

The "War On Terror" And Its Debate Have No End



The stage of the debate, with moderator John Donvan at center
(*Chris Vultaggio*)

What does "The War on Terror" mean? Is it the legal authority granted to the president by Congress to use all "necessary and appropriate force" against the people, countries or organizations that "planned, authorized, committed or aided" the September 11 attacks? Is it taking your shoes off at airport security, or seeing something and saying something? Is it what 7,497 coalition members and hundreds of thousands of civilians died for in the Middle East? This, rather than "It's time to end the War on Terror," was the main topic of debate Wednesday night at NYU's Skirball center, much to the audience's befuddlement.

For nearly two hours, terrorism expert (and one of the few journalists to interview Osama bin Laden) Peter Bergen and Juliette Kayyem, a former Homeland Security officer for the Obama administration, faced former CIA and NSA director Michael Hayden and Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Advisor to President Bush and Mayor Bloomberg, Richard Falkenrath.

For the Motion "It's time to end the War on Terror"

- "Our opponents want us to live in a constant state of fear, because that is what is required...to carry out the War on Terror, which is the principle national security policy for the United States." (Bergen)
- "The War on Terror is a mindset, and that mindset is over...This debate is probably two years too late." (Kayyem)
- "We've completely gutted Al Qaeda as we knew it in 2001...it's on its heels. Being their number two is now the most dangerous job in the world. **We didn't end World War II after we killed every German soldier.**" (Bergen)
- "You cannot go to war against a tactic. Roosevelt didn't declare a War on U-Boating...**Three hundred people die every year in their bath tubs...far less than the number of US citizens who are killed by Al Qaeda, and we don't have an irrational fear of bath tubs.**" (Bergen)
- "It took me nine months to move nineteen National Guardsmen out of a nuclear plant because it's a political third rail...Time didn't just stand still for ten years. Our mindset and worldview has changed and the War on Terror just doesn't reflect that." (Kayyem)

Against the Motion "It's time to end the War on Terror"

- **"Our opponents would have you believe that the War on Terror is a squishy 'mindset' or feelings. We see it as something practical. A set of tools to keep this country safe.**" (Falkenrath)
- "It's okay if a subset of the national security apparatus appears to feel like they're at war." (Hayden)
- "Yeah I worked for Bush, who's a Republican. But I also worked for Bloomberg...and who knows what he is? And Obama is tougher, harsher, and sharper on some issues of national security and fighting terrorism than even Bush was." (Falkenrath)
- "We have to have all available tools on the table...if you let them go, you will be less safe." (Hayden)

Uhh, what?

- "I agree that the Arab Spring and the death of Osama bin Laden are historic events...but there has to be a clearly decisive moment before we can declare an end to the War on Terror...much like Pickett's Charge on Cemetery Hill was the decisive blow in the Civil War, but remember there was much more fighting after that." (Hayden)
- Moderator: "Is there any circumstance where you would say it's time to end the War on Terror?" Falkenrath: "No."
- "We don't want you to live in fear...If you take away any of the necessary tools to do the job you will be less safe." (Falkenrath)
- **"I got the phone call in the middle of the night [to authorize force against Al Qaeda] and I knew what it was about...People who have to be held responsible for their actions are forced to see the world how it is, not how it should be."** (Hayden)

Remind us: who has taken responsibility for torture conducted by the United States? Or the costly, pointless war we're still fighting? Any mention of Iraq, Afghanistan, or the "excesses of the Bush administration," as Falkenrath put it, was "for another debate."

Politeness prevented any mention of Hayden's role in warrantless wiretapping, and his expansion of the unmanned Predator Drone program that the CIA has used to turn the agency into a defacto, extralegal paramilitary force, or "One hell of a killing machine," as a CIA agent tells the Washington Post.

Most galling was that there was no mention of Falkenrath and Hayden's current positions at the Chertoff Group, a corporation run by former Homeland Security chief Michael Chertoff that literally profits off fear generated by the War on Terror by hocking porno scanners and "expertise" to national and local governments.

But now that the War on Terror is settled, stay tuned for the next debate, "Men Are Finished!"

Contact the author of this article or email tips@gothamist.com with further questions, comments or tips.

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