Philip Gordon has provided an admirably clear statement of what in essence is the Democratic critique of George Bush’s War on Terror. Rather than waging an almost exclusively military campaign against Islamic extremism, America, argues Gordon, needs a multifaceted approach to win hearts and minds. In the process, he articulates the rationale for working more closely with allies, providing economic assistance to the region, and energetically working toward a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict among other sensible policies.

In a startling comparison of military and non-military efforts, Gordon writes that American spending on the Iraq war averaged well over $2 billion dollars per week; for much less, he writes, the United States could have funded “the entire budget of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (around $100 million), the entire public diplomacy budget for the Muslim world ($150 million), an expansion of the Peace Corps by some 10,000 volunteers (around $400 million), the opening of a new American cultural center in every Arab capital ($400 million), and scholarships to...
American universities for 10,000 students from the Middle East ($400 million)." (p. 86).

Gordon suggests that we look back at the West’s ultimate victory in the Cold War to find lessons for combating Islamic extremists today. Using analogies from the past to guide policy can be tricky, and there is much about the Cold War that does not seem particularly relevant for our current predicament. After all, the Soviet Union was a major industrial power with enormous economic and military might; Al Qaeda and other extremist groups present a very different type of non-state challenge. And in the Soviet case, a visionary leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, who possessed a radically different understanding of world affairs, transformed the U.S.-Soviet relationship by abandoning the competition with the West. Can any single leadership change among America’s enemies today provide such a transformative effect?

Nevertheless, Gordon’s focus on the lessons of containment does serve a useful purpose. Containment was an alternative to total war on the one hand or appeasement on the other. And it required patience – Americans could not know how long it might be before the USSR “mellowed” from within as the architect of the policy, George Kennan, predicted it would.

Gordon also usefully reminds us that in the struggle against communism, America made some mistakes, particularly the conflation of different types of threats, which the Bush administration has repeated. During the Cold War, we were slow to recognize the Sino-Soviet split and failed to understand the nationalist aspirations of leaders assumed to be marching in lockstep with Moscow, just as the United States now lumps together a variety of extremist groups and Arab states, seeing them as a monolithic group sharing the same goals.

Gordon views Iran as ripe for a mix of containment and engagement. Although elsewhere in the book he criticizes détente for its resigned acceptance to an indefinite Cold War, his policy prescriptions for Iran sound a lot like the Nixon-Kissinger approach to the Soviet Union. He argues against what others have called a “grand bargain” for Iran, instead offering a “gradual bargain,” which includes sanctions to weaken the regime but also inducements for Iran to abandon its nuclear program as well as support for terrorist groups.

Détente, however, was difficult to carry out. It was hard to ensure popular support for engagement with a country that continued to work to undermine American interests, but that is the nature of a “gradual” bargain – the behavior one is trying to change isn’t transformed overnight. And the linkage policy that Nixon and Kissinger pursued required extraordinary control over multiple agencies of the executive branch as well as Congress, which in many instances was not achieved. The Jackson-Vanik amendment tying trade to human rights, for example, was a policy that infuriated Kissinger but which he was helpless to prevent.

The end of the Cold War and the Soviet collapse lead Gordon to an optimistic conclusion regarding the war on terror. The ideology of the Soviet Union finally proved bankrupt, and so, says Gordon, will that of Al Qaeda. It offers little to Muslim populations hoping for a
more prosperous future, as public opinion polls throughout the region demonstrate. What frustrates Gordon about the Bush administration are policies – on Iran, Palestine-Israel, Afghanistan, and Iraq as well as with respect to torture and civil liberties – that he believes drive Muslim youth toward further extremism rather than toward the West.

The United States did not know in 1947 that it would take four decades applying containment before the Soviet Union abandoned its anti-Western ideology. Gordon is counseling patience in combating Islamic extremism, but the nature of the struggle may make that more challenging. Even the Cuban Missile Crisis, as dangerous as it was, did not lead to American civilian deaths, and mutual assured destruction while terrifying did not produce mass casualties. If there is another attack on American soil similar to or even worse in magnitude than a 9/11, a patient strategy that accepts risks as a fact of life may prove unacceptable to the American public.

Combating the Soviets in places like Angola and Nicaragua was controversial, to say nothing of attempting to stem communism’s advance in Vietnam; after all, even Kennan criticized the way containment was implemented. During the 1970s, the right was angry about détente; the following decade, the left was furious with Reagan’s interventions in Latin America. Gordon looks back at the struggle against communism to consider how to build a nuanced strategy for combating a multifaceted threat while upholding rather than trampling American values, but it wasn’t so easy then, and it won’t be easy now – on Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Al Qaeda. Still, his book offers a very helpful guide for responding to many of America’s most significant foreign policy challenges.