorism and the challenges opening up with regard to Muslim countries. But the public paid very special attention to the forms of gathering and evaluating intelligence data and security mechanisms on borders and at airports. Finally, the commission's long report includes a number of elements, testimonies and recommendations that will not be dealt with in this article. However, one issue became very important, increasingly so when Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet was replaced, and that is the dispersion in the efforts of the different security agencies in the fight against terrorism. It is very grave that after the Cold War, U.S. intelligence services have fragmented in such a way that they have lost the ability to join forces in the effort to reach a common objective. The recommendation that the candidate who wins in November will most certainly adopt is clear and centers on the need to join forces:

The current position of the Director of Central Intelligence should be replaced by a National Intelligence Director with two main areas of responsibility: 1) to oversee national intelligence centers on specific subjects of interest across the U.S. government, and 2) to manage the national intelligence program and oversee the agencies that contribute to it.⁵

Several issues are definitely open in the national debate on security, ranging from the conflict in Iraq to the re-engineering of the intelligence system. The United States has broad options in foreign policy that affect the entire world, such as the dilemma between unilateralism and multilateralism. The decision of the electorate next November will determine which options the hegemonic power will adopt in the next four years. **MM**

NOTES

¹ *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

² See <http://www.johnkerry.com/pressroom/speeches>

³ Richard Clarck, *Against All Enemies* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

⁴ See http://johnkerry.com/issues/homeland_security/homeland_plan.html.

⁵ *9/11 Commission*, op. cit., p. 411.



Errata

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