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Asymmetrical Warfare: Today's Challenge to U.S. Military Power,

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BOOK REVIEWS

A PARADIGM SHIFT

Barnett, Roger W. *Asymmetrical Warfare: Today's Challenge to U.S. Military Power*. Brassey's, 2003. 176pp. \$39.95

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, a cacophony of voices arose (mostly from the conservative wing of the Republican Party) asserting that the United States was in danger of being eclipsed by the Soviet Union. In short, the argument was “the sky is falling.” President Reagan used the issue to great advantage during the 1980 presidential campaign, setting the stage for a massive increase in defense expenditures and the launching of the ambitious “Star Wars” program, the forerunner of the Clinton and Bush administrations’ attempt to build a national missile defense system. It turned out that Soviet power had been exaggerated and that our own political, intellectual, and ideological predispositions had blinded us to signs of the impending implosion of the Soviet system. Interestingly, it could be argued that however misguided the Reagan defense buildup might have been vis-à-vis its principal objective, programs launched during that era set us on the path that today has resulted in an unprecedented global conventional military superiority that we see manifested today in battlefields around the world.

Today, there are new arguments that the sky is falling, that the global security environment has undergone profound and even revolutionary change, and that the United States remains woefully unprepared to deal with the threats posed by a new caste of diabolical adversaries boasting new and dangerous capabilities. Roger Barnett’s *Asymmetrical Warfare* could be regarded as a bible for those interested in exploring the implications of such a thesis. Like proponents of arguments advanced in the early 1980s, Barnett, professor emeritus at the Naval War College, believes that the United States has never been more vulnerable and must take drastic steps to avert an impending catastrophe. Today’s security environment, aptly and eloquently described in the Bush administration’s *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, is characterized by undeterred rogue states and transnational terrorist organizations with access to new weapons that can inflict mass casualties on an unprecedented scale. Barnett argues that the new environment represents a fundamental departure, or paradigm shift, in that there are no longer any

behavioral constraints on those seeking to attack the United States. In short, the international order stands at the precipice, if it has not already descended into the Hobbesian state of nature.

Barnett argues that a series of mutually supporting, and damaging, constraints—moral, political, organizational, legal, and operational—developed over the second half of the twentieth century and are now conspiring to subvert the ability of the United States to use force as a tool to manage the new security environment. He argues that the United States is fundamentally in a strategically defensive posture, thereby ceding the initiative to its adversaries and making it vulnerable to the kinds of surprise attacks that happened on 9/11. This means that “the United States has, without malice and forethought, backed unwittingly into the situation where it resembles the mighty Gulliver, cinched down by Lilliputian strings.”

Barnett believes that these limitations on using force have effectively created a “breeding ground” for asymmetrical actions by adversaries under no moral or political limits, who in fact perceive these constraints as signs of weakness. Throughout the history of warfare, participants have always sought to exploit an opponent’s weaknesses, but Barnett posits that asymmetric warfare today constitutes something new and different—war and conflict without limits. In other words, we are not talking about adversaries advancing creative ideas on asymmetric warfare like those developed during the 1930s by the Billy Mitchells and Heinz Guderians of the world, which eventually revolutionized conventional military warfare. Today’s adversaries are bent on mass destruction using any means at their

disposal—nuclear, chemical, biological, and cyberspace.

Barnett’s description of the international environment seems apt enough, if a bit dire, and his discussion of the various constraints is interesting and contains some good and useful points. He is right to point out that moral and legal constraints have assumed great importance in the conduct of military operations. Such issues as collateral damage, the idea of proportionality in using force, and the perpetration of the myth that the American people have an aversion to taking casualties have all affected the decision-making process on when and if the country should use force. As for the country’s decision making on using force, Barnett rightly criticizes the haphazard series of interactions between various governmental bureaucracies and the executive and legislative branches as a discombobulated process that can be manipulated and exploited by sophisticated adversaries. He is also right to point out that the United Nations has proven to be only marginally successful in managing new threats to security in the international environment and that the successive surrendering of authority to the international body under various treaties has constrained some capabilities that could conceivably be useful for deterrence and operational use. Barnett’s prescription to address the problem is useful, suggesting that the United States undertake a systematic review of circumstances under which the nation will use force and be prepared to declare war, and make these circumstances widely known to its adversaries.

