The most important thing about Phil Gordon’s *Winning the Right War* is that it gets the basic judgments—about the errors of Bush administration foreign policy and the best ways to right those wrongs—exactly right. Gordon’s analysis of the essential flaws of current U.S. approaches to radical Islamism and Islamic terrorism is spot on, and his suggested policy changes make eminent sense. As a book to recommend to an interested nonspecialist to understand why the current approach to the inaptly named “war on terror” isn’t working (and what alternative strategy might work), one could hardly do better.

Note the qualification about the book’s audience: It is obviously not intended for specialists who, apart from the occasional sterling insight and not-before-seen quote, won’t necessarily find themselves educated in new ways by the book. Some (like this reviewer) will turn the pages smiling, impressed with Gordon’s style, judgment, and precise ways of saying exactly what needs to be said about U.S. strategy; others of a different strategic bent will find much to disagree with. But the book is clearly written for a non-expert audience and ought to be judged on that basis; as such, it is an ideal primer on the requirements for a new strategic posture, because it is, to put it simply, right.
The central leitmotif of the book is a parallelism and contrast between the Terror War and the Cold War, and the comparison is not kind to the Bush administration’s approach to the current challenge. Within that larger concept, a number of Gordon’s subsidiary themes are absolutely on target, specifically:

The overemphasis on military tools of statecraft and “tough talk” when things like diplomacy, development, intelligence, and winning the information war are really decisive in such long struggles for the allegiance of masses of people;

A crude unilateralism and belligerence when legitimacy and a certain degree of popularity are essential to building the global coalitions necessary to succeed; and

The risk that the current approach focuses “on a tactic, terrorism, when the real issue is how to address the political, diplomatic, social, and economic factors that lead people to use that tactic” (xiii-xiv).

“Put most simply,” Gordon concludes, “the administration is fighting the ‘war on terror’ like a traditional, hot war—taking the offensive militarily, aiming to destroy a fixed enemy, expanding executive authority, and downplaying the importance of legitimacy—when something more akin to the Cold War—a long, patient, moral struggle against a hostile ideology—is required. Until America’s leaders learn to think differently about the new war, they will continue to lose it.”(xiv)

Reading such passages, one wants to holler in agreement and find a way to broadcast them directly into the subconscious of everyone running for president today. Of course, many of those same candidates seem to believe the direct opposite of all of this, or at a minimum feel unwilling to say it out loud for fear of appearing “weak”—which makes Gordon’s enterprise, bringing this sensible message to a quasi-mainstream audience, all the more important.

The book has other strengths. His analysis of the origins of the terrorist threat, while brief, places attention on just the right psycho-social factors and correctly. His suggestions for the elements of the “right war” to fight—restore our moral authority, improve the practice of homeland defense, create new momentum for social development in the Middle East, promote Israeli-Palestinian peace and so on—are all very good ideas and add up to a strong, pragmatic, sensible strategy that a new administration could do a lot worse than merely to pick up and implement.

There are a few passages that raised questions for me. Gordon, as do many analysis of the war on terror, calls for “A dramatic reduction in America’s dependence on imported oil.”(xvi) But in a world of interconnected webs of oil supply and demand, merely substituting Chinese yuan or Japanese yen for American dollars in the purchase of Saudi or Kuwaiti oil—a process already well underway—is not going to affect the socioeconomic dynamic in the Middle East, or the larger phenomenon of radical Islamism. Nor will it insulate America from dramatic oil price spikes if Middle Eastern oil production is severely affected by some regional disaster. Meanwhile, his specific mechanisms to address the
issue—a gas tax and an oil price floor—have been perennial political losers here at home, and he doesn’t explain how to alter that equation.

Referring to counterproductive U.S. policies in the war on terror, Gordon writes that “it would be hard to think of a greater gift that could have been given to al Qaeda recruiters who prey on Muslim perceptions of bias and mistreatment.”(22) True enough, our error-prone policies of the last six years can’t have helped; but much bigger socioeconomic causes are at work in prompting radicalism—long-term social malaise, governmental decrepitude, the presence and behavior of Israel. I wonder about the relative role of U.S. policies; take them entirely off the board and we would still have radicalism to combat. The emphasis needs to be not so much on eliminating negative U.S. policies but on putting in place positive ones, ones likely to work to alleviate the grievances that already exist—and Gordon suggests many such positive approaches.

