

Is It Time To End the War on Terror?

Who won Wednesday evening's Intelligence Squared debate and why.

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While the GOP contenders debating last night in Simi Valley, Calif., were engaged in a long discussion of the HPV vaccine and Rick Perry's unusual views about Social Security, the participants in the live Intelligence Squared U.S./*Slate* debate at New York University were battling over perhaps the most pressing question of this 9/11 anniversary week: Is it time to end the war on terror?

CNN National Security Analyst Peter Bergen and former Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security Juliette Kayyem argued for the motion that the war on terror should end. Former Homeland Security Adviser to George W. Bush Richard Falkenrath and former Director of the CIA and NSA Michael Hayden argued against it. John Donvan, a correspondent for ABC News Nightline, moderated the debate, which took place before a full house at NYU's Skirball Center.

Before the debate started, the audience voted electronically on the proposition, and it looked good for Kayyem and Bergen. Forty-one percent voted "for" the proposition that it was time to end the war on terror; 28 percent, against; and 31 percent were undecided. They voted after the debate, too, but you'll have to read to the end to learn the final result.

Kayyem told me before the debate that her argument was really about *renaming* our efforts, not about halting the fight of terrorism. "There's a difference between the war on terror and the war on al-Qaida," she explained. "Using a military campaign against al-Qaida is authorized by law, but the war on terror became something so much bigger than just military. It was coercive interrogation, it was prisons, Guantanamo, a whole bunch of things... It will be important for the audience to understand that you can argue that the war on terror is over without looking soft on terrorism."

Bergen, who produced the first television interview with Bin Laden, argued that even though terrorism still poses a serious threat to the United States, that threat has been irrevocably diminished by the Arab Spring and the death of Osama Bin Laden: The Arab Spring undermined al-Qaeda's ideology by proving that change in the Middle East can be peaceful and internal. The West played no obvious role in sparking the protests that spread across the region. That, combined with the death of the movement's charismatic leader, Bergen said, has significantly weakened the notorious terrorist network. "Our opponents wish us to live in a state of constant fear," he told the audience, "[But] the threat of terrorism has receded in the years since the attacks. If the death of the founder and leader of al-Qaida isn't the point where we can say the war is over, when will that point be?"

Hayden and Falkenrath couched their debate argument in the less sexy, but more palpable, language of law: As a nation legally at war, we are afforded certain tools that we wouldn't have otherwise, they said. We'd be foolish to give that up. "Despite the great successes recently, this isn't over," Hayden told me before the debate. "History may determine that the Arab Spring and the death of Bin Laden were very decisive in this war, but we can't know that with certainty now. I can tell you that no one I know—and I know a lot of people—who are responsible for doing what it is we're doing now think this is a time to stop."

Falkenrath continued that argument during the debate, saying that, "calling it a war gives the government the power and tools it needs to protect the people." Hayden reminded the audience that the government used that power and those tools to kill Osama Bin Laden.

Later, Bergen acknowledged the effectiveness of Hayden and Falkenrath's claims. "I think they had a better argument," he said. "If the debate had been framed as 'Was the war on terror a mistake?' it would've been more clearly black-and-white on either side. At the end of the day, Juliette and I kind of agreed with a lot of what General Hayden and Rich Falkenrath said."

Still, Bergen had at least one "touché!" moment after Hayden said that the people who initiated the American attacks "are largely dead."

"That's usually how you end a war, when your enemies are mostly dead," Bergen retorted. "We didn't kill all the Nazis when we ended World War II." By continuing the war, he argued, we're ignoring serious issues at home and abroad—like the rise of China, preventing nuclear war between Pakistan and India, and the jobs crisis.

But Bergen's moment wasn't enough.

The final score was 46 percent for the motion, 43 against and 11 undecided. Hayden and Falkenrath "won" because they attracted more new supporters—an additional 15 percent—with their argument.

John Donovan, who has presided as a moderator for 35 of 51 Intelligence Squared U.S. debates, says Falkenrath and Hayden won because their argument was more clear and unified. They also "had an ability to pick part the differences between Juliette and Peter's two arguments."

Hayden's closing statement reflected Donovan's analysis, pointing out that Bergen and Kayyem were making separate points. "From Peter I think I'm getting the argument that 'you've been successful, back off, you've won the thing,' " he said. "And from Juliette I'm getting the argument 'You shouldn't have been doing all those things that you were doing that Peter said were successful.' "

Still, despite the loss, a relaxed Kayyem said she was happy with the outcome of the debate and struck by the audience's perspectives. "The final poll numbers show that we are a nation still struggling about what the conception ought to be of how we fight this," she noted. "What was interesting about that was how many undecideds there were coming in," she noted. "And maybe that's good. Maybe this nation is more open to things than I thought."