ASU national security expert explains missteps since 9/11 attacks

Peter Bergen discusses new book, ‘All the Presidents' Wars: Twenty-Five Years of America's War on Terror’

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
October 6, 2026

Story highlights

National security expert and Professor of Practice Peter Bergen has released a new book, "All the President’s Wars: Twenty-Five Years of America's War on Terror."

Bergen, a producer at CNN who interviewed Osama bin Laden in 1997, spoke at a recent Future Security Initiative event about 9/11 and the aftermath.

Bergen says one outcome of 9/11 has been the lack of a successful, organized terrorist attack against the U.S. in the 25 years since.

The war against terror immediately after the 9/11 attacks had clear goals that were quickly accomplished, but has been followed by many missteps in the 25 years since, according to an Arizona State University national security expert.

Peter Bergen, a professor of practice at ASU, recently released the book, “All the President’s Wars: Twenty-Five Years of America's War on Terror.”

Bergen spoke about his book at ASU's Tempe campus at an event held by the Future Security Initiative, of which he is co-director. He's also faculty director of the ASU Center for Intelligence and National Security, vice president for global studies and fellows at the New America think tank and a national security analyst for CNN.

"I've never had any access to classified information but what is available publicly is often very helpful," said Bergen, a producer at CNN who had interviewed Osama bin Laden, founder of al Qaeda and orchestrator of 9/11, in 1997 in Afghanistan.

He recalled the day of the attacks, when he was halfway to the CNN studios as the second tower fell.

"Years later, I went back and looked at what point I got on CNN to say that I thought it was bin Laden. It turned out to be 1 p.m. And I said the following: 'The universe of people that might want to do this may be large, but the people with capability is a different question. And the people with capability probably wouldn't want to do this. The Iranians or the Iraqis have no love for America, but they're also not on a suicide mission.' I said the only group that had the capability and intent was bin Laden and al Qaeda.

"And that, of course, turned out to be true."

Bergen said that there were many indications that an attack was imminent.

"The CIA did a very good job of strategic warning to the Bush administration throughout the spring and summer of 2001," he said.

"But (the administration) couldn't get their head around the idea that a quote unquote 'non-state actor' like bin Laden or al Qaeda would really be a problem."

Bergen said that while the invasion of Afghanistan to fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda was well managed, the subsequent 2003 invasion of Iraq was not.

"When the commander in chief of the United States goes to war, you hope to have six or seven things happen: One, an imminent threat. On 9/11, that was not an issue. Two, congressional authorization. On 9/11, Barbara Lee of California was the only person to vote against authorization for the use of military force because she saw into the future and she saw that it was potentially indefinite."

The U.S. also had the support of NATO allies and the United Nations.

"You would want public buy-in — 90% of Americans thought it was a good idea," he said.

"And you would also want some kind of basic plan about how the war is going to unfold. When George W. Bush went to war, he had that checklist."

By December 2001, the Taliban had surrendered.

External coverage for Bergen's book

New York Times: Why the war on terror is still haunting us

NPR: 'All The Presidents' Wars' examines America's war on terror from Bush to Trump

“But the Bush administration didn't really have a sufficient plan for what came next. What could've come next was a peace deal with the Taliban.

“We bracketed the Taliban and al Qaeda together and treated them the same way, which turned out to be a mistake.”

He said of the 2003 invasion of Iraq: “What was that war about? What was the goal in mind, and how?

“And in fact, as far as I can tell, there was never a cabinet meeting to discuss whether invading Iraq was a good idea. It was just something that everybody agreed was going to happen because the president had decided.”

U.S. troops finally withdrew from Iraq last week.

He also thinks the current war with Iran is a mistake.

“We didn't have an imminent threat with Iran. We didn't have congressional authorization. This was the least popular war at the beginning of the war … and those numbers have certainly gone down,” Bergen said. “We didn't have a U.N. resolution in favor. We didn't have NATO allies. And we had absolutely no plan and really no strategy.

“So the Iran war kind of ticks every box you don't want to tick.”

Bergen says that one outcome of 9/11, however, has been the lack of a successful, organized terrorist attack against the U.S. in the 25 years since. He cited several reasons for that, including the creation of the Transportation Safety Authority and the Department of Homeland Security.

“TSA may be annoying, but it's going to prevent somebody bringing a weapon or explosives on a plane. DHS is the largest government bureaucracy outside the Pentagon,” he said.

“We had about 30 joint terrorism task forces around the country on 9/11 led by the FBI. Now there are more than 100. The intelligence budget quintupled.

“Finally, you have public knowledge, which is a huge force multiplier. So now, if you go into an airport and you see unattended luggage, you're going to say something.”

This story originally appeared on ASU News.

Main image



Peter Bergen, a national security expert and professor of practice at ASU, spoke at a recent Future Security Initiative event about 9/11 and the aftermath. His new book is “All the Presidents' Wars: Twenty-Five Years of America's War on Terror.” Photo by Joseph Torres Albores/ASU

Text image(s)



Daniel Rothenberg (left) and Peter Bergen, co-directors of ASU's Future Security Initiative, talk about Bergen's new book that examines America's war on terror during an event on the Tempe campus on Oct. 1.