Larry Downing/Reuters

The Fight against Terrorism
And the U.S. Elections

María Cristina Rosas*

I n contrast with previous U.S. elec-
tions, in November 2004, foreign
policy will be decisive. President
George W. Bush is seeking re-election
—or for many, his first legitimate elec-
tion— just as his father did 12 years ago.
The parallels between father and son
are interesting. In 1991, George Bush
senior, with backing from the United

Nations and a coalition of 30-odd na-
tions, made Iraq withdraw from Kuwait,
which it had invaded in August 1990.
The coalition victory was swift and the
consensus around Washington's mili-
tary operation prompted the president
to proclaim the inauguration of a new
world order. One year later, Bush made
foreign policy the main issue in his bid
to occupy the White House another four
years. The problem was that the elec-
torate, with its short memory, shunted
aside the victory over Iraq and worried
more about day-to-day issues like employ-

ment, job training, access to health ser-
vices, education, etc. William Clinton
campaigned on all these domestic issues.

Today, like his father in 1992, George
W. Bush is basing his electoral platform
on Iraq and foreign policy. For the cur-
rent President Bush, domestic issues
(like the enormous budget deficit, of
such concern both at home and abroad)
though important, are not a high prior-
ity. This is as far as the parallels go. Bush
carried out Operation Iraqi Freedom
from March 2003 on without UN autho-
rization. In May 2003, the U.S. pres-

* Professor and researcher in international
relations at the UNAM School of Political
and Social Science.
mcrosas@correo.unam.mx

For President Bush, domestic issues
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ident declared victory and the war over in Iraq, although the turmoil continues in that troubled Arab country. The number of Iraqi and U.S. casualties in the current conflict by far surpasses the number in the 1991 Gulf War.[1]

THE U.S. AND IRAQ: 2004

Perhaps the main difference between the 1992 and the 2004 elections is the current Bush administration's security doctrine, a result of the attacks on New York, Washington and Pennsylvania, September 11, 2001. This doctrine has three basic premises:

- *Counter-proliferation.* To dissuade or avoid the potential use of arms of mass destruction against the U.S. through intercepting military supplies and technology transfers, attacking enemies before they can attack (preventive war). For example, policy makers speak of putting an end to terrorist regimes (or benefactors of terrorist organizations);

- *Non-proliferation.* There is almost no mention of arms limitations, but very briefly, officials allude to the U.S. seeking to strengthen current disarmament accords and regimens, including:
  * The Nuclear Arms Non-proliferation Treaty;
  * The Convention on Chemical Weapons;
  * The Convention on Biological Weapons;

  * The Missile Technology Control Regime.

- *Consequence management.* This refers to what would happen if U.S. territory were attacked, including with weapons of mass destruction, and the attributions that the Department of Homeland Security would have for coordinating the response.

This doctrine assumes that the best way to guarantee the security of the United States is through war, which explains why since September 11, 2001, the Bush administration talks about the war against terrorism. The strategy against terrorism thus comes into contradiction with the U.S. characterization of terrorism itself. For example, in an interesting and polemical study about "netwars", John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt propose that in order to defeat or at least control the advance of the networks (like terrorist networks), the "forces of order" should first understand them and then develop new methods of struggle.[2] Also, they say that to defeat the networks, you have to act like a network. This does not imply disregarding all forms of vertical command (such as that of the armies and forces of order in almost all countries), but that government structures should begin to emulate the networks. According to Arquilla and Ronfeldt, this would imply working in a more coordinated fashion among ministries, departments, areas, delegations, offices, etc., forming networks

among them to facilitate information exchange and make the decision-making process more agile in order to be able to respond rapidly to dynamic circumstances.[3] Besides saying that the different agencies responsible for U.S. national security should compete less among themselves and cooperate closely to benefit national interests, it is important to point to the authors' affirmation that it is not possible to respond to an unconventional, asymmetrical threat like terrorism with conventional wars such as those carried out until now in Afghanistan and Iraq.[4]

Recently the U.S. College of War's Strategic Studies Institute published a study by Jeffrey Record in which he ferociously criticizes the way in which the threat of Al Qaeda has been identified in the U.S. with the invasion of Iraq. The study is about the war against terrorism and is put in terms of three characteristics that the Bush administration has given it:

- The evaluation of the terrorist threat;
- the spectrum and the possibilities of U.S. offensive commitments; and
- the political, fiscal and military sustainability of the war.