The modest length of the book—just 162 pages of text (and modest pages, too; the book is a smallish folio, about five by seven inches, and the pages are not densely packed with text)—demands very brief treatments of very complex issues. Thus in a mere eight of these modest pages, Gordon has to lay out and defend his proposal to set a date-certain for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq; he has to make the case for a new policy of engaging (while containing) Iran in less than ten. These mini-policy essays are exceptionally well done, but inevitably they leave out numerous potential qualifications, complaints, and counter-arguments. I suppose they are probably pitched at just the right length for the intended audience, which isn’t interested in an exhaustive treatment of any one issue. But there were times when I longed for answers to one or two obvious potential problems with the proposed solutions.

Some of my most substantial questions surround the Cold War comparison itself. Gordon puts is straight: In his view, “it is the Cold War—far more than World War II or any other traditional war—that provides the most instructive metaphor for the struggle against Islamic terrorism today.”(41) That means, to him, a struggle based around deterrence and containment rather than military aggression, a struggle waged primarily with nonmilitary instruments, and a struggle that will be won, if it is won, in the minds of the publics—European then, Muslim today—trying to choose between competing value systems. Gordon is also a committed advocate of patience and an opponent of feverish urgency; we don’t need to preempt people, the Cold War taught us—we could live with Communist Chinese and Stalinist bombs then, and we can patiently wait out aggressors today, confident that our value system will prevail. Communism collapsed of its own contradictions, “and there is every reason to believe today that the extremist ideology America faces will also fail and die of its own contradictions.”(49)

Precisely. And even one very strongly in agreement with Gordon’s sentiments must ask: Is the parallel really that exact? Is there something about the threat today that makes it different from Cold War communism? Is there something in religious radicalism that gives it a different flavor than purely political extremism? Was the Soviet Union circa 1950 really an extremist phenomenon at all?
I agree broadly with the parallel, with the need for patience and faith in our values, and in the idea that the radicalism being peddled by the extremists today will die off. On the other hand, communism was a state-bound movement by the Cold War years, something we could deter in conventional ways; it was not trying to implant terrorist agents in our midst, ready to destroy themselves in self-immolating violence. The level of fantasism in the two movements, the sort of otherworldly visionary aspect, seems entirely different.

A strong comparison can be made between some of the utopian-fantasist founders of the Russian revolutionary movement, from the 19th century forward, and the core members of al Qaeda. By the time we get to Stalin and Khrushchev, though, we are dealing with an entirely different sort of guy—more amendable to the patient wait-and-seeism of deterrence and containment. How can we possibly adopt the same approach now, when the furiously plotting radicals of today’s extremist fringes ready themselves to smash modern society from the inside, using everything from pipe bombs to cyberwarfare to (if they could get them) nuclear weapons?

That, anyway, is what Dick Cheney might say to Gordon’s Cold War analogy. And while I think the complaint might be exaggerated, there is probably something to it, and Gordon could perhaps have defended his Cold War comparison with a bit more detail and qualification. No analogy is perfect, and I’m sure he recognizes these potential flaws in the one he places at the center of this fine book; a bit more discussion of its possible pitfalls would have balanced the very persuasive presentation of its strengths.

Finally, when I got to page 154 and saw that he explained that only when we reached victory in the “right” war would “the nation’s priorities” come “back into balance. Preventing terrorism will remain an important goal, but it will no longer have to be the predominant paradigm for U.S. foreign policy. Instead, it will take its place as just one of several concerns for American citizens, alongside health care, the environment, education, and the economy.” Yet—and here’s the surprising part—we are, as Phil Gordon concludes, “a long way from this world.”

But are we? Need we be? Has Phil Gordon, in this judgment, concurred more with the assumptions of today’s misguided policies than he needs to do? Is not the assessment of the feverish urgency of the extremist threat, and its priority among the nation’s other business, the place where we started to go off track? Has the time not arrived to say that—while we will keep our intelligence and special forces capabilities hard on the heels of terrorists, and enhance our homeland security protections every day—it’s time for presidents to stop making every national speech about war, terror, and fear? Couldn’t we make the sort of announcement he describes (ending the paradigm of “war on terror”) today, this very moment, and move forward as a nation?

I think we could. I think, in fact, that much of the argument in Gordon’s fine book would support such a contention. As a result I’m not sure why he seems to think that the terrorist threat looms so large that we have to keep the war concept at the forefront of our national consciousness for a long time yet to come.
These, though, are small quibbles. Phil Gordon has written an exemplary volume about what is wrong with U.S. foreign policy, and how to fix it. The more people who read and are persuaded by his book, the better off the country will be as we head into an election with crucial implications for the future of our role in the world and our success in the struggle to combat violent extremism.