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Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror

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between surprise, security, and the American experience in the 21st century.”

Gaddis closes with a poignant anecdote. One of his Yale undergraduates “asked in the dark and fearful days that followed September 11th, ‘Would it be OK now for us to be patriotic?’” to which he responds, “Yes, I think it would.” This is a commentary both on the smug self-indulgence of many elites during America’s post–Cold War “vacation from history” and on the uncomfortable “disconnection in our thinking between the security to which we’ve become accustomed and the means by which we obtained it.” It is intellectually fashionable in many venues today to condemn the sometimes morally ambiguous policies that have nonetheless brought us the national security we historically have taken for granted. But as Gaddis notes: “The better approach, I think, is to acknowledge the moral ambiguity of our history. Like most other nations, we got to where we are by means that we cannot today, in their entirety, comfortably endorse. Comfort alone, however, cannot be the criterion by which a nation shapes its strategy and secures its safety. The means of confronting danger do not disqualify themselves from consideration solely on the basis of the uneasiness they produce. Before we too quickly condemn how our ancestors dealt with such problems, therefore, we might well ask ourselves two questions: What would *we* have done if we had been in their place then? And, even scarier, how comfortable will *our* descendants be with the choices we make today?”

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Burke, Jason. *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror*. New York: I. B. Tauris, 2003. 304pp. \$24.95

As the United States enters its fifth year in the war on terrorism, too little is known about al-Qa‘ida. Though several top al-Qa‘ida operatives, like Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, are now in custody, and detainee reporting from Guantanamo Bay, Bagram Airbase, and other locations provides a historical snapshot of the pre-9/11 organization led by Usama Bin Laden, the United States still lacks the vocabulary to understand how and why terrorism threatens. This is partly due to the impact of global counterterrorist operations (the Congressional Research Services notes that three thousand suspected al-Qa‘ida members have been detained by about ninety countries), conflicting strategies within Bin Laden’s organization (global legion of militants or global inspiration), and the diversity of groups that compose contemporary depictions of al-Qa‘ida (the Egyptian al-Jihad, the Indonesian Jemaah Islamiyah, or the Kashmiri Haarakat ul-Mujahidin, to name three of the many disparate nationalist groups lumped together with al-Qa‘ida).

Jason Burke, a chief reporter for the London *Observer* who spent about four years in Pakistan and Afghanistan, argues that al-Qa‘ida (Arabic for “the base of operation” or “foundation”) is an overused term and mischaracterizes the nature of international terrorism. In contrast to the pre-9/11 view that Bin Laden is al-Qa‘ida, or the post–Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (Afghanistan) view that al-Qa‘ida is a global coalition of factions, Burke argues it is less an organization than an ideology. “Osama

bin Laden did not create it nor will his death or incarceration end it”—he has been a “peripheral player in modern Islamic militancy.” Al-Qa’ida is bigger and different from Bin Laden and his Egyptian deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri. The word denotes a purpose, not an organization.

Throughout the book, Burke weaves a personal narrative drawing from his experiences on the ground and upon a deep understanding of international terrorism. He argues, “contemporary Islamic militancy is a diverse and complex historical phenomenon.” It is driven by local political grievances, economic frustration, and government repression.

Burke’s two-year-old assertion that al-Qa’ida is more of an ideology than a group is gaining currency and is now more widely accepted within the U.S. government. The Defense Department has now defined “countering ideological support for terrorism,” or CIST, as a major component of its strategy in the global war on terrorism. In order to win this war, it is simply not enough to protect the homeland, neutralize terrorists, and eliminate terrorist safe havens. Rather, the goal is to create the conditions that prevent terrorism from becoming an international threat. As such, the Bush administration’s efforts to promote democracy and eliminate tyranny are seen as the means to establish pluralism and to provide opposition groups a nonviolent venue to express grievances. In many authoritarian countries today, there are few options for peaceful regime change. Burke’s travels and interviews led him to the conclusion that “as national Islamic movements, moderate or violent, are crushed or fail, anger is channeled into

the symbolic realm and into the international, cosmic, apocalyptic language of bin Laden and his associates.”

Burke’s work adds to the Defense Department’s effort to analyze, by deconstructing al-Qa’ida, what motivates radical terrorist groups and understand why the United States is increasingly a target. For Burke, “the world is a far more radicalized place now than it was prior to September 11th.” It is the freelance operators without obvious connection to any group who should worry us the most; without a peaceful way to resolve their perceived injustice, they resort to violence.

The distance from 9/11, counterterrorism successes with international partners, and the lack of additional attacks in the United States allow for a more thoughtful debate on why the United States is perceived negatively in the world and how local conditions spawn terrorist movements. For those who are ready for the answers, Burke’s book is a good place to start. He not only corrects conventional misunderstandings of al-Qa’ida but offers a good representation of the radicalism the United States is attempting to contain.

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Diamond, Jared. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Viking, 2005. 525pp. \$29.95

In his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Guns, Germs and Steel*, Jared Diamond, professor of geology at UCLA, used a blend of history, archaeology, geography, and anthropology to explain how Western civilizations rose to dominance. In *Collapse*,