

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz: America's Unwritten Policy on Islam: The White House and the Relationship between Terror and Islam. Part 1: The Beginnings of American Anti-terror Policy

The first part of this two-part article sheds light on how four American presidents after Ronald Reagan dealt with the relationship between Islam and terror within the last 25 years. The analysis draws upon formerly secret White House policy papers that contain directives on terror and fundamentalism. What emerges clearly is that president Reagan and his vice-president, George H.W. Bush, did establish a nationwide anti-terror policy for the first time in 1986, but also that they did not relate this policy to the historical dimensions of the conflicts between Muslims and Western modernity. Mr Reagan, Mr Bush, and Bill Clinton failed to perceive the totalitarian ideology behind terrorism. Their key problem arose from the fact that they saw Islam, in the Western sense, merely as a religion, not as a civilisation that unites religion and power. This may be rooted in the secular nature of their governing mission; however, it proved to be their greatest mistake: While they did develop an anti-terror policy towards countries such as Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan, the other side of the coin remained in the dark because they did not establish a national policy on Islam. This is why they mostly acted defensively and aimlessly.

This inconsistency is living on under George W. Bush. What is more, the war conducted to free Kuwait from its aggressor, Iraq, in 1991, Islamist attacks against the USA from 1993 onwards, and the Islamist declaration of war on the West in 1998 caused the worldwide axis of conflict to turn from West-East to North-South. This, however, was not appreciated by the White House which, until September 11, 2001, was still influenced by the structures and the mentality of the Cold War. As the second part shows, Mr Bush was driven by the large-scale terrorist attacks to take the offensive. At first, he avoided showing the nexus between Islam and terror. Then, he broke that taboo. He has not yet formulated a national policy on Islam which confronts Islamism as the third totalitarian ideology entering flexible coalitions. Will this become unavoidable now? The conclusion presents the challenges confronting the USA in the light of the six historical peculiarities of Islamic practice.