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Review Essay

Terrorism

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Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends, Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

Mark Perry, *Talking to Terrorists, Why America Must Engage With Its Enemies* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

Elan Journo, *Winning the Unwinnable War, America's Self-Crippled Response to Islamic Totalitarianism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

For blindingly obvious reasons the past decade witnessed a veritable flood of new books on the topic of terrorism. As is the nature of such things, there are a series of identifiable steps up which the published materials that come in these waves usually ascend. In any case where there is a single catalyzing event that focuses attention (the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the stock market crash of 1929, Pearl Harbor 1941) these phases are clearly reflected in bookstores almost before the smoke has cleared.

In the first weeks or days following an event the first wave arrives. These books are often slapdash affairs, usually written by journalists. Some of these instant authors may have never heard of the topic before the catalyzing event, their primary skill being the ability to write quickly. This phase usually lasts a few months.

The second phase is the one initiated by the publishing industry. In an attempt to provide depth to the market for books on a particular topic, publishers go back through their catalogs of earlier works searching for anything related to the topic. They encourage the author (if he has not come to them first) to write a new introduction, an updated chapter, and a revised conclusion. The quality of these books range from “highly useful” down to “strangely out of touch.” This phase usually starts around six months after an event and may last a year or more.

The third echelon are those new “experts” in the field, many of whom have never been heard to speak a word on the topic until after the event. This author is more likely to be a television personality such as a TV news “expert.” The quality here is usually lacking and infused more with personal opinion than considered analysis. This phase generally does not start for at least a year following the event but may continue indefinitely

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Fourth to appear are the fledgling academics. In many cases they are graduate students or newly minted Ph.D.s who just happen to have been studying the very topic before the catalyst occurred. Unfortunately, quite often their book does not hit the street for at least two years following the event. In this case the work is solid, if sometimes dry, and it usually appears in an academic outlet rather than a commercial press.

Finally, we begin to see, no less than three or four years after the event, books by serious, experienced authors. They may come from a range of backgrounds: academia, think-tanks, the military, and even here and there a diplomat, politician, or senior journalist. Their unifying element is that these books combine a solid grip on the material stemming from research or experience. Happily, once this period starts it never really ends, although such quality books appear with distressing infrequency.

Audrey Kurth Cronin's *How Terrorism Ends* falls squarely into the last category. Cronin's biography alone telegraphs why this is so. The author is currently a professor of strategy at the US National War College as well as a senior associate at the Changing Character of War program at the University of Oxford, in the UK. Cronin has spent more than twenty years studying terrorism and political violence, moving between the Congressional Research Service and various academic positions at Georgetown, the University of Virginia, Columbia, and Maryland.

Cronin's thesis is particularly intriguing, because she manages to execute that most difficult of intellectual feats—turning a topic on its head and analyzing the same old thing in an entirely new way. So rather than approaching terrorism from the perspective of the present and looking forward, Cronin looks to the past and asks, “How and why do terrorist movements end?” Given that the overwhelming majority of terrorist organizations fail to meet their original objectives, this is an eminently sensible question. Cronin identifies six ways that terrorism might end: decapitation, where the leader is killed or captured; negotiation, where the group transitions to new methods and enters the political process; success (rare indeed); failure, usually through implosion or backlash; defeat by force (almost as rare as success); and finally, reorientation toward another method of operation or new objective. Only following this analysis does the author set her sights on the present and al Qaeda.

Echoing one of the main points made by Cronin is Mark Perry's *Talking With Terrorists*. As the title implies, Perry's thesis is that the most effective means of ending conflicts with terrorist organizations is to talk to them. In other words he identifies with and focuses on Cronin's category of negotiation. Perry uses four very loosely structured case studies to present his argument: insurgency in Al Anbar province, Iraq; Iran; Hamas; and Hezbollah. In each case he provides evidence suggesting that the identification of a group as “terrorist” may be too broad and counterproductive. Unfortunately, all the available evidence is not adequately evaluated and Perry seems determined to prove his point, even if that means ignoring the facts.

