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Terrorism: A History

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demographic crises that threaten to overwhelm it by the end of this century, if not before) the author’s counsel, including a plea for humility, is refreshing and much needed. His concluding thought about America’s role in the peace process, that “although we remain vital to peacemaking, we can’t drive the train as much as I once believed,” is a fitting one and captures the essence of the author—a thoughtful observer, seasoned analyst, veteran diplomatist, readable scholar, and all-around mensch.

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Rarely is a book written to fulfill the author’s own need for a scholarly work on a topic that he teaches at university. So when Associate Professor Randall Law determined that he must write a book on the history of terrorism, he sought to satisfy a need not only for himself but for other professors and researchers who deal with the subject. According to Law, “When I started teaching a course on the subject shortly after September 11, 2001, I could not find a book for my students that told this story in a clear chronological fashion, that provided sufficient analytical framework, that made use of the most recent scholarly work, and that was comprehensive but succinct.” Law’s book does exactly what he intended.

Dr. Law, a historian, immediately wrestles with his own working definition of terrorism with two core assertions. The first is that individuals or groups act through rational and conscious decision making within political and cultural contexts. Therefore, according to Law, terrorism is not “a kind of madness.” His second states that terrorism is a communicative act intended to influence the behavior of the audience. Consequently, the author emphasizes a correlation between terrorism and the media throughout the book.

An astute reader might ask on what basis the author chose certain groups and historical events. Actually, Law selected three viewpoints that would give the reader a broad understanding of the complexity of the subject. The first is what he calls the “terrorist toolbox,” a set of tactics, behaviors, and methods normally associated with terrorism. The second is that terrorism is “violent theater” that leverages symbols and provocatively violent acts. The third viewpoint is that terrorism has become a cultural construct, while the word itself connotes illegitimacy or is used as a label to vilify enemies.

Although concise and of a nice, workable size for classroom use, the volume treats terrorism with a stunningly all-encompassing approach. Its sixteen chapters truly span the historical, cultural, and political underpinnings of terrorism.

As one who teaches graduate courses on terrorism to federal, state, local, and tribal law-enforcement professionals, as well as military leaders, I found this book to be a welcome addition to the multitude of scholarly materials on terrorism. Randall Law has written the quintessential work on the subject, one that is provocative and educational, and will stimulate a necessary dialogue for future decision makers.

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