

America and the World in the 21st Century

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

As federal emphasis on “homeland security” increased, the effects of the War on Terror impacted life in the United States as well as abroad. The detainment of suspected terrorists raised constitutional questions about the rights of foreign prisoners. As the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continued, other crises in the Middle East required America’s attention. By the end of the Obama administration, a significant number of Americans had come to believe that the government should focus on domestic issues.

This tutorial examines America and the world in the early 21st century in three parts:

1. “Unlawful Combatants”

The War on Terror raised a number of questions for which there were no easy answers. Some were related to the use of wiretaps and other surveillance methods to monitor citizens’ activities. An increasing number of Americans believed that this undermined individual liberty. Other questions concerned what to do with the foreign terrorists who were detained in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

In “traditional” warfare, combatants wear uniforms and the rules of engagement are clear. Also, international agreements, including the Geneva Conventions, apply. These agreements stipulate the proper treatment of prisoners of war and include a prohibition of torture. During the War on Terror, however, the immediate need for information on upcoming attacks and the location of terrorist cells took priority. The Bush administration asserted that the international agreements did not apply to the current situation or the detainees involved.

Shortly after the War on Terror began, the United States transported men who were suspected to be members of **al-Qaeda** to the American naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for questioning. The administration referred to these men as “unlawful combatants” to whom the rights guaranteed to prisoners of war by international treaties (including protection from torture) did not apply.



TERM TO KNOW

Al-Qaeda

A militant Islamist group founded by Osama bin Laden.

President **George W. Bush** approved the use of torture only in instances when he had given special permission. However, military and intelligence authorities approved several techniques that many independent observers categorized as torture.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

George W. Bush

Republican president and son of the former president (George H. W. Bush) who served as president from 2001 to 2009 following the contentious election of 2000; the terrorist attacks of 9/11 defined his term in office as he launched a “War on Terror” that committed American troops and resources to ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The detention center at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq gained international notoriety as a result of the living conditions and interrogation methods used at those locations. Interrogation sometimes included waterboarding, beating, and administering electric shocks to extract information from detainees. Reports—and photographs—that documented prisoner maltreatment and, on occasion, death during interrogation provoked an international outcry.



(a)



(b)

The first 20 “unlawful combatants” were moved to the Guantanamo Bay detention center on January 11, 2002 (a). From late 2003 to early 2004, some of the prisoners held in Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq were tortured and humiliated (b). U.S. soldiers stomped and beat them, led them on leashes, made them pose naked, and urinated on them. Photographs of the abuse sparked protests around the world and diminished support for U.S. intervention in Iraq.



DID YOU KNOW

In 2009, it was revealed that decisions to authorize extreme interrogation tactics came from senior officials in the Bush administration, including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Attorney General Alberto Gonzales.

The classification of suspected terrorists as “unlawful combatants” was the subject of debate among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the federal government.

➞ **EXAMPLE** During the outcry raised in response to the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib in 2004, Congress included a provision in a 2005 bill regarding defense appropriations to ban the use of torture. President Bush signed the measure, but his signature was accompanied by a statement declaring that, as commander-in-chief of the U.S. armed forces, he had the power to establish rules for the military.

In a series of decisions between 2004 and 2006, the U.S. Supreme Court played a key role in protecting the rights of the prisoners detained at Guantanamo Bay. One of the most notable of these decisions was made in the case of *Hamdan v. Rumsfeld* in 2006. The court ruled that the administration’s creation of secret military tribunals to prosecute “unlawful combatants” was unconstitutional. In addition, the court’s decision stated that the treatment of prisoners at Guantanamo violated the Geneva Conventions.

Congress responded to the *Hamdan* decision by enacting a law that authorized President Bush to establish secret military tribunals to try suspected terrorists and to detain enemy combatants. However, in a 5-4 decision in 2008, the court ruled in *Boumediene v. Bush* that the law was unconstitutional and reaffirmed the right of Guantanamo detainees to challenge their imprisonment in U.S. courts.

These decisions illustrated the important role that the judicial branch plays in overseeing and reviewing the actions of the executive and legislative branches. They also indicated that the sweeping security measures undertaken during the War on Terror must operate within constitutional limits. As the War on Terror continues, these issues will continue to be debated.



