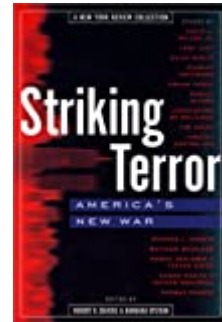




Robert B. Silvers, Barbara Epstein, eds. *Striking Terror: America's New War*. New York: New York Review Books, 2002. vii + 374 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-59017-012-0.



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Published on H-Diplo (May, 2004)

Struggling for Perspective

This collection of essays and commentaries, originally published in the *New York Review of Books* in the months immediately following the attacks of September 11, 2001, presents the reader with an interesting opportunity to examine what is essentially a snapshot of the attempts of contributors to one publication to make sense of the attacks while the memories were brutally fresh. Compiled from the work of a diverse group of authors, the book provides the rare chance to glimpse analysis written by people while they were still directly influenced by the event itself, but without the contamination of the ensuing deluge of material that inevitably flows forth as current events become history, and before their recollections could be clouded by the vagaries of memory. As intriguing a prospect as this is, of course, the passage of more than two years of the war on terror renders some of the pieces contained herein, particularly those suggesting the then-future course of events, subject to rather irrefutable, if somewhat unfair, criticism. Nonetheless, the diversity of the subjects covered and the clearly ideological tone of some of the essays leaves ample room for valid assessment.

In an attempt to impose perspective and understanding at a time when it was most assuredly in short supply, authors address the war from the American, European, and Islamic perspectives, with particular attention in the latter case on Afghanistan, where the active war was then being fought. Given the time from which the included essays are drawn (the roughly four months after September 11, 2001), the heavy focus on Afghanistan is natural, though the rapid succession of events there and elsewhere have made it seem outwardly a little strange, forcing one to occasionally remind oneself of when these essays were written. The collected authors offer an impressively broad cross-section of the intellectual establishment, and include several who have lived in, worked in, and written extensively about Afghanistan and the surrounding countries. Each essay covers a different aspect of the conflict, most of them fairly specific, and are grouped loosely by subject and approach rather than chronologically in an apparent effort to offer a more coherent package to the reader—although given the particular importance of temporal proximity to events in such a book, the initial impact of these pieces would likely have been preserved more authentically by presenting them in

the order in which they originally appeared in print.

As the title of this review suggests, the undercurrent running throughout the book is the constant, grasping search for the means to understand the events then so recently past. As could be expected, some authors are more successful in this than others. Particularly noteworthy is Tim Judah's "War in the Dark," a chronicle of his travels through Afghanistan from October to December of 2001, which comes closest to achieving the "moment in time" quality that highlights the value of works like these, remaining pertinent and insightful long after the event described therein took place. Combining useful background information with reportage and personal anecdotes, Judah creates an engrossing image of wartime Afghanistan that draws the reader into his experience while at the same time providing enough of the big picture to place these snapshots in a larger framework. His tales of fifteen-year-old warlords and massive smuggling operations that rely solely on donkeys for transportation through the mountains sound like something out of Kipling, and perhaps this is intentional, for they certainly serve to provide the reader with a much deeper appreciation of the character of Afghan life than a purely academic analysis ever could. This is the longest essay in the book, stretching almost sixty pages, but it is worthy of the space devoted to it.

Other essays also stand up reasonably well despite the passage of time. Several of the country-specific historical background pieces grouped together with Judah's in the book's second section, "Reports," continue to have relevance and remain useful tools for understanding. Pankaj Mishra's two selections, "The Making of Afghanistan" and "The Afghan Tragedy," construct a fairly detailed analysis of recent Afghan history and the interrelationships between the various Afghani ethnic tribal factions, the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, the Pakistani Intelligence Service (ISI), and the various other power groups that have exercised influence in the country over recent years. The historical information presented remains relevant for a general audience with limited knowledge of Afghan history, certainly the target group for all of the essays in this book. Similarly, Christopher de Bellaigue's "The Perils of Pakistan" lays out the array of internal problems facing Pakistan's president Pervez Musharraf that serve to constrain his cooperation with the United States in the war, offering a good basis for understanding the historical factors that led to, and continue to influence, the current situation in Pakistan. But, as expected, two years have dulled somewhat the impact of these pieces as events have moved beyond them. The

recent exposure of Pakistan's leading nuclear scientist as a major source of proliferation of nuclear technology has made de Bellaigue's discussions of internal Islamist threats as the primary problem facing Musharraf seem a bit dated, while the fall of the Taliban regime renders Mishra's questioning of the success of Allied strategy rather irrelevant.