In the case of US relations with Iran, Perry does a good job of reminding us of our own hypocrisy. Even as the US was loudly and repeatedly stating that we do not negotiate with terrorists, and after identifying Iran as a state-supporter of terrorism in the early 1980s, we had a Marine Lieutenant Colonel in the bowels of the White House dealing with Iran, supplying them with missiles, in an attempt to negotiate for the release of Western hostages. Similarly, during the early part of the war in Iraq, our political leadership continued to characterize all who opposed the Coalition as terrorists and, in some cases, explicitly refused to permit military forces to even talk to the opposition. Indeed, it was almost two years before the more accurate term of “insurgent” was used in reference to those fighting against coalition forces. Eventually, after more than 2,000 American dead, we did begin to talk to them . . . and discovered that the situation could be changed. Allying ourselves with a nascent movement in Al Anbar, we were eventually arming and paying those who had been our former enemies, creating the Sons of Iraq and experiencing our first true “turning point in the war.” Perry tells these stories well, although for what seems dramatic effect, he changes what is generally seen as the starting point of that movement.

Unfortunately, in the case studies of Hamas and Hezbollah, Perry seems inclined to look past evidence that might weaken his argument. He portrays Hamas as an entirely legitimate, democratically elected, political organization. One could make a case for that position, but you cannot do so without also examining (or mentioning) the thousands of rockets Hamas has launched into Israel since they assumed control of the Gaza Strip. It is not intellectually honest to ignore such facts. The author has a similar problem when describing Hezbollah, which he seems to think has the right to “declare war on Israel,” without noting that only nation-states can declare wars. In the case of Hezbollah he makes much of the Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure within Lebanon, without so much as mentioning the initial cause of the conflict: Hezbollah’s shelling of northern Israel and the capture or kidnapping of Israeli soldiers.

In short, while Perry’s book contains a fair amount of thought-provoking material, it falls short of the mark if one is seeking serious scholarship. Perry at least comes to his positions through legitimate research, and his ideas, while overstated, do contain realistic potential.

Winning the Unwinnable War, edited by Ayn Rand Institute scholar Elan Journo, is an edited volume of essays produced by members of that organization. It is one of the most unrealistic collections of ill-informed and biased information that I have read since the first wave of instant-books passed in 2002. The author’s collective thesis is that “Islamists” (which includes all Muslim groups, Sunni and Shia) have been waging war against the United States for thirty years. This, of itself, is not an entirely incorrect statement. But the authors ascribe to every Presidential Administration since the 1970s a guiding philosophy of fundamental cowardice.

One of the core positions the authors assume is that the United States should abandon Just War Theory as a guide to its behavior. For example, in refuting the concept of proportionality and the importance of not targeting

“women, children, the aged and infirm, all unarmed persons going about their daily lives, and prisoners of war,” the authors write, “Observe the injustice here. Benevolent, individualistic, life-loving Americans, and death-worshipping, collectivist, nihilistic Arabs. . . . The requirements of ‘proportionality’ and ‘discrimination’ are deadly to the nation that takes them seriously.” They go on to espouse that we should have rejected these beliefs long ago. Indeed, they contend that the United States should have (over the past thirty years) militarily invaded and vanquished Iran, Lebanon (and Hezbollah), Hamas (by invading the West Bank), Syria, and Saudi Arabia. The authors do so without the slightest acknowledgement of the costs incurred in the current conflict against two countries with one-tenth of the combined populations of the nations they suggest we invade.

These positions are understandable when you research the authors’ biographies. Their combined military experience consists of one of the author’s brief time as an enlisted radio repairman decades ago. As for the other authors’, their degrees are almost exclusively in economics. Significantly, the editor, Mr. Journo, is listed on the Ayn Rand Institute’s website as a “Middle East Expert.” Yet he appears to have no experience or advanced education in international relations, military strategy, history, or political science. In fact, he is not listed with any degree. Indeed, as with all the authors of this book, his claim to be a “Middle East Expert” with knowledge of military affairs and international relations is based solely on writing newspaper op-eds related to military affairs and international relations since 12 September 2001. This, more than anything, explains the book’s value.