Jeffrey Record's main hypothesis is that:

The global war on terrorism as it has so far been defined and conducted is strategically unfocused, promises much

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more than it can deliver, and threatens to dissipate scarce U.S. military and other means over too many ends. It violates the fundamental strategic principles of discrimination and concentration.[5]

For Record, the fact that the United States situates Saddam Hussein and his followers and Al Qaeda as a single terrorist threat is a strategic error because it ignores important differences between the two, both in their political nature and in terms of the challenge they represent and the military dissuasive action capabilities Washington can deploy to stop them. Thus, the result has been an unnecessary preventive war against Iraq that created a new space in the Middle East in favor of Islamic terrorism, distracting attention and resources away from U.S. security given new attacks and a threatening Al Qaeda. Record points out that the war against Iraq was not an integral part of the U.S. war against terrorism and that presenting it as such is a mistake of mammoth proportions.[6]

WHAT IF KERRY WINS?

The United States paradoxically made the world less safe with its new security doctrine, according to the 2004 Amnesty International report.[7] Today, Osama Bin Laden enjoys enormous popularity in opinion polls in Arab nations, even in moderate countries like Jordan. More important than popu-larity, however, is the political protagonism and ability to dialogue that Al Qaeda has achieved thanks to the U.S. security doctrine. Today, according to the London Strategic Studies Institute, Al Qaeda has 18,000 members spread over about 60 countries and was strengthened by the war against Iraq.[8] The stronger Al Qaeda is, the more it will need to carry out actions that create faith in that strength. This explains the March 11 terrorist attacks in Spain. There is an important lesson to be learned from these actions, claimed by Al Qaeda: now terrorist organizations know that they can determine the results of an election in a nation as important as Spain. Also, the withdrawal of Spanish troops partly as a result of those attacks will undoubtedly encourage Al Qaeda to seek a way to have an impact on U.S. domestic politics.

This is a matter of concern taking into account the coming November elections in the U.S. As a result of recent statements by U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft to the effect that officials have credible intelligence indicating that Al Qaeda is about to make what he called "large-scale attacks," nervousness about a possible repeat of what happened in Spain is growing.[9]

Linked to this is the Democratic candidacy, understood in different academic, political and diplomatic circles as synonymous with the possibility of a radical change in the way the United States carries on its relations with the world and even in its security doctrine (if John Kerry were to win in Novem-ber). However, if Kerry won the election and became the president of the United States, there is no guarantee that there would be a drastic change in the country's foreign policy. History tells us that regardless of the party affiliation of U.S. presidents, there is a bi-partisan consensus with regard to foreign policy since nothing can erase the fact that the United States was attacked on its own territory September 11, 2001, or that the population feels unsafe, and that this insecurity ratifies, at least in part, the Bush administration's security doctrine.

We should emphasize that while this doctrine is supported by the neo-conservatives surrounding President Bush, it has also been accepted by the neo-liberal hawks of the Democratic Party. This bipartisan consensus covers three key areas of current foreign policy:

• The recognition that terrorism and rogue states, particularly those that seek to own weapons of mass destruction, are the biggest threat to the United States and the world, which is why dissuasion, containment and preventive war are justified in the fight against them.
• The Middle East is the place where the new international order will come into being, which is why Europe and East Asia are losing importance. The United States must promote democracy in the Middle East because only if the Arab nations are democratic will the U.S. be able to live in safety.

• The United States must continue to be the only economic and military super-power, not only to discourage the emergence of rival powers, but to maintain world order. Being the dominant power confers on Washington both rights and privileges and also special responsibilities that allow it to manoeuver beyond alliances and the multilateral institutions it belongs to. According to the U.S. definition, a world with a single pole must allow it the flexibility to work through *ad hoc* coalitions and resort to and/or do without alliances and multilateral bodies as it sees fit.[10]

Since both Republicans and Democrats share these ideas, John Kerry would have very little room for manoeuver if he wanted to make a sharp turn in Washington's security and foreign policy in his electoral platform.[11] At the end of the day, the American public would not vote for a candidate who did not project an image of security for their daily lives.