Also included in "Reports" are two essays by Timothy Garton Ash, "Is There a Good Terrorist?" and "Europe at War," both of which utilize the admirable approach of attempting to formulate a framework by which we may comprehend more clearly that which is difficult to analyze and understand. In the former piece, he offers four categories—biography, goals, methods, and context—by which the structure of various individuals and movements may be broken down into more readily definable elements; the latter essay relies on the identity studies concept of the other, an opposing force that helps an entity to develop an identity by demonstrating what it is not, as a means by which post-Cold War Europe may seek to redefine itself. While both pieces are conceptually interesting, they fall short of actually being useful, largely due to the harsh intrusion of reality into the mix. The author acknowledges this in his first essay, accepting that moral relativism and cultural differences make any workable universal framework (as opposed to one based upon a culture-specific understanding of terrorism designed to be applied externally) extremely broad out of necessity, to the point in this instance of being virtually useless. His second piece also suffers once applied to the real world, and is somewhat self-contradictory, concluding that while Europe needs an other to successfully redefine itself, none of the available choices are acceptable. In attempting (unconvincingly) to discount Islam as Europe's new other, Ash seems unwilling to accept that such opponents cannot always be selected unilaterally based on convenience and political acceptability, but rather frequently develop of their own accord.

Several articles dealing with the more technical aspects of terrorism are included, and provide similarly useful, if generalized, overviews of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and more specifically biological weapons. Richard L. Garwin's "The Many Threats of Terror" attempts to present an accessible and rational evaluation of the threats presented by various types of WMD attacks, including supporting references to appropriate studies, and offers prescriptive measures to minimize these threats. Given that the possibility and repercussions of this sort of attack are things that even now are difficult for ordinary citizens to comprehend, Garwin's

effort to expose this fear-driven issue to logical analysis should be applauded, particularly given the level of concern generated by the anthrax scare at the time of writing. Indeed, that he presented such a clear and reasoned analysis at the time immediately makes one wonder why more articles of this sort have not appeared in the mainstream press in the intervening years. The piece immediately following Garwin's in the "Threats" section, "Bioterror: What Can Be Done?" by Matthew Meselson, unfortunately has not emerged as unscathed by time and the passage of events. After detailing briefly the history of U.S. and Soviet-Russian biological weapons programs, which it does reasonably well, the essay devolves into a rather tired dissertation on the value and limitations of the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions with respect to stateless terrorism, culminating in a call to render the production of such weapons a crime under international law. With the vivid demonstration in the recent Iraq crisis of the inability of achieving any sort of broad consensus between nations on taking decisive action, and the aversion of the United States to recognizing the authority of any sort of international judiciary body (not to mention the utter powerlessness of such a body to independently enforce policy), this sort of argument simply does not carry with it the weight it would have had in the years preceding the September 11 attacks, and particularly during the Clinton presidency, when such ideas were much more in vogue.

Some of the issues addressed in articles included in "Intelligence," the last of four sections in the book, have actually taken on greater meaning with time. "A Failure of Intelligence," by Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, and "The Trouble with the CIA" by Thomas Powers, though focused primarily on the question of how the intelligence community failed to identify the severity and immediacy of the Al-Qaeda threat just before the September 11 attacks, have both taken on increased relevance with the recent inquiries regarding the disparity between the pre-war intelligence estimates of Iraqi WMD capabilities and the failure thus far to locate the stockpiles and production facilities which were believed to be there. Indeed, the Benjamin and Simon essay, which deals with the 1998 Tomahawk missile attacks on a pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan that was believed to be producing precursor agents for the nerve agent VX, and which were launched in response to the African embassy bombings, is far more interesting at this point because it demonstrates clearly the disconnect between the media and the government in establishing the justification for the attack, a pattern which bears alarming similarity to the cur-

rent Bush administration's incremental and basically ineffective attempts to lay out evidence validating the 2003 attack on Iraq. In identifying questions raised by attacks in response to perceived threats by non-state terrorist groups, the difficulty of conveying the reasoning for such attacks through the media without revealing important sources, and the fickle and transient nature of media coverage of such events, the authors (both of whom served on the National Security Council at the time of the attack on the Sudanese target) set up a model which appears to have changed very little in the intervening five years, as much of what they present could very easily be applied to the debate over war in Iraq.

Of similar importance is the remaining essay in the "Intelligence" section, "Manual for a 'Raid'" by Kanan Makiya and Hassan Mneimneh, which offers a particularly interesting dissection of the written instructions left behind by the September 11 hijackers. In their analysis the authors break down the documents (the full translated texts of which are usefully included as an appendix to the essay), delving into the imagery and phrasing chosen by their unknown author and explaining both the intended and actual meaning of the wording, as well as showing the highly selective and non-contextual use of Koranic verses to justify extremist actions. They present a convincing case, demonstrating just how far the radical version of Islam utilized by the terrorists has deviated from the historical tradition. For those not well versed in the particulars of Islamic history, this analysis provides a compelling insight into the motivations of the architects of the attacks and the methods used to motivate terrorists to carry out suicide operations. Only in the final paragraph does the piece stumble slightly, as the authors seem to be somewhat overly optimistic that this twisting of the Islamic tradition into a more radical and absolutist faith is merely an aberration and does not mark a broad shift in the core values of a large segment of Islam, a view that remains open to question.

