

2009

Fighting Identity: Sacred War and World Change

S. Mike Pavelec

Michael Vlahos

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Pavelec, S. Mike and Vlahos, Michael (2009) "Fighting Identity: Sacred War and World Change," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 62 : No. 4 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol62/iss4/15>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

among the experts in this small but growing field.

Murphy takes a bifurcated approach that proves beneficial to both the author and the reader. Each half of the book could easily stand on its own, but the pairing is important to distinguish similarities or differences and provides the means for Murphy to discuss the reasons behind these activities and the challenges they engender.

The section on piracy adequately addresses worldwide incidents and provides appropriate regional perspectives. Readers will also benefit from Murphy's evenhanded treatment of the various forms of maritime terrorism, as well as their potential for unintended consequences. His treatment of the 2002 attack on the French supertanker *Limburg* discusses not only the method of attack used by terrorists but the subsequent impact upon the Yemeni port involved, which lost some three thousand jobs due to reduced commerce from an international industry hesitant to place ships at risk. Murphy's discussions of other possible threats, such as divers, swimmers, submersibles, and small boats, as well as of the particular case of ships carrying hazardous cargo (such as liquefied petroleum gas and liquefied natural gas) are particularly helpful in explaining, realistically and dispassionately, the difficulties.

However, this book still offers opportunities for continued debate. Murphy notes, for example, that piracy in the Strait of Malacca was reduced from 2004 to 2005 due to increased cooperation between international navies. Elsewhere, he suggests that the Free Aceh Movement was impacted by the tsunami of December 2004. Would not the tsunami have had a similar effect on

pirates as terrorists, given the devastation it wreaked?

This book sets the standard for future serious works on piracy and maritime terrorism. Murphy's work is a must for both journalists and the military, to gain a proper understanding of these issues.

CLAUDE BERUBE
U.S. Naval Academy



Vlahos, Michael. *Fighting Identity: Sacred War and World Change*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2009. 245pp. \$49.95

Michael Vlahos is a senior member of the National Security Analysis Department at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. He was recently a visiting faculty member in the Strategy and Policy Department at the Naval War College. He has written extensively on culture and war, including various projects on Iraq and counterinsurgency.

In *Fighting Identity* (the latest title in the "Changing Face of War" series from Praeger Security International, series editor James Carafano), Vlahos offers an excellent analysis of how war shapes the collective identity at the societal level. Combining a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, history, political science, and philosophy, he builds his argument on a foundation of postmodernist theory, expertly merging social identity, theory, and military history. Treading where social theorists disdain to be and military historians avoid, Vlahos provides essential scholarship.

The construct of the book is cogent. Vlahos outlines his rationale for the project before he delves into theory and definitions. He turns to methodology and research, offering guidelines for future scholarship. His content chapters, “Them,” “Us,” and “Fit,” represent the substance of the book, encompassing his analysis on the development of identity through war. Vlahos’s argument centers on the idea that the interactive nature of warfare creates, and changes, identity.

In his view, war is a “sacred ritual” that has been practiced throughout history and that in turn shapes social identity. These rituals have semireligious undertones and come to represent “humanity’s dark liturgy.” Further, war and interactive conflict shape the identities of participants, cultivating cohesion, motivation, and awareness. Vlahos argues that interaction creates common narratives and also leads to an acquisition of legitimacy. Finally, interactive conflict emerges as a central component of social identity (both national and nonstate), which shapes historical hindsight as well as future policy decisions.

This book draws on Vlahos’s extensive knowledge of history. He flows from the ancient to the contemporary with ease, drawing on past and present examples to support his arguments. In the final chapter, “Where I Come Out,” he argues that the United States is facing a crisis of identity in its own sacred narrative, as it transitions from the Cold War to something new. Finally, he suggests that the social identity of the nation will evolve as it faces the challenges of the twenty-first century.

Overall, this is an exceptional work of scholarship on the creation of social identity, as well as a critique of

American social construct. Vlahos provides an analysis of inestimable value based on an impressive grasp of history and philosophy. Written primarily for scholars, *Fighting Identity* is a modern philosophical treatise on war’s influence on the development and evolution of sacred identity. While I recommend this book for a wide audience, the subtleties of its analysis and the structure of its argument are complex and elaborate. This book is easily read but not easily understood.

S. MIKE PAVELEC
Naval War College



Goodman, Michael S. *Spying on the Nuclear Bear: Anglo-American Intelligence and the Soviet Bomb*. Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 2007. 295pp. \$50

The Cold War was a real war, marked by complexity. The nation-states making up the international system (the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union) that emerged in the wake of the atomic age were compelled to avoid a general conflict and to protect civilization from nuclear extinction. As such, a variety of instruments were utilized by these great powers. One of those instruments was the collection and analysis of intelligence and, in particular, nuclear intelligence.

The fact is, Goodman, a lecturer in the Department of War Studies at King’s College London, states, that “intelligence was in some ways the cold war waged by other means.” A little known aspect of the Cold War involved the Anglo-American intelligence communities’ intense focus on the development of Soviet nuclear weapons. Goodman’s main contention is that despite the