MAKE THE CONNECTION

During his 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama promised to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay and announced plans to do so early in his administration. However, his proposal to close the detention center met strong opposition in Congress. Many Republicans did not want suspected terrorists transferred to prisons on U.S. soil. Approximately 40 detainees remained in Guantanamo at the time President Obama left office in January 2017.

2. America’s Longest Wars



Map of the Middle East.

While the treatment of prisoners was argued in the courts and Congress, soldiers and civilians continued to die in Afghanistan and Iraq. Violence in both countries continued throughout the Bush and Obama administrations. The change from one administration to the next seemed to have no impact.

In December 2003, U.S. soldiers captured Saddam Hussein, the former Iraqi dictator. An Iraqi court found him guilty of crimes against his people. He was executed in December 2006.

With the exception of Hussein's capture, President Bush and his administration found little to celebrate in **Operation Iraqi Freedom**.



TERM TO KNOW

Operation Iraqi Freedom

The name of the American invasion of Iraq under the suspicion that Saddam Hussein was harboring weapons of mass destruction (WMDs).

Anti-war protestors in the United States and abroad continually drew attention to the fact that no weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) had been found in Iraq.

As the U.S. occupation of Iraq continued, sectarian violence increased. The “Mission Accomplished” banner displayed during President Bush’s “victory” speech in the spring of 2003 seemed to have been unfurled prematurely.

➞ **EXAMPLE** During Saddam Hussein’s regime, Sunni Muslims dominated the government and the armed forces, even though they were a minority of Iraq’s population. Following the U.S. invasion, Shia

Muslims dominated the new government. Sunni and Shia militias subsequently fought each other in the streets of Baghdad and throughout the country.



American soldiers exchange fire with insurgents in the streets of Baghdad in March 2007.

The United States was unable to establish a stable government in the midst of the ongoing violence. The cost of the war in Iraq was enormous and continued to increase—financially and in terms of human lives. It was conservatively estimated that the war had cost \$1.7 trillion by 2013.

The casualties resulting from Operation Iraqi Freedom were also significant. In May 2017, the Department of Defense stated that 4,424 Americans had died during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Over 30,000 more had been wounded. Many of the wounded suffered permanent injuries due to the widespread use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) by insurgents.

Iraqi civilian casualties were substantially higher. According to the Iraq Body Count project, over 119,000 Iraqi civilians died in Operation Enduring Freedom between 2003 and 2011.

In late 2008, the U.S. and Iraqi governments approved an agreement in which American soldiers would begin to withdraw from Iraq in the summer of 2009. The Obama administration completed the withdrawal in 2011 when the last American combat troops left Iraq. Violence continued throughout the country, and a stable government remained elusive.

The campaign in Iraq required the diversion of resources from **Operation Enduring Freedom** in Afghanistan.



TERM TO KNOW

Operation Enduring Freedom

The name of the campaign waged against the Taliban in Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks. By 2008, the United States seemed to be no closer to capturing **Osama bin Laden**, who had ordered the 9/11

attacks, than it had been when the invasion began. In addition, the **Taliban** proved difficult to defeat. By the time President Bush left office, the Taliban and al-Qaeda had reestablished a presence in some parts of Afghanistan.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Osama bin Laden

Leader of the terrorist organization al-Qaeda who was behind the 9/11 attacks on the United States.



TERM TO KNOW

Taliban

A fundamentalist Muslim group that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001.

While running for president in 2008, **Barack Obama** promised to end the war in Afghanistan. As president, however, he found his promise difficult to keep. In 2009, Obama deployed 15,000 additional soldiers to Afghanistan to wage a counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.



DID YOU KNOW

As of December 2013, 3,397 U.S. service members had died in the war in Afghanistan.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Barack Obama

First African American president of the United States who served in office from 2009 to 2017 after running on a campaign of “hope and change” that appealed to American voters looking for an alternative to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the economic recession at home.

In addition to conventional soldiers, President Obama deployed special forces and intelligence operatives and used drones to target Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders. The administration also used drones and special forces to conduct military operations in areas where al-Qaeda maintained a presence, specifically Pakistan and Yemen. In May 2011, U.S. Navy SEALs raided a compound in Pakistan and killed Osama bin Laden.

