

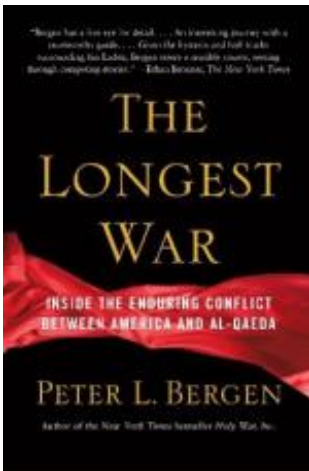
# Book review: Understanding the War on Terror, from bin Laden to Bush and back again

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/13/book-review-the-longest-war/?pfstyle=w p>

March 21, 2011

***Sasha Jespersen reviews the bestselling book on the West's relationship with Al-Qaeda, finding a poignant and detailed account of the War on Terror.***

**The Longest War: Inside the enduring conflict between America and Al-Qaeda.** By Peter L. Bergen. Simon & Schuster. February 2011.



As CNN's national security analyst, [Peter Bergen](#) produced the [first television interview of Osama bin Laden](#) in 1997, in which the Al-Qaeda founder declared war against the United States. With two prior books on Al-Qaeda, it is not surprising that Bergen's latest book gives the first account of the 'War on Terror' from both sides. Leaving no stone unturned, *The Longest War* provides a comprehensive analysis of the continuing war between Al-Qaeda and the United States. The book has topped bestseller lists in several countries so far, and for the UK especially the topic is definitely worth re-visiting, after David Cameron touched on the growing threat from Al-Qaeda in a [recent speech in Kuwait](#).

The first section, 'Hubris', traces the actions and mistakes of both Al-Qaeda and the American government. In a well-documented account including interviews with many key players in and around Al-Qaeda, Bergen traces the rise of Osama bin Laden from the shy son of a rich businessman to leader of the world's most dangerous terrorist organisation. Bergen details the inner workings of Al-Qaeda, from the training camps and the encyclopaedia of jihad, to the by-laws and management structure. The result is a detailed analysis of the Al-Qaeda organisation and the reasons behind it committing 9/11.

Bergen describes how the attacks had serious repercussions for Al-Qaeda, such as losing their base in Afghanistan and the support of many Middle Eastern governments. Although he describes the 9/11 attacks as a fatal error for Al-Qaeda, Bergen also argues that they were a tactical success, striking "*in the heart of the enemy, magnified through their global broadcast*".

The book also traces the US government response to the 9/11 attacks. Bergen details what happened in the weeks following the attacks: namely the battles between FBI agents, CIA operatives and members of President Bush's security team. Bergen explains how Bush's security team, the most experienced in history, were mired in Cold War thinking and were unable to adequately predict or respond to terror threats, which in many ways made things worse.

In talking up the threat of Al-Qaeda, Bergen notes that "*President Bush raised Al-Qaeda to the status of strategic, existential threat that the group craved, rather than the serious enough problem that it in fact presented*". Further, Bergen notes that Bush's invasion of Iraq confirmed much of the propaganda Al-Qaeda had been propagating about the US and the UK, which reinvigorating the movement.

The second section, 'Nemesis', details the rise of the American government after learning from past mistakes, and the fall of Al-Qaeda as a result of diminished support across the Muslim world. However, he notes that while the US may currently be on top, errors continue. Bergen cites the 2005 [closure of the unit to locate Osama bin Laden](#) as a strategic error. He also notes that the arrogance of US politicians and journalists in proclaiming "*we won*" several times during the long war has been damaging.

Bergen further examines the interconnectedness of the US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. The author's investigation of the US response in both countries and the "out of depth-ness" experienced during the Iraq insurgency goes a long way to explain the attacks on civilians [revealed by Wikileaks](#).

However, the attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq are often treated by Bergen as inter-military, neglecting the civilian casualties. "*That night American bombs began falling on Taliban targets in Afghanistan, the beginning of a campaign that would destroy Mullah Omar's incompetent and brutal regime*". The US bombing campaign resulted in numerous civilian casualties that are not acknowledged in Bergen's work.

On a positive note, the author does not fall into the common trap of presenting Afghanistan as a devastated warzone. During his narrative, he pauses to acknowledge the beauty of the country, offering a hope that it may return to its [1970s status as a tourist destination](#).

Perhaps optimistically, Bergen appears to conclude on the side of the US. Notably though, he does leave the ending of this long war open. "*The West has snatched defeat from the jaws of victory a number of times already in this long war, and the jihadist militias led by Bin Laden have proven surprisingly resilient despite the wide range of forces arrayed against them*". Ending with "*the longest war continues*", Bergen indicates that if this long war has an end, we are not there yet.

**Sasha Jesperson** is a PhD student in the Department of Government at LSE.