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Review Essay

The War on Terrorism: The Big Picture

P. W. SINGER

“Today, we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror. Are we capturing, killing, or deterring and dissuading more terrorists every day than the *madrassas* and the radical clerics are recruiting, training, and deploying against us?

“Does the US need to fashion a broad, integrated plan to stop the next generation of terrorists? The US is putting relatively little effort into a long-range plan, but we are putting a great deal of effort into trying to stop terrorists. The cost-benefit ratio is against us! Our cost is billions against the terrorists’ costs of millions. . . . Is our current situation such that ‘the harder we work, the behinder we get?’”¹

— Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld

Such are the big-picture questions for the War on Terror, the kind that should have shaped Pentagon strategy from the start. Unfortunately, they apparently weren’t asked by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld until 16 October 2003, in a private memo that he issued to his top staff. While the media focused on his admission of a “long, hard slog” in Iraq, contrary to the rosy predictions made earlier, the true surprise was that Secretary Rumsfeld questioned even whether we are “winning or losing the Global War on Terror.” He described how his office had yet to enact a “bold,” measurable, or even systematic plan to win the War on Terror, despite being two years and two ground wars into the fight. In short, what Rumsfeld’s memo admitted was a shocking absence of strategic thinking.

One hopes that the “12-step” programs are right, and that admitting one’s errors is the first step to solving them.

Since the 9/11 attacks, the United States has expended an immense amount of blood and treasure in the pursuit of security for its citizens and punishment upon those who would do them harm. Yet while the US military has successfully overturned vile regimes in both Afghanistan and Iraq, Secretary Rumsfeld’s internal memo disclosed his frank assessment that we appear little closer to resolving the actual challenge that drives us, eradicating the group that carried out the 9/11 attacks and preventing any repeats. While the United States and its allies have seized a portion of al Qaeda lieutenants and assets, the organization remains vibrant, its senior

leadership largely intact, its popularity greater than ever, its ability to recruit unbroken, and its ideology and funds spreading across a global network present in places ranging from Algeria and Belgium to Indonesia and Iraq. Of greatest concern, its potential to strike at American citizens and interests both at home and abroad continues. After the Madrid bombings, some worry that its capabilities may even be growing.²

At a broader level, the United States and the wider Islamic world stand at a point of historic and dangerous crisis.³ Perhaps most illustrative of the problem is that what America describes as the “war on terrorism” has now become broadly interpreted as a “war on Islam” by much of the world’s Muslim community. Relations between the world’s dominant state power and the world’s community of over 1.4 billion Muslim believers stand at question, with potential terrible consequences. More than some lost popularity contest, the deepening divide between the United States and the world’s Muslim states and communities is a critical impediment to success on a breadth of vital issues, ranging from running down terrorist groups, their leaders, and supporters, to the expansion of human development and freedom, whose absence steers the next generation of recruits to radicalism.

In sum, our concern is not just with the Iraqi militants or al Qaeda terrorism of today, but also a long-term issue of grand strategy. The United States may well stand on the brink of an emerging fault line, or “Clash of Civilizations” as Samuel Huntington warned, that could shape global politics for decades to come.⁴ Many strategic thinkers liken the situation to a long-term conflict, akin to the Cold War, much of it taking part in the realm of ideas, but still with a decided security threat.⁵ If this is the case, then from the Rumsfeld memo it appears that our leadership is circa 1946 in its strategic thinking, still struggling to master the most basic of questions, who and what we face and in what manner to respond over the long term.

Five recent books wrestle with different aspects of these important dilemmas. They nicely illustrate the varied viewpoints and perspectives that cover the challenges of terrorism and relations between the United States and the Islamic world. The importance of such analytic debates should not be understated. The current debate over what is the appropriate grand strategy or paradigm for the war on terrorism could be just as critical as the arguments during and immediately after World War II over communism and the Soviet threat, which shaped the next 40 years of US grand strategy in the Cold War. Sharp diagnoses like George Kennan’s “Mr X.” article will lead to robust strategies and sound programs, such as the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan.⁶ In turn, weak analysis and political posturing will generate miscalculations and failures, in the same way that McCarthyism and the misdiagnosis of the “Red Menace” rolled the Soviet Union, Red China, and third world nationalism into one monolithic and inseparable threat (unraveled only after Vietnam, with Nixon’s trip to China).

