Imagine that George W. Bush had been president during the Korean War. He would have reacted angrily and pridefully to the initial attack. He would have demanded that Douglas MacArthur carry the battle beyond the 38th parallel. He would have been aggressive in every way, linking the local threat to the existential menace of Communism.

And what would have happened after November 1950? Of course, one can’t be sure. But Bush would likely have bombed China, and he might have sent MacArthur across the Yalu. He would probably have exaggerated (both to himself and to the nation) the influence that the Soviets were exercising in the battle. Truman hid the evidence that America fighter jets were engaging with Soviet MIGs; Bush would likely have reveled in it. He might have brought out our nuclear arsenal, arguing that since the enemy started the fight, there was no limit upon our ending it.

Historical counterfactuals taken too far become silly. But there’s an important lesson here. One of the central policies in the Cold War was restraint. Even at the hottest moments---Korea, Vietnam, Berlin---America chose to limit the odds of conflagration.

This is one the central points in Philip Gordon’s strident, clear, and important new book, Winning The Right War: The Path to Security for America and the World. Gordon argues that the Bush administration is fighting the wrong war against the wrong people in the wrong way. We should be engaging in a battle of ideas with Al Qaeda and its potential recruits; not a battle of Kalashnikovs and UAVs against everyone we don’t like in the Middle East. The results, Gordon argues, have been disastrous for this country. George W. Bush has been a uniter, not a divider, in only one way: he’s taken a part of the world long engulfed with tension and rivalry, and begun uniting ancient enemies in their opposition to us.
To Gordon, the proper response to September 11th would have been to pull out and retune the theory of containment that George Kennan articulated in 1947. Obviously, there are vast differences between fighting an imminently nuclear Soviet Union and a shadowy world of men with TNT strapped to their chests---much as there’s a difference between fighting a raging bull and a swarm of insects. But as Gordon shows, there are also very useful things to learn from the old fight.

For starters, we didn’t need to attack the Soviet Union to rid ourselves of our threat. We just had to keep it in its place and wait for it to self-destruct. Kennan’s wrote that communism "bears within it the seeds of its own decay." Gordon argues that: "With time and experience---and if we make the right choices---Muslims will turn against the extremists in their midst." (p. 162)

There are other parallels between the two men’s arguments. Kennan argued relentlessly that communism wasn’t monolithic. Tito wasn’t Stalin, and Stalin wasn’t Mao. Likewise, Gordon argues forcefully that the Bush administration has done a disservice by lumping so many different threats in the Middle East together. Bin Laden isn’t Ahmadinejad, and Ahmadinejad isn’t Nasrallah.

Kennan and Gordon both focus on the need to make America strong at home---morally, economically, socially---to set an example for the rest of the world. "The issue of Soviet-American relations is in essence a test of the overall worth of the United States," Kennan wrote in the X article. "To avoid destruction the United States need only measure up to its own best traditions and prove itself worthy of preservation as a great nation." Gordon argues passionately that the loosening of civil liberties at home, and America’s torture scandals abroad, have been a great gift to the nation’s enemies.

Gordon’s whole argument isn’t reflective of Kennan’s. The so-called war on terror (nomenclature the author finds wholly misleading, but no longer worth arguing about) offers dramatic differences from the Cold War. One of the more interesting is that it’s hard to see how it will end. A peaceful endgame to the Cold War may have seemed highly unlikely, but at least it was conceivable that a friendly government would gain power in Moscow. But what will the end of the GWOT look like? To Gordon, it will be when terrorism is a nuisance, not an obsession. He makes an interesting parallel to crime in New York. No, it will never go away. It’s a heck of a lot better though now than 20 years ago. If we do the same thing with terror, then it’s time to pop the champagne corks.

This smart and clear book has two weaknesses. The first is that it can seem partisan. Gordon worked in the Bill Clinton administration and at times he takes his arguments one step too far---into the realm of Harry Reid more than George Kennan. For example, at one

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point he argues that the Bush administration isn't adequately funding the war in Iraq. But, if one buys the rest of his arguments, this doesn't follow. It’s rarely better to throw two $20 bills, not one, into a fire engulfing your neighborhood.

Second, and relatedly, Winning the Right War can sometimes read like a campaign book. It's short and covers lots of ground; the strength is breadth and brevity, not depth and surprise. By the second-to-last chapter, we're skipping over the course of 10 pages from meta political recommendations for Iran, then for Pakistan, then for Turkey. One wonders whether the prime target of this book isn't Barack Obama's briefcase.

That may be a slightly frustrating feature for readers, but it wouldn't be such a bad thing for the country. Gordon's got a set of smart ideas that he's articulated well, and he grounds them solidly in our history. If the next president follows Gordon's advice, America will take a turn in the right direction---toward the sensible set of policies and values that got us through the Cold War and that could well guide us though the foreign policy troubles of today.