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What's in a name?

by [Mark Steyn](#)

On *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism* by Norman Podhoretz.

“You don’t roll out a new product in August,” said President Bush’s aide, Andrew Card, apropos Iraq in the summer of 2002. But in this seventh September of a no longer new war a somewhat battered product is in need of a rebranding.

It was launched in the days after 9/11 as a “war on terror,” an artful evasion deemed necessary on the grounds that a war on any enemy beginning with “Islamist,” “Islam-,” or “Islamic” might give the impression we had some, ah, issues with Islam itself and only complicate things further with various “friends” like Mubarak and the Saudis. Then, a couple of years back, the Administration rechristened (oops) the whole messy business “the Long War.” And Newt Gingrich started describing it as World War III, on the grounds that it’s a war on a global scale, and that’s how we designate such conflicts, and as the last one so designated was Number Two, this must be Three.

Norman Podhoretz, in a famous essay, argued that it is, in fact, World War IV, Number Three being the Cold War. The author has now expanded his thesis into a short and characteristically trenchant book in which he argues vigorously in support of the “Bush Doctrine”—more vigorously, indeed, than most of the Administration or even the President would be prepared to argue these days.^[1] Unlike Newt, Mr. Podhoretz is not one of nature’s salesmen, but he recognizes that this product needs to be pitched. The Naming of Wars is not some semantic diversion for bored viziers on rainy afternoons, but a critical element in framing your strategic goals and—in a plump and prosperous democracy—bringing the citizenry along with you. As students of Harry Potter’s sworn enemy—He Who Must Not Be Named—well know, the inability even to identify the foe speaks at the very minimum to a kind of psychological faintheartedness.

From the outset the “war on terror” was mocked by cynics as absurdly genteel—as if earlier generations of sensitive warmongers anxious not to give offense had proclaimed, in December of 1941, a war on dive-bombers. If the intention was not to be beastly to the Muslims, it’s been a spectacular success: When a jihadist drives his blazing Chevy Blazer into the departure hall of Glasgow Airport, Fleet Street starts pondering the alienation of, ah, “British Asians,” implying that Her Majesty’s many loyal and contented Hindu subjects are seething to self-detonate. When two Florida students, one of whom keeps his worldly goods at an address previously rented to a convicted terrorism supporter, are arrested near the Naval Weapons Station at Goose Creek, South Carolina with what appear to be pipe bombs, the Associated Press reports the FBI investigation thus: “Some have suggested the men were targeted because of their ethnicity. Mohamed is a native of Kuwait and Megahed is Egyptian.”

Yet, if it appears to have solved the “Islamophobia” problem, what Podhoretz calls the “ungainly

euphemism” of the “Global War on Terror” has created its own set of difficulties. In a conventionally labeled war, you know how things will end: if things go well, the War on Slovenia or War on Fiji will end with your lads marching down Main Street in Ljubljana or Suva, toppling the government and running your flag up the pole. With a war on “terror,” there’s no identified enemy, no enemy capital, no victory parade—and also no clearly defined end. Furthermore, by framing it as a war on “terror,” you leave yourself politically at the mercy of the terrorists: If there are no planes being hijacked and buildings being blown up, if there is no “terror,” then it becomes harder to make the case that there’s a war. So the well-intentioned “ungainly euphemism” wound up confirming to those so inclined that the Bush war was a con, a fiction, merely a racket got up by Bushitler and the neocons to impose a permanent security state on the nation in which your library books and non-local phone calls are monitored 24/7 in order to protect us from an enemy that doesn’t exist.

So they renamed it “the Long War.” Which is kind of a bummer. In an age of spin and packaging, it’s heartening to know not everything is focus-grouped, because you can bet “the Long War” wouldn’t have survived any Dick Morris–Frank Luntz pre-testing. If you’d wanted to make the Global War on Terror seem even more thankless and unending, that’s the way to go. It’s as if Philip VI had formally declared the start of the Hundred Years War in 1337, and then added he might need a decade or two of wiggle room.

As for Newt’s World War III, this third war is not like the second or first. True, they’re not like each other. As Podhoretz points out, the trench warfare of the western front bogged down year in, year out over a few acres of poison-gassed ground doesn’t have much in common with Hiroshima. But both at least involved traditional great-power rivalry resolved through large-scale military conflict. And, in the absence thereof, the rote invocations of the Thirties and appeasement pay diminishing returns. If leftist demonology holds that everyone’s Hitler, the right is in danger of giving the impression that everyone’s Chamberlain. Actually, it’s worse than that: Chamberlain and Lord Halifax could at least claim in mitigation that they had no concept of the scale of Hitler’s ambitions. When Ahmadinejad gets to the mike and does nightly Holocaust karaoke, our leaders cannot tell posterity they had no idea what he was contemplating. Fool you once, etc. Nevertheless, the glibness of the ’tween-wars comparison negates its effectiveness: The complaceniiks argue that the Third Reich was a bona fide reich; the new caliphate is merely a pipe dream.