No collection of essays is likely to be uniformly valuable, and this is no exception. The first section, entitled "Comments," is the weak point of this book, and though, to a limited degree, one must grant a bit more leeway to the authors presented here due to the transient character of any commentary, these essays all seem to be the product of a particular understanding of the very nature of international relations that has been sharply called into question by the policy makers of the U.S. government and elements of the foreign policy intelligentsia, if not by the bulk of the academic community.

Philip C. Wilcox's "The Terror," published only eight days after the attacks and the first such piece to appear in the *New York Review of Books*, is typical. Offering little more than a reiteration of Clinton-era internationalist policy (not surprising, as Wilcox worked for the State Department for four years during the Clinton administration), Wilcox manages to sound hopelessly out of date. He predicts that a military effort in Afghanistan (not yet underway when the piece was written) would fail and precipitate further terrorist attacks, suggests that terrorism should continue to be treated as a criminal issue, encourages America to improve relations with the rest of the world (largely by acquiescing to their demands), and attempts to refute Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" theory, a theory which has proven to be alarmingly accurate in the last decade. In his epilogue, written three months later, Wilcox again suggests that military action is not the answer while in virtually the same breath acknowledging the success of the effort against the Taliban in Afghanistan. He also takes time to lament the continuing failure of the Middle East peace process while suggesting that solving the problem will require "more aggressive and imaginative American leadership and diplomacy" (p. 14). The invasion of Iraq was presumably not what he had in mind.

A far better and more moderate version of this approach is found in Tony Judt's "America and the War," though it arrives at the same outdated conclusions. Judt takes pains to aggressively condemn the far left critics who "have slipped comfortably back into familiar routines: peace vigils, teach-ins, and finger-pointing" (p. 17), while asking pointed questions about the direction of American foreign policy and the perception of the United States around the world. While the issues he raises are legitimate and discussion of them certainly worthwhile, the answers he offers clearly stem from a point of view that regards realist approaches to international relations—the use of force, unilateral decision-making, and the generally power-oriented approach to international affairs that has been the norm since the birth of the organized political entity—as being not only undesirable, but indeed somehow suddenly not even worthy of consideration. The fact that periods in which international cooperation has reigned over pure power politics are few and far between does not appear to have entered into his analysis. This point of view, on the part of the editors, must clearly also account for the appearance here of a reprinting of "Notes on Prejudice" by philosopher Isaiah Berlin, written in 1981. In the process of reading this general indictment of the evils of human history, one

immediately wonders what radical Islamists might derive from this model of moral relativism.

Similarly one-sided assessments may be found in the essays of Stanley Hoffman ("On the War") and Orhan Pamuk ("The Anger of the Damned"). Both of these deal with the question of the supposed root causes of the anti-Americanism that seems so pervasive across much of the Third World, both concluding that this is largely the fault of the United States, not only for failing to help the vast disenfranchised masses rise up from their poverty, but indeed contributing materially to their "humiliation" and "degradation," apparently by being too successful. Neither suggests that there is any doubt about the eventual positive outcome if America will only spread the wealth a little and stop being so pushy and unilateralist, never mind that Al-Qaeda was at war with the United States throughout the multilateralist 1990s. And while Hoffman approaches this from a point of view fairly traditional among the American left, Pamuk, a Turkish novelist, sinks virtually into Marxism to make his point. Both arguments fail by making the assumption that American economic success (and the political power that comes with it) and improvements in the quality of life among the people of the underdeveloped nations of the world are mutually exclusive—that economic power is in effect a zero-sum equation. Decades of free trade and economic growth around the world, the undeniable linkage between the two, and the collapse of Marxist systems into bankruptcy should have put these ideas to rest long ago.

What then are we to make of this collection, now more than two years after the events that spawned the essays it contains? While many of them remain relevant and useful, others seem hopelessly dated. Sadly, the "moment in time" quality that would make a book such as this so valuable is not present in most of the essays, perhaps due to the efforts of many of the authors to impose perspective where it did not yet exist in the public mind. This, combined with the organization chosen by the editors and the pervasive left-wing politics of the commentaries, renders what might have been a timeless piece of history into what is now merely a collection of works being rapidly passed by events, a very clear representation of the transient nature of current-events writing. However, it is likely that with the further passage of time and increased distance from the events covered here, this book will begin to rise up the other side of the depreciation curve and may in due course become a valuable resource in the scholarship of the early days of the war on terror.

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Citation: Andrej Gaspari. Review of Silvers, Robert B.; Epstein, Barbara, eds., *Striking Terror: America's New War*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.

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