

Counterfactual history suggests that the last ten years of American foreign policy has made us safer

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With the ten-year anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon only days away, a debate still rages over whether Britain and America are now more secure now than on September 10th 2001. Critics complain that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the overarching idea of the “Global War On Terror”, were counterproductive, doing “[more damage to ourselves than did the two-bit criminals who baited us](#)” and “[left the US weaker, more divided and broke](#)”. This raises the question of what would have happened had American foreign policy continued along pre-9/11 lines.

The first and most obvious difference would have been in relation to Afghanistan. Even during the summer of 2001 attempts were still being made to induce the Taliban to relinquish Bin Laden through diplomacy. However, these efforts were, in the words of a memo in July 201, “[fruitless](#)”, a fact demonstrated by Taliban rejections of the [thirty American pre-9/11 requests](#) for the terrorist leader, and Mullah Omar’s refusal to hand over the terrorist leader after the September 11 attacks. One plausible scenario suggested by analysts was that Al Qaeda’s expanding power would eventually “[consume the host and replace it](#)”, allowing the terrorist organisation complete control over Afghanistan’s resources.



Just as a failure to remove the Taliban would have increased the threat from Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, Saddam’s continued existence would have allowed the Iraq dictator to increase instability in the Middle East. Although the failure to find fresh Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq generated intense controversy, recent revelations show that chemical weapons, albeit of uncertain provenance, [were in fact discovered by Coalition forces](#). Even the Iraq Survey Group conceded that, given time, the Iraqi dictator would have [eventually acquired them](#), stating that “Saddam wanted to recreate Iraq’s WMD capability...after sanctions were removed and Iraq’s economy stabilized... [a goal that] was within striking distance”.

A failure to intervene would have also have meant that the boost to non-proliferation efforts that occurred in the wake of Operation Iraqi Freedom would not have occurred. Instead of various countries abandoning their programmes, a nuclear arms race may have developed – which [sadly seems to be taking place in response to Iran](#). Not only would this have created a risk of open nuclear conflict, or technology falling into the hands of terrorist groups, it would have made it harder to deal with the conventional actions proxies of the various regimes.

Therefore it seems that, as well as providing substantial humanitarian benefits, regime change in Iraq and Afghanistan have reduced the risk of terrorism and helped counter-proliferation efforts. While significant threats still remain, opponents of the interventions need to explain how keeping Saddam and Mullah Omar in power would have been an improvement.

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