Princeton University Historian Bernard Lewis has been among the most influential thinkers in shaping the Bush Administration’s post-9/11 policies so far, having advised both the Pentagon and Vice President Cheney on how to think about the Islamic world. Lewis’s book *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* is a quick, post-9/11 follow-up to his acclaimed survey, *What Went Wrong?* While his new book breaks little new ground in either analysis or research, it does provide an easy-to-read general introduction to Lewis’s line of argument.

Lewis finds the historical roots of the current crisis to lie in a uniquely Muslim rage, sketching the hostility from the advent of the religion to its global spread over the last 13 centuries. In the current incarnation of this rage, Lewis argues, America serves as the Islamic world's "archenemy," replacing Europe as the incarnation of Western greed and imperialism. The United States, with its values and policies, represents all that it is wrong in a modern world seen as unfair to Islam—from unequal status in wealth, power, and success, to US support for the rule of tyrants in a region left behind by both development and democratization. Lewis's thesis describes Islam as a doctrine that rejects modernity, in lieu of a more sacred past, and is thus placed in a continual clash with the Judeo-Christian West. It is a simple, succinct, and thus seductive line of argument.

The book has serious flaws, though, and not just because it is really only an extended essay. Lewis's analysis is surprisingly ahistoric for a historian, glossing over entire centuries and deep complexities. In a sweeping survey, he jumps from the Crusades to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as if they were one pre-established continuum, with minimal stops in-between. He arrives at this deterministic viewpoint rather quickly, without establishing the underpinnings. Indeed, he accepts the radicals' claims of being motivated solely by the events and wrongs of past centuries without question. (One is reminded of the 1990s ethnic cleansers in the Balkans, such as Milosevic now in the Hague, who pointed to centuries-past grievances as their justification, when they were clearly motivated by more current and often worldly interests.) In making a fairly monolithic analysis of Islam, Lewis's one-size-fits-all approach risks misdiagnosis and clearly misses the wide diversity and great debates within the Islamic world. For example, he often uses "Arab" and "Muslim" interchangeably, overlooking the differing paths that Islam has taken in places like India and Indonesia, where more Muslims than there are in the entire Arab world live under democracy, as well as the differences within the Arab world, where one has both regressive autocracies in the large states and emerging democracies in the small states. Recognizing these intra-Islamic world differences, and taking action to support those in the moderate camp and those who support our values, could be critical to developing a more nuanced and successful policy. Finally, the book suffers from the fatal flaw of much in the field, spending all of its energy in analyzing the problems, but offering little in the way of solutions. Indeed, perhaps it is best for Lewis that the book ends far too abruptly. Lewis's pre-war predictions about the potential of the Iraqi opposition being "capable of taking over and forming [a] government," clearly were wrong.

Like Lewis's book, a new book by the noted liberal thinker Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism*, primarily avoids the present day in lieu of engaging the ideas involved in the war on terrorism. Most of his argument takes place on the theoretical plane, including through the works of writers and philosophers from other contexts like Sartre and Glucksmann.

Berman's ultimate conclusion is that our present enemy is actually an old one in new clothing, arguing that the plagues of the 20th century are actually still with us. This latest spate of terrorism, Berman finds, springs from the same sources as Fascism did in the last century (in contrast to those thinkers such as Francis Fukuyama who heralded the triumph of liberal democracy in the Cold War as the

“end of history”). These same totalitarian ideologies have been planted in fertile ground in the Middle East. Berman argues that, like Fascism, the ideology of al Qaeda and radical Islam is driven by a fear and hate of liberal ideals of tolerance. These groups reject the “hideous schizophrenia” of the West that attempts to divide the state from religion and promotes individual freedom. Also reminiscent of Fascist writings, the groups’ texts emphasize death as a purifying event.

Thus, Berman finds that the war on terrorism must be fought in same way as Fascism was defeated, by beating back the radicals both on the battlefields and on the level of ideas. His ultimate hope is that, unlike the liberals of the 1930s who rationalized the politics of the Nazi Germany, the liberals of today will face up to the threat of terrorism. His equal concern, though, is that in confronting terrorism, we do not destroy the very foundations of our liberal world along the way. This is an important recommendation in a time of declining privacy, expanding police powers, arbitrary detentions, and media spinning.