In 2011, the United States announced a phased military withdrawal from Afghanistan, which would be completed in 2014. In December 2014, the United States announced the end of military operations in Afghanistan. Some U.S. forces remained in the country, however. Many of them trained Afghan security personnel or conducted counterterrorism operations in the region.

In 2021, the incoming presidential administration of Joseph Biden indicated its intention to move forward with plans to withdraw all remaining U.S. troops, contractors, and nondiplomatic civilian personnel from Afghanistan. As the United States prepared to vacate, the Taliban entered the Afghan capital of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and swiftly reestablished control over the country. The full U.S. withdrawal was completed 2 weeks later. Since then, the United States has focused instead on providing humanitarian aid and targeted assistance to Afghanistan.



DID YOU KNOW

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan together were the most expensive wars in U.S. history.

3. America and the World to Come

Despite Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom, al-Qaeda remained active in the Middle East and Central Asia and expanded operations to other locations, including some in Africa. New Islamic militant threats emerged, and terrorist attacks against the United States continued, though most were committed by American citizens and legal residents. None of these attacks were as devastating as those that occurred on 9/11.

As the United States scaled down military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, special forces and airpower (including drones) continued to be used against enemies in the Middle East and Central Asia.

➔ **EXAMPLE** In 2011, the United States and its NATO allies assisted Libyan rebels in overthrowing dictator Muammar Gadhafi.

In 2011, Americans watched as popular revolts in Egypt, Tunisia, and other nations (referred to collectively as the “Arab Spring”) challenged existing governments. The protests in Syria led to a violent response from President Bashar al-Assad and marked the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, which continues at present. In addition to nearly 1 million casualties, the war has displaced millions more, creating the world’s largest refugee crisis since World War II.



Refugees from violence in Syria and Iraq get off a boat near the Greek island of Lesbos in October 2015.

The violence in Syria and the ongoing instability in Iraq enabled the emergence of the **Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)**, a radical group that many observers view as a greater threat than al-Qaeda.



TERM TO KNOW

Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

A radical Islamist militant group consisting of mostly Sunni Muslims; once affiliated with al-Qaeda. In June 2014, ISIS seized control of Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq and Syria. On June 29, it proclaimed the

formation of the Islamic State, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as caliph (i.e., the new state’s political and religious leader). By 2015, ISIS had established a presence in countries throughout the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. The growth of ISIS, the Syrian civil war, and the refugee crisis will test U.S. resolve in the years ahead.

At the same time, shocking acts of domestic terror led some Americans to question whether “homeland security” had really made the nation secure. Shortly before 3 p.m. on April 15, 2013, two bombs made from pressure cookers exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. Three people were killed, and more than 250 were injured.



Bystanders at the finish line of the Boston Marathon carry the injured after the attack on April 15, 2013. Two bombs exploded a few seconds (and a few 100 yd) apart, killing three people.

credit: Aaron Tang

Three days later, two suspects were identified, and a manhunt began. On the first night of the manhunt, two brothers who had immigrated to the United States from Chechnya as children killed a campus security officer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, stole a car, and fled. The older brother, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, was killed when the police tried to arrest him. The younger brother, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, was captured the following day.



DID YOU KNOW

In his statements to the police, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev said that he and his brother, who he claimed had planned the attack, were influenced by radical Islamists in Afghanistan and Iraq. He denied that they were affiliated with any terrorist group.

Terrorist events including the Boston Marathon bombing, the Paris terror attacks in November 2015, and the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando in June 2016 indicate that the War on Terror has not ended terrorist

violence. U.S. citizens remain vulnerable. In this context, American values—and what it means to be an American—continue to be debated.



SUMMARY

As a result of the War on Terror, the line between international and domestic security had blurred. The labeling of suspected terrorists as “unlawful combatants” raised concerns regarding the proper treatment of detainees and prisoner rights. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq plagued the Bush and Obama administrations, and the ultimate cost of these conflicts is still impossible to foresee. The rise of ISIS and the ongoing threat of domestic terrorist attacks indicate that homeland security will remain an important issue in the years to come.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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