So Norman Podhoretz has settled on World War IV, citing Eliot Cohen of the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins: “The cold war was World War III, which reminds us that not all global conflicts entail the movement of multi-million-man armies, or conventional front lines on a map.” For Podhoretz, World War III is also relevant because it was won in spite of “great bouts of defeatist sentiment.” “The battles in dispute,” he writes,

were not only military, as in Korea and (to a much larger extent) Vietnam, but also political, as in the passionate debates over arms control and détente; in addition, they were ideological, as over the question of whether the enemy was Soviet expansionism in particular or communism in general, or our own paranoid delusions.

The first five years of World War IV have been marked by a version of all these features.

I’ll say. Mr. Podhoretz’s full title is *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism*. With due deference to the American publishing industry’s fetish for subtitles, I think it would have been better for once to eschew the post-colonic and invite us to focus on that stark enumeration. The book, after all, is not primarily concerned with the enemy so much as with the instinct of all the most critical institutions in our society to recoil even from the very concept of “the enemy.” From the first chapter—“The 9/11 Blame Game”—to the penultimate—“Defeatism on the Right”—the author is preoccupied not with this or that jihadist branch office or nuclearizing Muslim dictatorship,

but with “isolationists,” “liberal internationalists,” “realists,” “the mainstream media,” and other features of the home front. I used to think that these were simply speed bumps en route to the real battlefield, but as the years go by I’ve moved closer to Podhoretz’s view—that they’re far more central to what is not so much a “long struggle against Islamofascism” but a long struggle to muster the will to wage a long struggle, *any* long struggle, against anyone.

Consider that recitation of World War III’s ideological differences: We “won” the Cold War, but for most of the “winners” it didn’t seem like a victory. The image of Soviet collapse—the fall of the Berlin Wall—could be interpreted as vindication by all ideological factions. The soft left maintains we can’t have been at war with “Communism in general” because it was that great “moderate” Communist Mr. Gorbachev who had midwived this moment. If you were minded to regard the thing as a “paranoid delusion,” the hot eastern babes sweeping through Checkpoint Charlie to enjoy a Heineken with young western lads would easily confirm a pacifist conviction that left to our own devices we can all rub along. Certainly, when Leonard Bernstein conducted his re-unification concert at the Wall, he wasn’t celebrating Reagan or Thatcher. For monuments to that heroic pair, one is obliged to travel further east. Among the citizens of America’s allies, there was no sense that our Big Idea—freedom—had beaten their Big Idea—Communism. Au contraire, millions of French and Italians voted for the latter, year in, year out.

But the people who got World War III wrong (and, in its darkest hours, potentially fatally wrong) were given a pass: they got to skate. Moral equivalists, looking-at-the-world-through-Red-colored-glasses sentimentalists, hardcore anti-Americans, all were as entrenched as ever in the institutions of the West when the new struggle began—and with an even freer hand to get it wrong one mo’ time. In a particularly sharp chapter, “From World War III to World War IV,” Podhoretz traces the links between the two: the forces of defeatism in the Cold War’s bleakest decade—the Seventies—that also emboldened new enemies. He quotes Jimmy Carter’s mockery of the old assumptions, the “belief that Soviet expansionism was almost inevitable and that it must be contained. Being confident of our own future, we are now free of that inordinate fear of Communism which once led us to embrace any dictator who joined us in that fear.”

No fear of that anymore. And so the Shah fell to the Ayatollah Khomeini. “Just how blind the Carter administration was to this portentous development,” writes Podhoretz, “can be gauged by the fact that Andrew Young, Carter’s own ambassador to the UN, hailed the radical Islamist despot now ruling Iran as a saint and a great believer in human rights.”

The seizure of the U.S. Embassy disabused even Carter of Carterian delusions. He loosed Zbigniew Brzezinski to deal with the Soviets in Afghanistan. In post-Watergate post-Vietnam Washington, the “covert mission” barely existed, so Zbig outsourced the Afghan operation to Pakistan’s ISI and Saudi Arabia’s Prince Turki, and they in turn signed up Osama bin Laden and other excitable types. Thirty years on, the idealist buffoon Carter and the wily “realist” Brzezinski are not laughingstocks but prominent and reasonably respected and indeed bestselling analysts of our present woes.

