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The War against the Terror Masters

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BOOK REVIEWS

A VERY OLD KIND OF WAR

Ledeen, Michael A. *The War against the Terror Masters*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002. 262pp. \$24.95

Some twenty years ago, en route to a Gulf deployment, this reviewer and other watchstanders received various briefings on how to defend against Harpoons and other U.S. weapons sold to the newly hostile Iranians. This occasioned more than a little angry puzzlement at how we found ourselves in such a situation, but we had no uncertainty about who the foe was.

Today, the United States once again faces conflict in the wider Mideast region, including the Gulf. Again we have foes that use our own tools against us (e.g., airliners as cruise missiles). However, unlike then, today we arguably face a fundamental confusion about who the enemy is and what this war is about. This makes it extraordinarily difficult to know what to plan and execute against or to know the overall campaign context for individual combat operations. Ultimately, such confusion is a formula for failure in this war.

In *The War against the Terror Masters*, Mike Ledeen, noted political analyst, Middle East scholar, and frequent contributor to the *Wall Street Journal* and other media outlets, presents a compelling picture of what the threat actually is, how it developed, and how the United

States can and must defeat it. He avers that this war is not a “global war on terrorism” at all but is specifically about Islamic, not generic, terrorism—motivated and underwritten by militant Islamic fundamentalism and abetted by many regional regimes. However, many in the West are most reluctant to frame the conflict this way, for fear of being accused of “engaging in a war against Islam.” Ledeen’s account thus is quite “politically incorrect,” but as one European leader recently (and encouragingly) noted, “to solve a problem, you must start by giving it a proper name.”

President Bush, in his earliest “post-9/11” speeches to the nation, emphasized that the United States must wage war against the terrorists and *the countries that support or harbor them*, recognizing immediately that major terrorist organizations would be crippled absent state support. However, in the ensuing year this crucial distinction was largely honored in the breach. With the notable exception of Afghanistan, the emphasis has almost exclusively been on fighting terrorists, not their state facilitators. Much of the senior leadership of the Department of State, the CIA, and the U.S. military, as well as most European

elites, consider terrorists primarily as criminals and therefore urge a legal paradigm, or crime-fighting approach, perhaps with selective military assistance, rather than actual warfighting. The consequence arguably has been a dangerously lethargic campaign of which the ultimate objectives remain vague and uncertain.

The conventional wisdom is that the United States is engaged in a totally new kind of war against clandestine organizations rather than nation-states.

Ledeen argues compellingly that this is at best partially true. Rather, “our prime enemies are the terror masters—the rulers of the countries that sponsor terrorism, and the leaders and soldiers of the terrorist organizations themselves.” Moreover, “the main part of the war—the campaign against the terror masters who rule countries hostile to us—is a very old kind of war . . . a revolutionary war, right out of the eighteenth century, the very kind of war that gave us our national identity.”

Ledeen starts by asking “why it happened,” and recounts how the (Islamic) terror network developed, from the start of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to today’s al-Qa’ida, including “an analysis of the importance of Islamic fundamentalism within the terror network, as well as the crucial roles of several Middle Eastern regimes.” He argues that the al-Qa’ida and other Islamic terrorist groups have a fanatical desire to destroy the West, based on “a deep-seated Muslim rage and buttressed by a powerful Muslim doctrine. Without the rage and the doctrine—the ideology of the terror masters—there might be Islamic terrorists (there have been for centuries) but there would not be the global Islamic

terrorist network, resting on an Islamic fundamentalist mass movement.”

Ledeen then poses the equally important question, “Why weren’t we properly prepared?” He notes the woeful record of U.S. policy making and intelligence vis-à-vis terrorism and the Middle East since the late 1970s, when American policy makers failed to understand the epochal nature of Ayatollah Khomeini’s triumph in Iran. The 1980s and 1990s saw a long, compounding litany of disasters and missed opportunities. Some were due to bureaucratic dysfunctionality and poor communications among various organizations, while others were results of deliberate, ideologically based castration of agencies like the FBI and CIA throughout much of the 1990s, when *welfremd* policy decisions left the “CIA as a cross between the Post Office and the Department of Agriculture,” in the words of one senior CIA official. However, many mistakes stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of “human nature and the true nature of human history”—in essence, for a variety of reasons, U.S. policy makers consistently fooled themselves about the reality of the threat. Progress is being made to correct some of the egregious flaws, but again, the pace is slow.

Lastly, Ledeen asks “How will we win?” He notes that if the key terror masters are in fact the rulers of their countries, the United States must defeat those regimes in some meaningful sense if it is to prevail. Noting these regimes’ fragility, he suggests bringing them down will help the United States “show the Muslims that they have been led astray by the terror masters, that they should look within themselves for the source of

their centuries-long failure, and that the best hope for them lies in cooperation with the civilized world and in greater freedom for all their people.” This can be characterized as a “revolutionary war against the tyrants,” one “entirely in keeping with our own national tradition of fighting tyranny.”

The War against the Terror Masters is a book that U.S. military leaders should read as a matter of urgency in order to understand the deadly threat that confronts the United States and its armed forces. The confusion about whether the United States is fighting terrorists or a much more formidable phenomenon, militant Islamic fundamentalism, is exacting a heavy toll. Though the cost has been paid largely in terms of international political support through late 2002, arguably America has been very lucky that it has not been reckoned in lives and destruction from another large-scale atrocity. It is little wonder that Mike Ledeen for months has ended his newspaper columns with “Faster please,” and more recently, “Faster please. What are you waiting for? Another September 11th?”

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Hoffman, Frank G. *Homeland Security: A Competitive Strategies Approach*. Washington, D.C.: Center for Defense Information, 2002. 67pp. (no price given)

O’Hanlon, Michael E., et al. *Protecting the American Homeland: A Preliminary Analysis*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2002. 188pp. \$17.95

Since the events of 11 September 2001, a multitude of homeland defensive plans have been discussed at every level of

government and the military, centering on the restructuring of existing organizations or increased financing. Each plan focuses on a single phase or group believed to be essential to the safety of our nation. These two books for review take different approaches. *Homeland Security: A Competitive Strategies Approach*, by Frank G. Hoffman, stays out of the tactical and operational level of the “war” and focuses on the strategic level and the planning cycle. *Protecting the American Homeland: A Preliminary Analysis*, by Michael E. O’Hanlon, Peter R. Orszag, Ivo H. Daalder, I. M. Destler, David L. Gunter, Robert E. Litan, and James B. Steinberg, analyzes the problems of national security, determines the progress of current programs, and designs an agenda for future endeavors.

Homeland Security offers a process to enhance U.S. capabilities through a simple “course of action” analysis based on comparisons of known and perceived threats with strategies used by policy makers in recent history. The authors envision three possible categories of attacks against the United States. The first is a missile attack, from intercontinental ballistic missiles or cruise missiles; the second is covert attack or catastrophic terrorism, involving an array of weapons of mass destruction smuggled into the United States; finally, they consider a cyber attack designed to destroy the U.S. information infrastructure. Each method is considered in terms of known and projected capabilities of national and transnational players, and of the four classic strategies of nonproliferation, deterrence, counterproliferation, and preemption. Each “style” has been filtered through these four perspectives to discern strengths and weaknesses.