I am grateful to my four distinguished colleagues for their thoughtful and stimulating responses to Winning the Right War. I am delighted that they found many of the arguments convincing and thank them for the provocative and challenging questions about those they did not. All of the reviewers clearly read the book carefully and, I think, fairly represented my thesis in their summaries—except in a few cases I’ll address below I certainly cannot claim to have been misunderstood or misconstrued. My only major disagreements are with Tony Smith, whose review, I think, says as much about the prism through which he sees the current U.S. foreign policy debate as it does about my book, an issue that I will also discuss below.

Let me start, however, by addressing a central issue that more or less all the reviewers brought up, which is the relevance of the Cold War “containment” analogy for our current situation. Mazarr suggests that the threat today is “different from Cold War communism,” Goldgeier and Thompson point out that the Soviet state was a very different actor from al Qaeda, and Smith notes that Cold War containment also involved failures (like Vietnam) and wonders whether its logic “could work as well in the future as in the past.” To all this, I can only emphasize a point that I made in the book: I do not argue that containment is either a perfect analogy (no such thing exists) or a perfect strategy (ditto),
simply that it is a better analogy and strategy than all the others, which is about all that anyone can ask for.

The differences between the “war on terror” and the Cold War are numerous and outlined well by all the respondents. What is important, however—and what makes the analogy useful—is the essential point that neither was/is a traditional war that could/can be won on the battlefield. We could not win the Cold War by invading and occupying the Kremlin any more than we can win the war on terror by force of arms today. Kennan’s great insights in 1947 were that we needed an alternative to both World War III and capitulation to the Communists, and that, contrary to conventional wisdom at the time, the long-term trends were in our favor. Those two basic truths, I think, also apply to our strategic situation today, and—equally importantly—remain underappreciated, including in the White House. I call the Bush administration’s “war on terror” the “wrong war” not only because we’re fighting the wrong way but because we’re thinking about it the wrong way. And for all the obvious differences between Islamist extremism and Communism, the essential similarity—that neither can be defeated on the battlefield but only discredited in the minds of potential adherents—is very much worth keeping in mind.

To the point that the Soviet Union was led by cautious, deterrable leaders while al Qaeda is led by fanatics trying to kill Americans every day I would agree but also offer several responses to put it in perspective. First, while it’s easy now to look back at the failed Communist experiment and argue that it was always a containable, deterrable threat, we certainly did not know that at the time. As Kennan pointed out, the Soviet Union’s leaders were “committed fanatically to the belief that with [the United States] there can be no permanent modus vivendi, that it is desirable and necessary that the internal harmony of our society be disrupted, our traditional way of life be destroyed, the international authority of our state be broken.” Yet Kennan still argued that the right strategy consisted in containing this threat by maintaining a vigorous defense, applying counterpressure, and making efforts to win over the world’s population—and eventually the Soviets themselves—to our side. Postwar Americans had to accept living with risks of subversion, invasion, or even nuclear war, yet still concluded, rightly I think, that containment was the best way to go.

Second, while the risk of actual attack from today’s terrorists is higher than it was from Communists decades ago, the scope and magnitude of the latter threat were far greater. The threat from terrorism today is a serious one, but it simply does not compare with that from a nuclear-armed industrial state whose ideology at one point had supporters and admirers all around the world, from Vietnam to Guatemala, Cuba, Indonesia, and Egypt, let alone in Western Europe and even the United States itself. As I point out in Winning the Right War (p. 81, borrowing from terrorism expert Brian Jenkins and others), the risk to an average American of dying from a terrorist attack is over fifty times less than the risk of being murdered and over one hundred times less than dying in an automobile accident—yet some argue that this degree of risk cannot be “contained” and instead requires a sort of foreign policy revolution. America should not allow a real but limited risk of terrorist attack to provoke them into counterproductive actions any more than they allowed the far more grave risk of Soviet subversion or worse to do so.
Finally, the reason a containment strategy is advisable today despite our inability to deter suicide bombers is that—just like containment during the Cold War—it is simply a better approach than the alternatives. For what, exactly, is the policy recommendation that emerges from the critique that containment cannot deter al Qaeda? That we should preemptively detain all potential terrorists? That we should invade major Middle Eastern countries, arrest their militants, and seek to democratize them by force to dry up the sources of the terrorist threat? That we should seal America’s borders to keep out potential terrorists or their weapons? In the book I propose a number of active measures the United States should undertake to accompany containment—from restoring its tarnished moral authority abroad to resolving diplomatic sources of frustration in Middle East and reducing U.S. dependence on oil. Containment does not have to mean passivity. But it does mean accepting the Hippocratic recommendation to “first, do no harm,” and it certainly means avoiding a counterproductive approach—based on repression or military force—that would only play into the terrorists’ hands.

