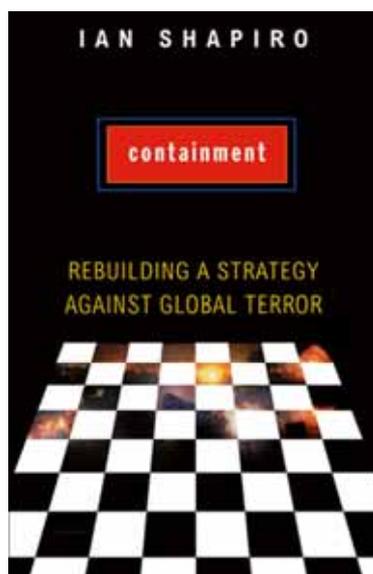


Shapiro: Thinking Inside the Box?

REVIEW

Maria Ryan



Ian Shapiro

Containment: Rebuilding a Strategy Against Global Terror

Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. 192pp

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For too long, Ian Shapiro argues, American Democrats have allowed the Republican Party to set the political agenda in both domestic and foreign policy. The Democrats' decade old strategy of 'triangulation'—peeling off moderate Republican votes by proposing 'lite' versions of Republican policies—has bred a defensively minded Democratic Party that simply apes its opponents for fear of incurring the ultimate insult: being tarred as 'liberal'. Shapiro's book is an attempt to call time on the Republican echo chamber and to spur the Democrats onto the offensive in matters pertaining to foreign policy by unapologetically proposing a genuinely alternative strategy to fight the war on terror. In particular, Shapiro seeks to reclaim and reinvigorate George Kennan's strategy of 'containment'. Although Shapiro seems critical of the way in which successive US presidents chose to pursue containment during the Cold War, he distinguishes this from the doctrine itself, affirming that Kennanite containment is the most realistic, the most effective and the most ethical way to confront the challenge of terrorism and reform US foreign policy (and America's global standing) by creating 'a world in which no-one can dominate' (p.120).

At just 133 pages (excluding notes) the book is short, but there is much to commend and much to think about. Shapiro provides a cool dissection of the Bush administration's conflation of threats that justified its adoption of the strategy of prevention. He argues convincingly that rogue states are highly unlikely to sponsor terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda because of the difficulty of controlling them and the probability of being discovered. He reminds us how unlikely it is that such groups would have the technological ability to assemble and use weapons of mass destruction. Shapiro is on particularly strong ground when he points out that, in the case of Iraq, there was a failure *to* contain rather than a failure *of* containment—in 1990, Saddam was given his infamous, albeit not deliberate, 'green light' to invade Iraq by US ambassador April Glaspie and, during the Clinton years, the sanctions regime was corrupted with the knowledge (and arguably the complicity) of the UN Sanctions Committee. The flawed execution of containment does not warrant the use of preventive war, Shapiro argues.

Shapiro does not dwell on the historical debate over what Kennan actually meant by containment, but he is clear about what a revitalised containment would

embody. The new containment, Shapiro argues, would be premised on the belief that a group such as Al Qaeda has a 'perpetual need for sanctuaries' (p.87) and that such states, usually weak ones, can be contained through securing borders, obtaining good intelligence and working with international organisations to resolve their internal problems. (Although this would not counter the phenomenon experienced in the UK of the home-grown suicide bomber). Washington also needs to (re)learn that terrorist leaders are not nihilists. Drawing on the work of Robert Pape, Shapiro correctly and convincingly argues that terrorists are by no means immune to strategic logic, citing Hamas and the 'hudna' proposal and the African National Congress.

In a broader sense, containment would help drain the swamp of terrorists because its more modest aims ('prevent hostile powers from achieving dominance while eschewing any agenda for American global supremacy', p.36) would improve America's global standing. Once the US itself was secure, containment would even allow for supporting indigenous, organic pro-democracy movements, if they should emerge.

However, where Shapiro overreaches is in his depiction of the Bush Doctrine as 'a radical sea change' from what has gone before (p. 120). He is right that terrorism is no longer viewed as a criminal justice matter, but the Bush administration's invocation of 'war on terror' and its adoption of the preventive war agenda is aimed ultimately at pursuing American primacy, with the 'war on terror' a constituent but subservient part of this wider strategic objective. This is hardly a radical departure from the objectives of the Cold War administrations, which sought a 'preponderance of power' vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the primacy of the American developmental model in the third world. The Bush administration's *National Security Strategy* (NSS) is indeed global in scope but so too was NSC-68 of 1950. Moreover, US administrations frequently undertook preventive military action on a worldwide basis during the Cold War, including in 'peripheral' regions (such as Vietnam). The NSS does attempt to void the concept of international neutrality but this is simply a formal codification of US practice during the Cold War, when successive administrations responded to independent or leftist movements as though they *were* communist, thereby denying the possibility of a third way. Finally, Shapiro is wrong to claim that the NSS envisions democratisation 'as sufficient to legitimate an American invasion'. Beyond the grandiose rhetoric of the NSS, there are many caveats; it calls for balancing democracy promotion with 'other interests that are also vital to the security and well-being of the American people' and goes on to list thirteen actions the US can take to promote democracy—all of which are *non-military*.

Overall, however, Shapiro has written a thought-provoking critique of the Bush administration that deserves to be taken seriously and read widely.





SUBMISSIONS GUIDELINES

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Submissions should comply with the following:

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