

The History of the War on Terror

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U.S. Navy Seabees participate in a live-fire range exercise prior to deploying to Iraq in support of the global war on terror. Photo by: James Finnigan

On September 11, 2001, the terrorist group al-Qaida attacked the World Trade Center in New York City. Terrorists are fighters who work outside of regular armies. They killed many American civilians, and in response to this attack America started the war on terror. The war on terror was meant to stop terrorist groups across the world.

The U.S. was backed by many different countries, like Great Britain. The war on terror led to a larger U.S. military, more intelligence-gathering or spying, and new relationships between countries.

U.S. targets terrorists in the Middle East

The U.S. led major military attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq in the Middle East. The terrorist group al-Qaida was based in Afghanistan and the U.S. feared attacks from Iraq.

America expanded its intelligence-gathering organizations. These groups gathered information about terrorist groups and possible terrorist attacks. The United States also captured terrorist

suspects. They started keeping the prisoners at Guantánamo Bay, which is an American prison in Cuba.

On U.S. soil, the war on terrorism meant new laws, such as the USA Patriot Act in 2001. Under the Patriot Act, certain people in the country were watched more closely. The Department of Homeland Security was created to screen people coming into the country. The National Security Agency, or NSA, began to gather more information about people.



Within a year, hundreds of terrorist suspects around the world were arrested. Terrorist training camps in Afghanistan were closed. The country was ruled by the Taliban, an Islamic group. This group had protected al-Qaida, so it was removed by the U.S. Many of al-Qaida's older members were also caught.

U.S.-led campaign faces criticism

However, critics argued that the failures of the war on terror were greater than its successes. They said that the war in Afghanistan had scattered the al-Qaida terrorists. Now, they were even harder to track down and fight. The war in Iraq made more people in the Muslim world angry at the U.S. As more civilians were killed, more people became terrorists.

Some people think the war on terrorism was just a cover for the U.S. They think the real goal was to control the oil in Iraq.

By the time the U.S. President George W. Bush was re-elected in 2004, the failure of the war on terror was becoming clear. In Iraq, U.S. forces had overthrown the government of Saddam Hussein in 2003. However, they had trouble rebuilding a government in Iraq. The war had made the country more unstable. The same was true in Afghanistan, where by 2006 there was a full revolt against the U.S.



Many people in other countries and in the U.S. were angry at President Bush. They thought the way the U.S. was trying to stop terrorism was wrong and against the law. People were kept in prison without trial. People hurt the prisoners to try to get information from them. For the first time, drones, or war planes without pilots, were used to kill suspected enemies.

Obama changed focus, but kept some of Bush's policies

Barack Obama was against the actions of Bush's government. When he became president in 2008, the expression "war on terrorism" quickly disappeared. Obama declared that the United States would no longer be part of a vague "global war on terrorism." Instead, the country would focus its actions on specific groups. Under Obama, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were gradually contained. At the end of Obama's presidency in 2016, however, there were still U.S. troops in both countries.

Obama spoke out against the war on terror in his speeches. However, he still continued some of Bush's programs. For example, he expanded the use of drones. He even authorized the attacks on several U.S. citizens in other countries. Special operations forces, which are highly secretive, were greatly expanded. They were used more and more outside of war zones. The U.S. security agencies also continued to watch and gather information about people.