If it sounds like I’m used to defending my argument from critics on the Right it’s because I am—proponents of “World War III” have, not surprisingly, attacked me for being too passive in the face of the terrorist threat. The originality in Tony Smith’s critique is that he attacks me from the Left, for what he alleges is ambivalence about the Bush administration’s strategy. Whereas other reviewers, I think, have perceptively dissected my argument (whether they entirely agree with it or not), I have to admit some puzzlement at Smith’s conclusion that I’m “uncertain as to whether the [Bush] Doctrine offered a mistaken vision for American foreign policy.” The first 35 pages of the book consist of an argument that Bush has misunderstood the origins of the terrorist threat; overemphasized military force and tough talk; squandered American moral authority; conflated a diverse set of threats; gratuitously alienated key allies; and failed to match his strategy’s ends with its means. I return to similar criticisms throughout the book and sum it all up again at the end. In a separate review, former White House official Peter Wehner called my assessment a “one-sided…ideological, legal brief” that failed to recognize any merit to the Bush case. He apparently failed to detect the alleged ambivalence.

Distancing myself from the Bush administration, of course, was not the point of the exercise, yet it seems to be the criterion by which Smith wants to judge its merit. He apparently believes that the “litmus test” for foreign policy strategy should be based on the degree to which it drives a “stake through the heart” of the Bush doctrine, and that any association with anyone who ever supported that doctrine constitutes a sort of “pact with the Devil” (the title of Smith’s own recent book). That seems to me an unnecessarily Manichean—and certainly counterproductive—way to view U.S. foreign policy. As my book makes clear, I have fundamental differences with the way the Bush administration has conceptualized and conducted the “war on terror.” But I also refuse to accept that these are simple issues, that there is no merit whatever to the case made by those I disagree with, and that political opponents cannot occasionally find common ground. Smith rejects both containment and the Bush Doctrine as guidelines for policy, but if the alternative to them means essentially getting the United States out of world affairs I think that cure would be worse than the disease. Whatever my complaints about the Bush
administration’s overestimation of America’s ability to reshape the world, I also think it is possible to err on the other side—leaving a security vacuum that would hardly make the world a safer place.

The various respondents raised a number of other important issues that deserve more extensive discussion than I can provide here. Mazarr, for example, makes the important point that however great the U.S. role in dealing with the issue of terrorism there are “much bigger socioeconomic causes at work” and therefore limits to what the United States can do. I agree with that and develop that argument in the book—ultimately Muslims, and not outsiders, will decide the fate of their societies. That said, our own policies are all we have to control, and their indirect influence on the “socioeconomic causes” in question (let alone the diplomatic and psychological ones) should not be underestimated. I also take Mazarr’s related point on the narrower issue of energy dependence that the United States cannot act alone, since the global energy market is so interconnected and oil is a fungible product. Again, true, but it’s also true that the United States still consumes almost a quarter of the world’s oil, and that U.S. leadership in this area—in reducing global demand, in setting an example for others, and in developing the technologies that will help everyone move away from oil—would be a critical step forward.

Let me conclude by addressing the question of the target audience for this book, an issue raised by both Mazarr and Thompson. Mazarr notes that it seems targeted at nonexperts, while Thompson more specifically wonders “whether the prime target of this book isn’t Barack Obama’s briefcase.” I will not deny that I deliberately wrote a short, jargon-free book that I hoped would be accessible to the wider public and yes, even presidential candidates during an election year. I hope to have done so in a serious way that places current foreign policy debates in the context of recent U.S. history, carefully explores the merits of the analogy with the Cold War, discusses the psychological, sociological and diplomatic roots of Islamist terrorism, and proposes and defends clear policy alternatives. If my call to re-think the way we are approaching the “war on terror” manages to persuade a major political leader—or frankly even a handful of university students somewhere—it will have served at least some of its purpose.