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IT'S NOT THE THIRD WORLD WAR

ANDREW J. BACEVICH *The Spectator*



Podhoretz

IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH OF 9/11, Norman Podhoretz, distinguished U.S. journalist and neo-conservative godfather, penned a series of articles describing the attacks as the opening shots of what he called “World War IV.” For Podhoretz, the more commonly used construct, “global war on terror,” was too generic. Placing 9/11 in its proper context requires fitting it into the grand narrative of contemporary history which, as Podhoretz sees it, began in 1933 in Berlin.

For Podhoretz and other neo-conservatives – for large numbers of Americans generally – history is above all a morality tale. They prefer simple stories that yield simple and unambiguous truths: about the folly of ignoring, appeasing or otherwise failing to confront evil – folly that leads inevitably to Auschwitz; about the imperative of bold, charismatic leadership such as Churchill displayed after the fall of France and as Reagan did during the 1980s; about the necessity once attacked of going all out, giving the enemy no quarter and sparing nothing in the pursuit of total victory.

Thus framed, history becomes a story of freedom engaged in perpetual conflict with totalitarianism that appears in an ever-changing guise. “Islamofascism” is simply the new face of an old enemy – the Nazis of the Second World War and the Marxist-Leninists of the

Cold War (dubbed by Podhoretz “World War III”).

Classifying the war on terror as World War IV offers attractive benefits. It provides a reassuring sense of continuity: We’ve been here before, we know what we need to do, we know how it’s going to end. See the conflict with violent Islamic radicals as World War IV and the Bush administration’s crusade to democratize the Greater Middle East – enthusiastically endorsed by Podhoretz – not only makes sense: It becomes a categorical imperative.

For Podhoretz, an ardent U.S. patriot who is also an ardent supporter of Israel, the kidnapping of Israeli soldiers and rocketing of Israel proper along with IDF incursions into Gaza and punishing attacks against Hezbollah and Lebanon only serve to validate the World War IV paradigm. Does the Jew-

ish state suddenly find itself engaged on two fronts? Then Gaza and Lebanon necessarily have become two new fronts in the overarching struggle against totalitarianism. Israel’s war is our war is freedom’s war.

The World War IV construct also has utility on the domestic front. It facilitates efforts to mobilize popular support for military actions undertaken in pursuit of final victory. It ratifies the claims of government authorities who insist upon exercising wartime prerogatives, expanding the police powers of the state and circumscribing constitutional guarantees of due process. It makes available a stock of plausible analogies to help explain the otherwise inexplicable – seeing the dastardly attacks of Sept. 11 as a reprise of the dastardly surprise of Dec. 7, 1941, for example. It thereby helps preclude awkward questions. It disciplines.

President George W. Bush has never publicly referred to World War IV, but he and others in his administration have repeatedly compared their war on terror to the Second World War. Seeing the enterprise as an open-ended global conflict to be waged on a global scale, they have implicitly embraced Podhoretz’s formulation.

We are now in a position to evaluate the results. Bluntly, a contrived and phony version of history has yielded a demented strategy. A Churchillian Bush imagined that Operation Iraqi Freedom might provide his Finest Hour – an act of liberation that would jump-start the democratic transformation of the Greater Middle East. Instead Iraq has become Bush’s Gallipoli, a sinkhole into which he has not yet ceased to pour American treasure, military strength and credibility.

Although Bush succeeded in toppling his stand-in for Hitler (while Osama bin Laden, the actual architect of 9/11, remains at large), the Iraqis have refused

to follow their assigned script.

Unlike the compliant Germans after 1945, they have not submitted. Instead they resist, seeing their liberators as an army of occupation pursuing its own political agenda which has a lot more to do with sectarian divisions than Jeffersonian ideals.

In the Persian Gulf more broadly, “liberation” has produced not a peace but more violence; at home, it has meant not assured supplies of oil but higher prices at the gas pump. Rather than pacifying the region, the Bush Doctrine has destabilized it, exacerbating tensions between Shia and Sunni and emboldening the mullahs of Tehran.

Supplanting autocrats with democrats was supposed to pave the way for settling old disputes. It has turned out to be somewhat more complicated than that. A democratic uprising in Lebanon did not make that country any less hospitable to Hezbollah. Among the Palestinians, meanwhile, free elections have handed power to those most stubbornly opposed to Israel’s existence.

In fact, the Second World War does not provide an appropriate model for what we commonly (although mistakenly) call the global war on terror – especially not Norman Podhoretz’s sanitized and fraudulent version of it. Did the war of 1939-1945 pit good against evil? Sure, but it also saw the “good” anglo-Americans making common cause with Joseph Stalin whose crimes probably exceeded even those of Adolf Hitler.

Was it a war of liberation? To judge by the experience of the French, the Dutch, the Belgians and others, absolutely. But from the perspective of the Poles, the Czechs and the Hungarians, the outcome looks somewhat different.

Was the war intended to pave the way for a new international order based on mutual respect, free trade and the peaceful resolution of disputes? Well, yes, but U.S. statesmen also viewed it as

an opportunity to secure U.S. primacy, largely at the expense of allies such as Great Britain. Was it a war fought to secure the Four Freedoms for all humankind? The people of the developing world, including the Persian Gulf, didn’t think so: After 1945, as before 1939, they continued to labour under the yoke of colonial rule in which concerns about freedom from want – or any other freedom – did not figure prominently.

Make no mistake: the real Second World War was on balance a just war. It had to be fought and won. No alternative existed but to confront and destroy the Third Reich.

But to enshrine that conflict as a parable conveying universal truths is to invite still more of the strategic delusions that landed the U.S. in Iraq.

We do not live in the 1930s. Despite their bizarre professed intentions of restoring the Caliphate, Islamic radicals bear no comparison with the Nazis who yearned for Lebensraum. The beginning of wisdom lies not in imposing on to the present a contrived historical paradigm but in acknowledging the complex, sloppy, morally ambiguous sequence of events that got us here.

Rather than contemplating the lessons of Munich in 1938, we ought to consider the consequences of having overthrown Mosaddeq in Iran in 1953. In that regard, rather than celebrating the Churchill who stood fast against Hitler, we are better off studying the Churchill who two decades earlier carved up the carcass of the Ottoman Empire, thereby creating many of the problems that bedevil us even today.

Andrew J. Bacevich is professor of history and international relations at Boston University. He is author of *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*.