

2004

## The Age of Sacred Terror,

S. Douglas Smith

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Smith, S. Douglas (2004) "The Age of Sacred Terror," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 57 : No. 1 , Article 25.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol57/iss1/25>

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](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

land and water in ways that some who focus on the religious conflicts, the shadow of the past, and the various weaknesses of the Israeli-Palestinian and other Arab authority structures forget. In short, academics, policy makers, and military officers should pay close attention to those regions that have the greatest potential for armed conflict based on the relative scarce supplies of critical resources.

PETER DOMBROWSKI  
*Naval War College*



Benjamin, Daniel, and Steven Simon. *The Age of Sacred Terror*. New York: Random House, 2002. 490pp. \$25.95

Were you to begin with the last chapter of this book, “A World of Terror,” you would note that radical Islamists do not have an exclusive hold on terror as a strategic weapon. In fact, you might be well advised to consider reading this chapter first, to understand that extremist adherents of Christianity as well as other faiths also have employed sacred terror as a tool in the pursuit of their aims. If, on the other hand, you choose to begin with chapter 1, you will receive a good overview of the terrorist events of the past ten to twelve years, with a focus on those of Islamic origin.

Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, senior staff members of the Clinton administration’s National Security Council, paint a coherent picture of the genesis of sacred terror, the response to it, and prospects for the future. The time frame also includes the end and the beginning of the two Bush administrations. Benjamin and Simon’s conclusion points out the long-term nature of

the issue and recommends that the West engage it with a view to the postconflict possibilities. The book’s purpose may include an attempt to influence history’s interpretation of the data, particularly with regard to the years of the authors’ involvement, but that hardly negates its significance.

Benjamin and Simon offer three particularly valuable discussions. First, they carefully tease three threads from the history of radical Islamism. Second, they give an airing to the workings of government—probably always less than transparent. In this, they do not hesitate to parcel out responsibility for good and for ill. Finally, they offer a strategic reflection that goes beyond radical Islamism.

That Islam was, and can be, a religion of the sword should come as no surprise. After Muhammad (d. 632), Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya, born in 1269, an accomplished Islamic jurist at age twenty, established the intellectual underpinning of today’s radical Islamism. Ibn Taymiyya did more than anyone to erect *jihad*—actual warfare—as a pillar of Islam. From him descended in the subsequent centuries serious intellectuals, hard men ready to commit violence, messianic figures whose zeal seems most foreign to twenty-first-century realities. Together, “they feed into the eruption of jihadist Islamism that has confronted the West, America in particular, over the last decade.” Now, the warrior prince Usama bin Laden carries jihadism into the new millennium.

“Exactly when the name Usama bin Laden began appearing in American intelligence reports and FBI investigative materials is something we are unlikely to ever learn.” This observation,

coupled with the truism that we judge the unknown to be unlikely, points out how it was that we only gradually gave shape and definition to the terrorist threat. When one considers that the United States was riding the laurels of the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War and that its economy was steaming comfortably, it seems almost understandable that no one put all the pieces together earlier. Nevertheless, Benjamin and Simon take turns putting agencies and leaders in the pillory. Interagency collaboration is mostly a game of “I’ve got a secret.” Alley politics overshadow intelligent analysis and policy making as the White House and Capitol Hill threw punches at each other; a president lacked personal credibility; and the news media, aware of the public’s low interest for international news, failed to pursue stories aggressively.

Before 9/11, “America was the prisoner of an old paradigm for thinking about terrorism, and it could be released only through a revolutionary act of violence.” Herein lies a tragic blessing. As its long-range response, the administration created a new cabinet-level department for homeland security. Other measures were also taken, and others need to be taken once the technology measures up. Additionally, citizens and governments alike must become much more attuned to the various currents that have been shaped by the past and that will shape the future. Developing a sustainable strategy depends on it, lest the tragedy become pathos.

The book concludes with a riveting chapter on terrorism under the cloak of other religions. Jewish messianism, the quasi-Buddhist cult Aum Shinrikyo, and Christian apocalyptic literature and movements all point to more terrorism.

*The Age of Sacred Terror* will enlighten leaders and citizens alike, and it should be a must-read for midlevel officers, especially those aspiring to senior leadership. It challenges the way we plan and train, and it certainly provides grist for the mill of doctrine development—while pointing out, yet again, that this is not the foe our parents and grandparents faced. If we learn no other lesson, this book will have served us well.

S. DOUGLAS SMITH  
*Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy*



Kurspahic, Kemal. *Prime Time Crime: Balkan Media in War and Peace*. Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2003. 261pp. \$19.95

Solving the puzzle of the destruction of Yugoslavia is one of the dominant historical and political questions of our time. Prominent scholars, high-ranking military officers, and noted politicians all seem to be asking how an advanced confederation could fail so quickly and with such disastrous consequences. Kemal Kurspahic, the award-winning editor of the Sarajevo wartime daily newspaper *Oslobodjenje*, provides some important answers to this question with his firsthand account of media in the former Yugoslavia.

This book provides chilling, first-person insight into the decline of the Yugoslavian media into nationalism and into its contribution to the destruction of the Yugoslav federation. Kurspahic, a Bosnian Muslim, paints a picture of the disintegration of the former republic that, like many horror stories, is at once riveting, revolting, and compelling. This is a work that is riveting in its