Carter got it exactly wrong. It was precisely because we were not “confident of our own future” that we were so tentative in response to provocations. There were two forces at play in the late twentieth century: in the east, the collapse of Communism; in the west, the collapse of confidence. And, with the end of the Soviet existential threat, the enervation at home only accelerated.

Norman Podhoretz is a happier warrior than most at the dawn of the seventh year of World War IV. Unlike many on the right, he does not think the Bush Doctrine—the plan, as one skeptical pal of mine puts it, “to shove freedom down the throats of the entire world whether they want it or not”—is utterly deluded. And, unlike many of the small band of supporters of the Bush Doctrine, he does not think that Bush himself has given up on it. He makes the point that the “miserable despotisms” of the Middle East are not some ancient eternal cultural expression: most of the

psychotic kleptocrats sit on thrones invented with nary a thought by British and French civil servants eighty-five years ago. Whether or not the Middle East can be transformed into Vermont or Switzerland or Singapore, there is nothing that says what it is now is all it can ever be.

Nonetheless, it's hard to read Podhoretz's account of the first years of the "long war" without getting the sense of a shriveling comfort zone for 9/11 transformationalists. The glee with which that Tuesday morning was greeted in the Muslim world was to be expected ("I felt that I was being carried in the air above the corpse of the mythological symbol of arrogant American imperialist power," declared the chairman of the Syrian Arab Writers Association), the gloating in Europe perhaps less so ("We have dreamed of this event," wrote the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard. "They did it, but we willed it"). Podhoretz expects nothing from the Continent because of simple demographic reality: "The large percentage of Muslim voters in every European country meant that politicians were being forced to cater to them, and this in turn meant that the 'sophisticated' European opposition to the Bush Doctrine would be greatly reinforced by domestic political considerations."

So Europe can plead demography in mitigation. But what explains our media, our political class, our "isolationists right and left"? Twenty-five years ago, the Hudson Institute's Herman Kahn wrote a book called *The Coming Boom*, predicting the eponymous prosperity but also observing *en passant*:

Two out of three Americans polled in recent years believe that their grandchildren will not live as well as they do, i.e., they tend to believe the vision of the future that is taught in our school system. Almost every child is told that we are running out of resources; that we are robbing future generations when we use these scarce, irreplaceable, or nonrenewable resources in silly, frivolous and wasteful ways; that we are callously polluting the environment beyond control; that we are recklessly destroying the ecology beyond repair; that we are knowingly distributing foods which give people cancer and other ailments but continue to do so in order to make a profit.

It would be hard to describe a more unhealthy, immoral, and disastrous educational context, every element of which is either largely incorrect, misleading, overstated, or just plain wrong. What the school system describes, and what so many Americans believe, is a prescription for low morale, higher prices and greater (and unnecessary) regulations.

A generation on, it's easier to see that the assumptions underpinning such self-flagellation are "unhealthy" far beyond environmental regulation. Large numbers of people cannot conceive of the morality of national purpose, without which it's hard to resist any kind of existential threat. The same networks which offer drearily parochial coverage of the Olympics to the point where you'd barely know there were any other countries competing except as exotic background extras in a Team USA victory parade insist after the commercial break that in their war coverage they're simply impartial arbiters with no dog in the fight. Podhoretz notes George Kennan's famous essay "X" on the outbreak of World War III:

In the light of these circumstances, the thoughtful observer of Russian-American relations will experience a certain gratitude for a Providence which, by providing the American people with this implacable challenge, has made their entire security as a nation dependent on their pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.

"Substitute 'Islamofascism' for 'Russian-American relations,'" writes Podhoretz, "and every other word of this magnificent statement applies to us as a nation today."

Yet, in practice, that lone substitution is proving a tricky implant. The author has no illusions about the years to come: In an implicit echo of Rumsfeld's line about going to war with the army you have, Podhoretz says that, if World War IV is to be fought at all, it will "have to be fought by the kind of people Americans now are." The President could do worse in this last year and a bit than adopt the designation promoted here, and frame the strategic goals and non-negotiable conditions and eventual victory in World War IV accordingly.

What's in a name? Lots.

Notes

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1. *World War IV: The Long Struggle Against Islamofascism*, by Norman Podhoretz; Doubleday, 240 pages, \$24.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

Mark Steyn's most recent book is *America Alone: The End of the World As We Know It* (Regnery).

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