

American Grand Strategy After 9/11: An Assessment



In the three years since 9-11, the Administration has yet to arrive at a clear definition of the enemy or the aim in the War on Terrorism; to date, American policy has combined ambitious public statements with ambiguity on critical particulars. Heretofore, the costs of pursuing such ambitious but ill-defined goals have been high but tolerable. The ongoing insurgency in Iraq, however, is increasing the costs of grand strategic ambiguity to the point where fundamental choices can no longer be deferred. There are two broad alternatives for resolving these ambiguities and creating a coherent and logically sufficient grand strategy: rollback and containment. Rollback would retain the ambitious goals implicit in today's declaratory policy and accept the cost and near-term risk inherent in pursuing them. Containment would settle for more modest goals in exchange for lower costs and lower near-term risks. Neither alternative dominates the other on analytical grounds both involve serious costs as well as benefits. Most important, the choice between them turns on a series of basic value judgments on the acceptability of risk, the relationship between near-term and long-term risk, and the ultimate degree of security the Nation should seek.

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