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New words for war

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton recently confirmed that the Obama administration has dropped the phrase "global war on terror." She didn't say why. "I think that speaks for itself. Obviously," was her elaboration.

That raised a few obvious questions: Does the new administration believe the fight against al-Qaeda and other extreme Islamist groups doesn't amount to war?

Is the threat to the U.S. homeland less, in President Obama's estimation, than that perceived by President George W. Bush? And does the United States still expect its NATO military allies to join in this newly unnamed, speaks-for-itself endeavor?

A partial answer came this week in congressional testimony by General David H. Petraeus and Michelle Flournoy, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, who described a serious and continuing menace from terrorist networks.

"In the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region you have continued safe haven for al-Qaeda and other extremists, who we know are actively plotting against American interests, American allies and the American homeland. So this is a matter of vital national interest," said Flournoy. Gen. Petraeus said: "All of [the terrorist groups] together represent a threat ... and, in certain cases, a truly global extremist threat."

But it was Obama himself who most compellingly stated the administration's position, and in the best of locales — in front of a European audience in Strasbourg, France.

"I think it's important for Europe to understand that even though I'm now President and George Bush is no longer President, al-Qaeda is still a threat," he said. "It is going to be a very difficult challenge."



President Obama tries out his own description of the 'global war on terrorism'



Terrorism thrives across the borders. AFP

The president noted that some argue that if the United States changed policies on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or "were more respectful towards the Muslim world, suddenly these organizations would stop threatening us." He concluded: "That's just not the case."

"We believe that we cannot just win militarily," said Obama, citing the new development and diplomatic efforts he has launched in Afghanistan and Pakistan. "But there will be a military component to it,

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and Europe should not simply expect the United States to shoulder that burden alone.”

George W. Bush might have spoken those words, but Obama, in contrast to how his predecessor might have been received, was greeted with applause by his European audience. So the threat is “a matter of vital national interest,” it is “global,” and it requires a military response, with NATO’s participation. It seems the “global war on terrorism” will continue — only without the name.

There is some logic to that: Obama is acutely aware of the damage done by the Bush administration to American prestige in Europe and throughout the Muslim world, and he has spoken much this week of a fresh start. As many have pointed out, the old term was awkward — “terror” describes a means of war, not an enemy.

The challenge for the new administration is to describe that enemy and the campaign against it in ways that convey its urgency to both Americans and foreign audiences — and that unite rather than polarize. In that respect, Obama made a good start in Strasbourg.

Washington Post

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