Berman’s book is thus an interesting read with a valuable point of view. But like Lewis’s, it attempts to cover too much ground with little grounding and offers too few tangible solutions. Berman’s greatest contribution, though, is an engaging and all-too-rare exploration of the works of Sayyid Qutb. Qutb is the Egyptian teacher who became the major philosopher for the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 60s. His writings form the ideological foundation for most Islamist terror groups today. Qutb’s work *Ma’alim fi’l-tareeq* (“Sign-Posts on the Road”) was reputed to be almost as prevalent as the *Quran* in the Afghan training camps. Berman thus offers a useful analysis, with the benefit akin to how military officers and intelligence analysts read Lenin and Mao during the Cold War in an attempt to get into the heads of communists and guerillas.

Richard Chasdi’s *Tapestry of Terror: A Portrait of Middle East Terrorism, 1994-1999* is the prototypical book for all that is right and wrong with academia these days. It provides a wealth of data and novel analysis, but packages it in a form that is almost inaccessible to general readers. Given the incredibly important and engaging topic, Chasdi’s work is too often difficult to read and overly reliant on dry and sometimes distant quantitative analysis. Make no mistake, this is a book solely for experts, but valuable nonetheless.

Building from his prior research work on Middle East terror, Chasdi lays out a program that explores the victims, motivations, and methods of terrorist attacks in the Middle East, and then connects them with the responses. His study finds that economic backwaters, both at the state and provincial level, as well as instances of failed modernization and unequal development, can lead to the formation and proliferation of terrorist groups. An absence of capable political institutions, as well as an inability to deal with minorities in an effective manner, can drive terrorist activity as well. In a sense, what Chasdi’s numbers are telling us is that failed and failing states, as well as the lack of human development, do matter for terrorism. This is a key fault-line in the field, so Chasdi’s evidence is important.

So while such quantitative analysis is often dry, it can reveal many interesting findings that are often ignored by policymakers and intelligence analysts. One example is the often cyclical pattern of terrorist incidents. The research also finds that across a distinct set of case groups, a counterterrorism strategy that is only

heavily repressive tends to backfire. These include the use of high-level assassinations as a sole means to cripple an organization. Instead of hamstringing the organization, the research shows that it usually ends up producing splinter groups that are even more actively violent and harder to defeat. It is a finding that the Israeli government can unfortunately now attest to, and one that US intelligence analysts worry is coming true with the evolution of al Qaeda from a centralized global structure to a more decentralized, regional-based network. Chasdi also makes an interesting foray into the situational factors that lead to spin-off groups to emerge from terrorist groups. In many cases, these organizations are far more dangerous than the original core, but trace their lineage to catalyzing events that might have been foreseen or even avoided.

The final two books under review here are by far the best. The first is Walter Laqueur's *No End To War: Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*. This is both an essential resource to understanding terrorism, as well as a capstone to Laqueur's distinguished career. Laqueur is one of the foremost experts on terrorism, researching and writing on the issue for the last several decades, long before anyone even conceived that terrorism would be an issue of such import. He is thus able to make the historic connections and grounded analysis that others lack.

In a breakdown of the many forms and causes of terrorism, Laqueur looks at groups as varied as the turn of the 20th century Russian revolutionaries, who pioneered terrorism as "propaganda by deed," and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, who pioneered the current wave of suicide bombing and other tactics. In doing so, he goes a long way toward dispelling the prevailing conventional wisdom that terrorism, and its suicide bombing variant, are of a uniquely Muslim or Arab origin. He also clearly establishes both the continuity of terrorism as a phenomenon and the important differences between the anarchists and radicals of the European intelligentsia of the 19th century, the nationalist liberation movements of the mid-20th century, and the more recent radical religious terror groups. Laqueur is also to be commended for the extensive bibliography at the end, providing essentially the entire library of terrorist studies for analysts and researchers starting off in the field.

Laqueur's emphasis is on the multiple causes of terrorism (religious radicalism, political repressions, and even individual and group psychology). This can leave the reader frustrated at times, however. Terrorism, like poverty, war, or even the weather, does indeed have multiple causes, but that does not mean that it cannot be answered or appropriate responses made.

