

Naval War College Review

Volume 64
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 14

2011

Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al Qaeda

Andrew L. Stigler

John Mueller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Stigler, Andrew L. and Mueller, John (2011) "Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al Qaeda," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 64 : No. 4 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol64/iss4/14>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

still in progress. Considering that Algerian intelligence has been exceptionally successful at fighting terrorists, employing clandestine methods that are brutal and nefarious even by regional standards, the absence of any analysis of Algeria cannot be explained.

In the end, *Schattenarmee* is really a collection of spy stories, many of them of questionable provenance, and lacks much overarching analysis. The stories are entertaining and, based on this reviewer's experiences, essentially true; however, they are not a serious treatment of an important subject. Instead, Dietl has added to the unfortunate genre of terrorism books, marred by unattributed revelations, inadequate analysis, and overheated rhetoric. The major role played by Middle Eastern intelligence agencies in security matters and nearly all regional politics is poorly understood in the West and demands detailed analysis. This is not the book to fill that need.

JOHN R. SCHINDLER
Naval War College



Mueller, John. *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al Qaeda*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011. 319pp. \$27.95

John Mueller has written an extensive body of work on national security issues, work that runs counter to the conventional wisdom. *Atomic Obsession*, a broad examination of the limited role nuclear weapons have played in history, examines the prospects for a terrorist's acquisition and use of a nuclear device. Mueller argues that the expense of these nuclear arsenals (perhaps as high as ten trillion dollars over the course of the

entire Cold War, by one estimate) was not worth it. He contends that the memory of World War II, great-power "contentment," and fear of conventional escalation were enough to prevent the Cold War from going hot. He cites historian Adam Ulam as stating that Stalin "had great respect for the United States' vast economic and hence military potential, quite apart from the bomb."

On the specter of proliferation, Mueller points out that decades of predictions of an imminent cascade of new members in the nuclear club have not been borne out, that warnings by Herman Kahn that Japan would "unequivocally" have an arsenal by 1980 (and similar predictions concerning a unified Germany) have not come to pass. Mueller documents what he says is a sixty-year history of nuclear alarmism, arguing that this is the light in which we should view current concern about proliferation.

The most engaging aspect of this important book is its section on nuclear terrorism. Mueller, to my mind, demolishes the casually constructed conventional fears on the subject. Even rogue regimes are highly unlikely to transfer one of these expensive (and laboriously acquired) weapons even to a trusted independent group, because of the potential for extreme danger to the state. Al-Qa'ida, the "chief demon group" in this regard, is trusted by no one; its "explicit enemies group includes not only Christians and Jews, but all Middle Eastern regimes."

Mueller documents how remarkably difficult nuclear weapons are to steal and use. Not even all weapons designers are familiar with modern security safeguards, such as conventional explosives within a nuclear weapon that render the

weapon useless if precise operating procedures are not followed. Regarding concern over terrorists building their own bombs, it is very hard to steal fissile material, and the work of constructing a bomb is “difficult, dangerous, and extremely exacting.” A great deal of complex experimentation, experimentation beyond the capabilities of substate groups, would be required.

Mueller points to a raft of alarming but mistaken predictions about the likelihood of a terrorist group using a nuclear weapon. For example, John Negroponte, as UN ambassador (2001–2004), suggested that there was a “high probability” that al-Qa’ida would attempt to use a nuclear weapon on the United States within two years—an ominous warning offered in 2003.

Those concerned by the threat of nuclear terrorism against the United States are likely to find *Atomic Obsession* a well argued, engagingly written, thought-provoking, and ultimately reassuring work.

ANDREW L. STIGLER
Naval War College



West, Bing. *The Wrong War: Grit, Strategy, and the Way Out of Afghanistan*. New York: Random House, 2011. 336pp. \$28

“We have fought the wrong war with the wrong strategy”—so ends Bing West’s *The Wrong War*. West, a former assistant secretary of defense and Marine officer with combat experience in Vietnam, is an award-winning author whose books have appeared on the *New York Times* best-seller list and the Commandant of the Marine Corps’s reading list. His latest work is an engrossing

compilation of tactical vignettes, cataloging changes to the strategic and operational-level approaches of two administrations and six theater-level commanders, over the ten-year history of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM. West’s concluding view on the key to exiting Afghanistan, though perhaps an oversimplification of the challenge, is nonetheless a valid consideration for a potentially long-term military commitment in Afghanistan.

The strength of West’s work is in his vivid descriptions of operations undertaken by coalition and special operations forces (SOF) in Kunar and Helmand Provinces. The author’s credibility and ability to connect with war fighters provide him intimate access to small-unit leaders, resulting in narratives of tactical-level successes that ultimately evolved into strategic-level failures. West also describes the complexities of the regional, tribal, and national-level political influences in Afghanistan, the latter best illustrated by operations in Nuristan Province forced upon the coalition by President Hamid Karzai. There are also numerous examples of what West describes as the “culture of entitlement,” whereby Afghan leaders gain the benefits of coalition-provided security and development projects while seemingly providing—at best—only neutrality in return. West’s portrayals of the war fighters’ courage and heartbreak are well supported by a number of revealing photographs. His method of numbering the photos for specific reference in the text is particularly effective. Aside from some minor editorial errors, this work is remarkably detailed yet still easy to follow, despite the change over time in local leadership, unit rotation, and the periodic