

3-1-2004

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Stephen D. Biddle Dr.

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Recommended Citation

Biddle, Stephen D. Dr., "Debating Ends, not Just Means, in the War on Terror" (2004). *Articles & Editorials*. 289.
https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/289

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Debating Ends, not Just Means, in the War on Terror

**Compiled by
Stephen Biddle**

The national security debate tends to focus on means. How much money should we spend? Where should we use force? How should our troops be equipped? Ends, however, ought to shape decisions about means. Yet the ends of American national security usually get less attention than the means. As the nation debates national security in this time of war, what critical questions about the ends of American strategy should we be considering?

The most basic question of wartime strategy is against whom it is to be directed. Who is the enemy? A “war on terror” pits us against a tactic, not an enemy; by contrast, wartime strategies typically seek to defeat specific opponents whose aims conflict with one’s own. A wide range of groups use terrorist tactics; many of these groups pose no particular threat to America. Clearly al-Qaeda is in the cross hairs, and surely should be. But should there be others? Hamas? Hezbollah? The Colombian FARC? At some point do we go from destroying threats to America to creating them by driving together groups we might otherwise be able to split apart? Historically, terrorists have had great difficulty collaborating: their secretive natures, differing interests and inevitably local priorities discouraged common action. Will such a broad definition of the enemy create the common cause needed to drive them together against us? Or does it instead provide the breadth of aims needed to root out a diverse conspiracy with unknown interconnectedness? Al-Qaeda has been likened to a holding corporation for terrorists, in which a core cadre funds subcontractors to carry out the actual dirty work; if so, how can we be sure that we do not exclude important “subcontractors” if we fail to cast the net broadly enough? More generally, who should we really be waging war against, and who not?

Similarly, what end state are we trying to create? How much security is enough? If we demand something like absolute security, then can we ever achieve victory? Or if absolute security is unrealistic, then what level of tolerance for terrorism is appropriate? When, if ever, can we stand down—if not to a state of indifference toward terror, then at least to a condition where we no longer find “war” and wartime defense expenditure an appropriate response?

A war such as this one poses unusually difficult civil liberties issues. The ultimate end in this conflict is the preservation of our way of life, an important element of which is liberty. Yet civil liberties are often restricted in wartime. Historically, the courts have permitted this, in part on the assumption that the war would soon be over and normal rights returned. But if we define the enemy and the end state in ways that create an open-ended conflict against an ill-defined foe, “wartime” could become a chronic condition, not an acute emergency. If so, then how can we preserve the civil liberties for which we are ultimately fighting in a war that could be potentially indefinite? Does it make sense to incarcerate potential combatants without counsel for the duration when the duration could be forever? But if not, then how is the public to be defended from real threats that no longer come in uniforms or with clear national insignia?

Basic issues of strategic direction—the ends for which one fights—are central to success or failure in any war. They deserve at least the attention normally devoted to the means of war in the public debate on national security. Without the right questions, sound answers are unlikely; we owe it to ourselves to pose the best questions we can on the ends, and not just the means, of the War on Terror.