

2008

Salvaging American Defense: The Challenge of Strategic Overstretch

Peter Dombrowski

Anthony Cordesman

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

Recommended Citation

Dombrowski, Peter and Cordesman, Anthony (2008) "Salvaging American Defense: The Challenge of Strategic Overstretch," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 61 : No. 4 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol61/iss4/14>

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.

driving nation-states and international relations today.

RICHMOND M. LLOYD
Naval War College



Smith, Paul. *The Terrorism Ahead: Confronting Transnational Violence in the Twenty-first Century*. New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2007. 258pp. \$79.95

Paul Smith's *The Terrorism Ahead* is a superbly written blend of history, contemporary analysis, and personal reflection. It is the product of thorough research and study plus a decade's worth of vigorous debate with an international cast of students, colleagues (Smith is currently a professor at the Naval War College), counterterrorism practitioners, and academic specialists. The author's arguments thus merit serious and thoughtful consideration. As a participant in many of these debates (I am a former colleague of Smith's, and we did not always agree), I can attest to the "trials by fire" to which the ideas expressed in this book were subjected.

The Terrorism Ahead provides a comprehensive, balanced, yet succinct overview of the key contemporary debates in terrorism studies. Smith skillfully examines terrorism in its wider historical, geopolitical, and technological contexts. This contextualization of the global environment in which terrorism lives and evolves is the book's great strength, and what makes it a valuable contribution to the literature.

Chapter 2, "Historical Evolution," is one of the best one-stop short histories of terrorism in print. One might also single out chapter 8, where Smith tackles terrorism financing and associated

legal issues. The closing chapter presents a compelling analysis of the "root causes" debate and its implications for U.S. policy, plus a thought-provoking look at the future. In this chapter, Smith argues that five conditions will shape terrorism in the years ahead: demography, globalization, transnational crime, weak/failed states, and climate change. Smith is one of the few people working in terrorism studies to seriously consider the implications of climate change.

Throughout the work, Smith also explains how changes in communications, information, and weapons technologies have helped shape the conduct of terrorism. It would have been interesting, therefore, if he had added a discussion of emerging and predicted advances in technologies—such as nanotechnology and genetic engineering—that may provide future tools for terrorists.

All in all, *The Terrorism Ahead* is an engaging, comprehensive, and thoughtful consideration of the challenge of terrorism. It should find itself equally at home on the bookshelves of specialists, general readers, and students.

CHRISTOPHER JASPARRO
*U.S. Marine Corps Command and Staff College
Quantico, Virginia*



Cordesman, Anthony. *Salvaging American Defense: The Challenge of Strategic Overstretch*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2007. 488pp. \$49.95

Anthony Cordesman, current holder of the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for International and Security Studies in Washington, D.C., is one of the most prolific defense analysts in the United States today. *Salvaging*

American Defense is much like the extant body of research produced by Cordesman over the last few decades. It is filled with information that is intended to be comprehensive, even encyclopedic. Yet this approach can have its drawbacks. The book's subtitle promises to discuss "the challenge of strategic overstretch" and its chapters are organized around ten specific challenges, yet the author fails to offer a sustained argument about how to grapple with them. Instead, the chapters offer program-by-program vignettes, military service-by-military service comparisons, and agency-by-agency descriptions of difficulties. Within the vignettes, comparisons, and descriptions are piecemeal solutions—some of which make an enormous amount of sense, while others smack of improvisation or are contradictory to diagnoses and solutions offered pages earlier.

Evaluating the individual parts of so massive a work is difficult. Absent expert knowledge of an extremely wide range of issues and programs, this reviewer is left to seek out those modest areas of national security where he has some competence or general insight. Here the news is largely positive. Cordesman's discussions of U.S. Navy force structure, policies, and programs seem largely sensible, even when his language is somewhat intemperate. It is hard to argue with the author's diagnoses and solutions when he uses the words of public officials and military officers, not to mention the analyses of seasoned analysts, to underpin his arguments. His account of military "transformation" is reasoned, although in my judgment Cordesman may be a bit too enamored of the promised benefits of transformation and too hopeful that the

national security establishment can overcome what is perhaps the largest problem with transformation: "It is brutally clear that strategy and planning documents that are not integrated with force planning and long-term budgets become hollow wish lists or—at the minimum—more of a problem than part of the solution."

Like many defense experts, Cordesman is not shy about offering recommendations to fix what is wrong with U.S. national security policy. In his final chapter, he offers fourteen "major changes," all of which are ambitious. Unsurprisingly, given the enormous scope of these recommendations, Cordesman offers few details about how they might be implemented.

PETER DOMBROWSKI
Naval War College



Thornton, Rod. *Asymmetric Warfare: Threat and Response in the 21st Century*. Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley, 2007. 256pp. \$69.95

Asymmetric warfare, although anything but new, is among the current political-military hot topics of the day. The success of al-Qa'ida in striking the World Trade Center, and the difficulties encountered by the United States and its partner countries in achieving stability and security in Iraq and Afghanistan, has convinced some observers that those who would wage asymmetric warfare against powerful states may now have the upper hand. Other analysts, less willing to go quite so far, agree that asymmetry will be a notable facet of most military conflicts for the foreseeable future.