The book's closing points may be the most important. Laqueur finds that modernity, rather than just democracy as often expressed, is the most important force in defeating the present wave of global terrorism. Modernity involves more than improved material conditions; it also entails a transformation in beliefs and philosophies. While Laqueur believes that this shift is ultimately inevitable, the challenge for the modern world is that it is still in a race with religious fanatics to see who can influence the general population more in the interim. Unfortunately, the forces of modernity seem to be falling behind right now, with potentially catastrophic results. Perhaps most bracing is Laqueur's pessimistic conclusion that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) will be used at some point by terrorists in this continued conflict.

The strategic question that Laqueur presents, then, is twofold: The United States and its allies, including those contending within the Islamic world, must find a way to jointly support the forces of modernity both in the material and ideological realms, while diminishing the power of radicals, including preventing them from getting their hands on WMD. This entails both support for comprehensive political, economic, social, legal, and educational reform, as well as a continued focus on pursuing terrorists and those who would arm them. In weighing these needs against the Rumsfeld memo, it appears that we are doing too little of the former and have lost focus on the latter.

Finally, by far the most interesting and useful of the five books reviewed here is Jessica Stern's *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill*. An incredibly fascinating read, it follows Stern's journeys as she seeks to understand what impels organizations and individuals to use religion as a means to organize for violent purposes. The book is filled with remarkable anecdotes that will grab the reader, from her dining with a militant "Identity Christian" in his trailer park home to conversing with young Muslim boys being trained in radical *madrassas* on the Pakistani-Afghan border. As in Laqueur's work, her meetings with radicalized mullahs, ministers, and rabbis, who have all created organizations wedded to the concept that God has instructed them to cleanse society through killing, goes a long way toward dispelling the idea that any one religion is predisposed to violence. Stern is to be congratulated for doing what too few dare to these days, actually confronting the issue she writes about.

The ultimate finding of *Terror in the Name of God* is that in this increasingly networked but still distant world, the most vulnerable in populations are particularly at risk to succumbing to the sway of a charismatic leader or a deeply believed and holistic ideology. These range from the abject poor to those who are dispossessed or disconnected in some way (such as the Muslim middle-class youth, with no job prospects in broken authoritarian states, who make up the al Qaeda middle management). At the core of the religious radicals' doctrine is the creation of an "us vs. them" view of the world. A complication for these groups is that their recruiting must target the excluded and humiliated of society to be effective (as those who are content have no reason to make the sacrifice of joining), but at the same time must establish its concurrent superiority to those who are presently on top. This usually leads to the religious doctrine of avenging, where violence is described as a godly way to purify the world.

Stern's best analysis is in her look at the multiple structures and organizations of radical groups. Like militaries, radical groups also contend with mission creep, as what were originally religiously motivated organizations evolve over time. Activity in the groups becomes a vocation, and both leaders and middle-managers can begin to be motivated by worldly—including economic—rewards, a key point to target. Most highly organized but leader-dependent are the traditional "commander-cadre" groups. However, we also have seen the creation of "networked" groups, which have multiple, lightly connected nodes, working under the same ideology, but not dependent on each other. The latest are "lone wolf" operators, who are inspired by a distant leadership or ideology to carry out their own operations, but not linked in any formal or easily traceable manner. As Timothy McVeigh or John Mohammed show, just because they are individuals does not mean they do not wield a devastating power

to terrorize. Stern finds that al Qaeda's particular talent has been its adeptness at welding each structure into a fairly cohesive threat to the United States, spread across multiple levels and regions. Stern also worries (as does Laqueur) of the strange new alliances that this networking can facilitate. One surprising finding is the startling levels of support for al Qaeda among other radical groups, such as Neo-Nazi and radical "Identity Christian" groups, who celebrated al Qaeda and its 9/11 attacks for the attempt to strike a perceived shared foe. The potential of these links being activated makes the concept of achieving homeland security through racial profiling even more ineffective than it already has been.

