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Perhaps the most unappreciated strength of the American national security system—and even of American democracy more broadly—is the caliber of the people who comprise the fourth estate, the press, which Thomas Jefferson stated was more important than government itself. I came to appreciate the value of informed, inquisitive reporters while working at the Center for a New American Security with Eric Schmitt of the Los Angeles Times and Thom Shanker of the New York Times while they were writing the book Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America’s Secret Campaign against Al Qaeda (Henry Holt and Company, 2011). Shanker has now collaborated with Andy Hoehn, a RAND researcher and former deputy assistant secretary of defense, to write Age of Danger, a book well worth readers’ attention.

Shanker and Hoehn’s thesis is clear and almost certainly correct: “Today, with terrorism fading from its two-decade role as Public Enemy No. 1, a host of new challenges, and of a different kind, are rising” (5). The national security establishment—the subject of Shanker’s last book—was initially formed to defend against the Soviet Union and pivoted to focus on counterterrorism, and it has to change again in this age of new dangers.

Hoehn and Shanker begin with a description of what they call the “Warning Machine” (the intelligence community) and the “Action Machine” (the Department of Defense), noting the role both played in winning the Cold War against the Soviet Union and, later, in defeating al-Qaeda. These victories left room for the People’s Republic of China to become America’s now-acknowledged pacing threat—one with an economy inextricably tied to our own, unlike previous enemies. Hoehn and Shanker do not put their feet firmly in the “Panda Hugger” or “Panda Mugger” school. They do, however, underscore the unprecedented challenge presented by a superpower with
an economy equal to ours and describe deterrence against a threatened invasion of Taiwan as “kitten mesh.”

The acute threat, they argue in the book’s best chapter, is a Russia led by former KGB agent Vladimir Putin, whose ambition is clearly to restore as much of the Soviet Union’s glory as he can in his remaining days. Brigadier General Peter Zwack (US Army, retired) told the authors he wished the United States paid more attention to the Russian threat: “Even on a bad day, they are the country that can take us off the planet, and we them, in about twelve hours. Full stop. They are going to look for every edge in this gray zone, to chop us down, weaken us, subvert us, because they know they can’t win or survive on an equal playing field with us” (178).

After Hoehn and Shanker identify the two states they consider America’s most dangerous and most likely threats (though they do not use these words), they turn their attention to emerging threats they label “Germs” (biological and epidemiological), “Digits” (cyber war), “Drones” (artificial intelligence and robotic weapons), and “Storms” (climate change). Even with the puzzling omission of Iran, which is currently wreaking havoc in the Middle East, this list of threats and changes to the ever-evolving character of war is concerning enough to merit an epithet in the title, perhaps one Eric S. Edelman, the former undersecretary of defense for policy, included in his analysis to Hoehn and Shanker: “The reason we get things wrong so much in national security is because it’s really [expletive deleted] hard” (13).

Hoehn and Shanker visited the US Army War College in February 2024 to share their insights and fears with the Resident Class of 2024 (and many others online). They noted that America has adapted to new and emerging threats before. They are confident it can do so again because of the courage, dedication, and intelligence of the people who devote their lives to the defense of this nation and to the creation of an international system that has led to more peace and economic growth over the past 75 years than in any other period in history.

But man, this is tough.

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