

Time to reset politics, focus on enemy

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February 22, 2010 05:06 AM EDT

The politics of terror have shifted dramatically for the Obama administration. It has only itself to blame. Until the failed attack Dec. 25, the president spent his first year defining counterterrorism in opposition to a political caricature of Bush-era policies. Politically, we could expect this “rearview mirror” approach, but it has proved problematic and confusing. It has now come back to bite the president.

The rhetoric of the rejection of the past doesn't match reality. There has been fundamental continuity in the core counterterrorism policies between the Bush and Obama administrations. Given the remaining threat from Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, the Obama administration has kept most of the Bush-era counterterrorism tools in place, including preventive detention and the killing of Al Qaeda leaders on the battlefield.

Ironically, the administration now uses this continuity as a shield when it comes under fire. In so doing, it deconstructs the straw man description of immoral Bush-era policies limited to the use of military power and insensitive to the long-term war of ideas.

When criticized for returning Guantanamo detainees to Yemen immediately before the failed Dec. 25 bombing, the Obama team credited the Bush administration for releasing 530 detainees. When lambasted for reading Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, the so-called Christmas bomber, his Miranda rights, the Obama talking points highlighted that the policy was consistent with Bush-era procedures and numerous criminal prosecutions.

When accused of going soft on terrorism, the president gladly touted that more Al Qaeda members were killed or captured in 2009 than in 2008.

This reality exacerbated the administration's political instincts to demonstrate that it broke from the past. This led to bad decisions, lost opportunities and confusion.

- The focus on closing Guantanamo and emptying the prison without a plan to handle current and future detainees has sucked the oxygen out of the air. Instead of taking the opportunity to set and defend the long-term legal framework for holding terrorists — including those who do not face a trial of any sort — the administration hung the albatross of Guantanamo's closure around its neck as the baseline for its detainee policy.

- The administration muddled the intended “demonstration of American justice” of trying Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and other high-ranking Al Qaeda detainees in criminal courts by admitting that Mohammed would not be released if acquitted, that others would face

military commissions and that other low-ranking Al Qaeda operatives would be held indefinitely without trial. The attorney general confused things further with the decision to read Abdulmutallab his Miranda rights and inject him immediately into the criminal legal system.

- Establishing a different interrogation protocol for terrorists without clear guidance on whether intelligence gathering or evidence collection would take priority was bound to confuse. This manifested itself in the lack of debate within the administration about the best way to obtain timely intelligence from Abdulmutallab, a foreign terrorism suspect caught in the United States.

The Dec. 25 attempted bombing reminded us that we face an adapting and committed enemy intent on attacking the United States — whether the president is Bill Clinton, George W. Bush or Barack Obama. Mixed with the inconsistencies of Obama's approach, this event opened the door for political jousting that will only worsen unless the administration resets its own rhetoric and focuses on the future threats we face.

This is a critical moment. Al Qaeda the organization remains in steady decline, but the continued allure of the violent extremist ideology remains a central national security concern.

The administration is right to focus attention on shifting the momentum against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. This is where core Al Qaeda will make its last stand.

There are several other steps that the administration should take now to ensure we are focused on the enemy ahead of us:

- Recommit clearly to intelligence gathering and prevention as the primary goals when confronting terrorist threats.
- Use the new focus on Yemen to move beyond the “two-war” construct and focus on the global threat. This will allow the administration to lead new efforts with regional partners to deny physical safe havens to terrorists.
- Make concrete the message of Obama's Cairo speech. Aside from demonstrating that the West is not at war with Islam, the United States should actively counter the violent extremist ideology by encouraging the credible voices now emerging to oppose Al Qaeda and its ideology.
- With Congress, establish a legal paradigm to hold terrorists indefinitely if necessary, in a manner that can be defended in U.S. courts and in the court of public opinion.
- Push government agencies to imagine the unimaginable — possible links between terrorist groups and illicit transnational networks, new terrorist innovations and platforms, and the real potential that small groups or cells could deploy biological or

nuclear devices. This means investing to extend our borders and create resiliency in our critical infrastructure, including our cyberinfrastructure.

The world is not getting any safer. It's time the president and everyone in Washington started focusing their attention on the common enemies that lie on the horizon.

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