Stern's book is notable in offering a number of policy prescriptions. She finds that key aspects of defeating such groups are to take away the power of the leader's recruiting and justificatory tools. This means targeting root causes like the lack of human development, political repression, and simmering conflicts like Israel-Palestine and Kashmir; helping to support failing states and post-conflict zones that serve as havens and recruiting grounds for their foot-soldiers; sowing confusion and dissent within the groups and their supporters (one of the weaker arguments, as the nuances required would appear to be beyond limited US intelligence capabilities); and providing alternatives to the problem of the often well-intended charitable assistance which such groups often warp, both to draw in members and to present a positive face to their supporters. For example, many of the radical *madrassa* schools that Rumsfeld's memo mentioned thrive not because of their terror links, but because they fill an educational need in impoverished areas of Pakistan and other Muslim states. An appropriate response would be to shut down funding going toward these radicalized schools while also creating an active local alternative through the steering of funds toward more moderate ones, as well as bolstering the failing public education system in such areas, which forces poor parents to send their children to these schools in the first place.

In sum, the American military has carried out a dazzling array of actions in the last few years, but the Rumsfeld memo and the five books reviewed here concur that its civilian leadership still has a series of complex and demanding decisions to make in constructing a long-term approach toward defeating terrorism.

The writers agree sensibly that we must locate our policies on the side of change, not the failing status quo. An important realization, though, is that the needed transformation is not solely about short-term tactics or changing regimes through invasion. The realm of ideas is just as important as the material, so we must identify the United States with the positive ideas, supporting prosperity and opposing repression. There is a glaring need for the United States to articulate an overarching strategy toward terrorism that matches ends, means, and discernible measures. Part and parcel of this is not the issuance of more policy statements that are simply collections of tactics, but to establish a grand strategy toward the Islamic world that will shape our often disparate policies. The side-effect of building a cohesive, positive vision is that it will provide an agenda for our allies and friends to side with, as well as a program to contend with the competing visions, such as those emanating from radical Islamist and other illiberal forces described with such worry by the writers.

In turn, the military must also begin to face the long-term challenge ahead of it in protecting American interests and security. But this needed transformation is

not just about precision strikes and gigabytes. Rather, a military structure that has yet to enact the sort of crash course in Arabic and other Muslim cultures and languages for its soldiers and intelligence analysts (as compared to the buildup of Slavic skills across the force in the early Cold War), continues to stretch forces thin and deploy them into roles that they were not prepared for (such as having artillery and armor troops conduct counterterrorism raids in urban zones), and has a public affairs strategy toward the Islamic world that can at best be likened to an ostrich with its head in the sand (reportedly, CENTCOM's Public Affairs shop during the height of the Iraq war did not even have an Arabic speaker on its staff), has not fully adjusted to the changing strategic environment.

History ultimately judges wars not just by their immediate effects, but also by their legacy. World War I is usually judged as a failure not because of the lack of success on the battlefield, but by its failure to leave much positive in its wake. World War II by comparison is viewed as an ultimate success, because it heralded a new liberal world order. History now stands poised to judge us—and Mr. Rumsfeld's memo—by the legacy that we are prepared to leave in Afghanistan, Iraq, and beyond.

NOTES

1. Donald Rumsfeld, memo, 16 October 2003, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/rumsfeld-d20031016sdmemo.htm>.

2. For a further analysis of al Qaeda's health, see the authoritative guide to global military affairs, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, 2003-04.

3. For example, in a survey of Muslim countries, only four percent in Saudi Arabia have a favorable opinion of the United States, six percent in Morocco and Jordan, 13 percent in Egypt, and so on. Similar patterns hold across the rest of the Muslim world, from Indonesia to Pakistan. In turn, a growing percentage of Americans are increasingly suspicious of Muslims and Islamic countries. For example, the number of Americans who fear that Islam encourages violence has doubled in just the last year. Pew Global Attitudes Project, "Views of a Changing World," June 2003; John Zogby, Zogby International, "America as Seen through Arab Eyes: Polling the Arab World after September 11th," March 2003; The Pew Research Center for the People and The Press, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Religion and Politics: Contention and Consensus," 24 July 2003, <http://www.pewtrust.org>.

4. Samuel Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998).

5. Eliot A. Cohen, "World War IV," *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 November 2001; James Woolsey, "At War for Freedom," *The Guardian*, 20 July 2003.

6. Mr. X, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," *Foreign Affairs*, 25 (July 1947).

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