Does this mean that since there is not an abysmal difference in the Democrats' and Republicans' security and foreign policy agendas (at least for the majority of these parties), the risk of a terrorist action against the United States aimed at influencing balloting decreases? Or, on the contrary, will this "stand-off" and/or similarity in the Republican and Democratic agendas prompt new acts of terrorism precisely with the aim of changing the situation?

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given that Bush administration promises —such as destroying Al Qaeda and other international terrorist organizations, transforming Iraq into a prosperous, stable democracy, bringing democracy to the rest of the autocratic Middle East regimes, eradicating terrorism as an asymmetrical threat, and putting an end to the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction— are not very realistic, the United States should reformulate its security interests in more concrete terms, taking into consideration the limits of its power. What for many is obvious (the failure of the U.S. counter-terrorist strategy), is difficult for U.S. officials to accept because of the political costs of that kind of recognition in an electoral year.

The main teaching of U.S. mistakes is that all strategic doctrines pinpoint fundamental objectives that discriminate between what is important and what is not, and that maximize scarce resources to face security threats. However, the Bush administration has not set clear priorities or laid out the country's limits, like, for example, the exorbitant defense budget, which is not sustainable in the medium or long term, particularly with the existing budget deficit. Thus, the United States feeds the world's —and its own— insecurity. **VM**

NOTES

[1] Even though some estimates put the number of Iraqi civilian dead at 5,500 since March 20, 2003, others calculate the number at more than 10,000. See "Han muerto más de 5 mil civiles en Irak en un año," *El Universal* (Mexico City) 24 May 2003, pp. 1 and 4. The British-U.S. organization Iraq Body Count has a detailed estimate of Iraqi victims. See http://iraqbodycount.net. In addition to 10,000 dead, Iraq Body Count estimates the number of wounded at 20,000. For the number of dead among U.S. and other countries' soldiers, a good source is the Iraqi Coalition Casualty Count at http://lunaville.org/warcasualties/Summary.aspx.

[2] The "netwars" concept refers to different private organizations (that is not governmental) characterized by the rapidity with which they can develop and disappear. Networks have flexible organizational structures: they are disperse and made up of individuals and/or small groups that communicate among themselves and operate in a coordinated, interconnected fashion, often without a centralized command, but with a horizontal command. Thus, the "netwar" of these organizations is different from criminal and violent acts in which the actors prefer to create formal, hierarchical organizations using doctrines and strategies from the past. Networks can be made up of different kinds of individuals, for example, terrorists, drug traffickers, urban gang members and members of civil society who pursue "noble causes."

[3] It should be remembered that Arquilla and Ronfeldt's work came out before September 11. Thus, the networks the authors had in mind were, for example, the kind of organizations that joined together in 1999 during the Third Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle, causing the collapse of the meeting, or activists like Lori Wallach, who was the main person responsible for transcribing and sending out on the internet the Multilateral Investment Agreement (MIA), which then could not be ratified by its promoters, the members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). They do mention terrorist organizations like Al Qaeda, but they are not as central to the study as they would have been if it had been done after the September 11 attacks. This is why Arquilla and Ronfeldt's work has been so criticized by civil society organizations because it puts organizations with praiseworthy agendas in favor of social well-being on the same level as terrorist organizations. See John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Networks and Netwars* (Santa Monica: Rand, 2004). It is also available at http://www.rand. org/publications/MR/MR1382/

[4] For a detailed analysis of U.S. intelligence services agencies' rivalries, see Alejandro Dávila Flores, "El imperio herido: inteligencia y seguridad," *Metapolítica* vol. 8 (May-June 2004), pp. 54-62.

[5] Jeffrey Record, *Bounding the Global War on Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: Strategic Studies Institute, 2003), p. v.

[6] Ibid., pp. 6-9 and 11-16.

[7] http://www.amnesty.org

[8] "Prepara al-Qaeda golpe en Estados Unidos, dicen," *El Universal* (Mexico City), 26 May 2004, p. 4.

[9] "Serían atentados a gran escala," *Excélsior* (Mexico City) 26 May 2004, pp. 1 and 3.

[10] Sherle R. Schwenninger, "Revamping American Grand Strategy," *World Policy Journal* vol. 20, no. 3 (fall 2003), p. 25.

[11] It is difficult to imagine a turn of this magnitude. When Spain announced the withdrawal of its troops from Iraq, Kerry made a public statement calling on Madrid to reconsider its decision.