However, like those who declared that the sky was falling in the 1980s, one cannot help feeling that Barnett has

overdramatized the situation. While the 9/11 attacks created a cottage industry of sorts describing a supposedly new and dangerous security environment, the toppling of the World Trade Center towers needs to be seen in the context of a pattern of increasingly bold attacks on the United States that arguably stretch back to the 1980s, when the first hostages were taken in Lebanon. One of the surprising things about the attacks was that they were a surprise at all. After all, Ramzi Youssef came closer than is generally appreciated to bringing down the towers in 1995; the Khobar Towers attack in 1996 resulted in a dramatic change in U.S. security posture in the Persian Gulf; and the United States had already returned fire with al-Qa'ida following the August 1988 embassy attacks. Over this twenty-odd-year period, America adjusted and took a variety of steps, mostly at the operational and organizational levels, that helped create the special operations capabilities that are now being deployed around the world in the so-called global war on terrorism. Homeland defense is now a priority, seeing the creation of a new cabinet secretary and department to coordinate efforts at the federal, state, and local levels.

While Barnett decries the irrelevance of the United Nations in the new environment, the global war on terror is in fact taking place within an internationally sanctioned legal framework that requires all states to take necessary steps to combat terrorism, including the use of force. While the United Nations has proven less successful in addressing threats posed by rogue states, UN Security Council Resolution 1368 (passed after 9/11) provides a useful and interesting template that requires global

cooperation against the very threat Barnett argues is a principal source of evil in the international system. It is hard to see that it is anything other than a useful tool for marshaling a global cooperative effort against terrorism.

Moreover, while it is true that the United States operates under a number of constraints when using force, today's global military deployments around the world simply belie Barnett's contention that the United States remains hamstrung in using force as a tool to manage the international environment. If anything, it would appear that efforts over the last twenty years have positioned America quite well to go after its adversaries in all four corners of the globe, and that the attacks of 9/11 created the political environment for decision makers to use force aggressively to address perceived threats. While Barnett asserts the necessity of a more systematic and commonsensical process for deciding when to use force, events indicate that we are not doing too badly on that front. As for a new declaratory policy spelling out when the country will use force, any adversary could read the Bush administration's national security strategy report and get a good idea of the nation's intolerance for directly threatening the United States.

On a stylistic note, *Asymmetrical Warfare* at times reads like a legal brief, and it gives the impression that the author simply searched for arguments supporting his thesis and consciously ignored any contradictory evidence or points of view. Some parts of the text simply consist of a series of long, strung-together quotes by other authors, making for heavy going. The extent to which the author

repeats his arguments in successive chapters is also somewhat irritating.

These criticisms notwithstanding, the book provides an extremely interesting and thought-provoking argument that is cogently expressed in a well organized work. Barnett has produced a useful and positive contribution to the ongoing revitalization of the field of strategy and to the associated debate surrounding the use of force in the international environment. Students and professors interested in security strategy in the new century should add this work to their libraries.

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Stanik, Joseph T. *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan's Undeclared War with Qaddafi*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2002. 360pp. \$34.95

This well researched and clearly written study of U.S. combat with Libya in the 1980s has important echoes for today's policy makers. It begins with a quick look at America's first war with a Muslim state—in the nineteenth century, when the U.S. Navy fought viciously with the Barbary pirates off the coast of North Africa. It then traces the rise of one of the Barbary pirates' direct descendants—the well known late-twentieth-century practitioner of state terrorism Muammar Qaddafi of Libya. Throughout the book Joseph Stanik, professor of history and retired naval officer, provides detailed accounts of the 1980 key attacks and a well reasoned analysis of their political impact. There is, of course, particularly well documented material covering the key air strike of 15 April 1986, which

was a devastating blow against Qaddafi's regime and changed his approach profoundly.

For those of us on active service in the 1980s, the battles with Libya seemed a bit of a sideshow when compared to the main dance of the Cold War. Yet this relatively short, bitter conflict was actually a harbinger of things to come. Much as today's terrorists seek to influence global events through individual attacks, Qaddafi sought to drive the course of world activity through bombings and state-sponsored terrorism. The Reagan administration at first responded with rhetoric, but it eventually became clear that more forceful action would be needed.

It is interesting, in this time of "global war on terrorism," to look back to the 1980s and realize that this is a war that began long before 9/11. President Reagan was elected in no small measure in response to the state-condoned terrorism of Iran, where radical students had held American diplomats hostage for 444 days before Reagan's election, releasing them just after his inauguration. Over the next five years, a series of dramatic terrorist incidents followed—bombings and killings in Lebanon, including the horrific truck-bomb attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, killing over two hundred Marines in a single moment; the murder of Marine embassy guards in El Salvador; the hijacking of major airliners and the killing of hostages, including a U.S. Navy SEAL, Robert Stethem; airport killings in Rome and Vienna; and the dramatic disco bombing in Berlin. Clearly, the United States had to respond, so in the spring of 1986, Operation EL DORADO CANYON sent a clear and dramatic message to Muammar Qaddafi, with telling results.