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The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America

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Winner of the 2004 Arthur Ross Book Award from the Council on Foreign Relations

From two of the world's foremost experts on the new terrorism comes the definitive book on the rise of al-Qaeda and America's efforts to combat the most innovative and dangerous terrorist group ever. Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon trace the growth of radical Islam from its medieval origins and, drawing on their years of counter-terrorism work at the National Security Council, provide essential insights into the thinking of Usama bin Laden and his followers. With unique authority, they analyze why America was unable to defend itself against this revolutionary threat on September 11, 2001, why bin Laden's apocalyptic creed is gaining ground in the Islamic world, and what the United States must do to stop the new terror.

The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America Details

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From Reader Review The Age of Sacred Terror: Radical Islam's War Against America for online ebook

Alex Connolly says

Very informative

Chris says

A good overview on the origins of al-Qaeda and Islamic militancy. It tries to address other forms of religious terrorism, but doesn't go very far, and it's already somewhat out of date, since it was published in 2003.

Will Byrnes says

There is a lot of history in this dense volume, tracing the roots of Islamic terrorism back many centuries. It deals with other types of terrorism as well. Although I found it interesting, I did not feel an uncontrollable urge to return to it all that much, which accounts, in addition to its length, to the fact that it took me a month to read it.

PWRL says

SM

Greg says

This book is now dated. So much has happened: the invasion of Iraq, the killing of Bin Laden, etc. I can't give it a stellar review because some aspects are very good and others are amateur. The authors lack an understanding and a sensitivity to religion and an understanding of anthropology, so their roots of Islamic terrorism is superficial, as is their final chapter about other violent religious movements. They don't know the difference between messianism and millenarianism. These criticisms aside, the book has some great meat in it regarding the things the Clinton administration did successfully and unsuccessfully in confronting Bin Laden that I was ignorant of (thanks to the feckless mainstream media which is the subject of one chapter).

Mark says

I had previously read portions of this as part of a Homeland Security course many years ago.

This book provides the fascinating backstory for the origins of many of today's terrorist movements. At

nearly 18 hours, be prepared for a long 'read.'

Katie says

Age of Sacred Terror analyzes the connections between radical Islam, terrorism and the “war on terror” as conducted by the United States. Benjamin and Simon centrally position jihad in their analysis of the implications of the rise of radical Islam on the United States. Their argument on jihad traces jihad's historical path, its manifestations in recent decades, and its implications on foreign relations, specifically relations between the United States and Muslim countries.

Jerome says

Interesting and easy to read. Many books I've read cite this, and the authors worked for Richard Clarke, whose memoir Against All Enemies I've read.

The first half is a crisp, brisk read jammed with vital detail on the history behind radical Islamism. That history, from the Crusades to the Balfour declaration, is ever present before the minds' eye of the terrorists, so it behooves us to know it. These are guys who know how to put together an executive summary. Without a word wasted on horrified emotion, partisan sentiment, or political correctness, they give us the names, the dates, the theologies, the actions that led to the current confrontation. You are unlikely to find a precis of Al-Qaeda's motivations and makeup anywhere as complete, concise, and pertinent.

In particular, Benjamin and Simon give the definitive answer to "why they hate us." Many social, economic, and political factors go into the level of tacit support for Al Qaeda on "the street." But the operatives themselves are motivated entirely by religion, and nothing short of the death of all Jews and the destruction of the West will satisfy them. In one sense it is true that what they peddle is a perversion of Islam. Even the virulently anti-American head of Iran's clergy, Ali Khamenei, condemned the WTC attacks, because the Quran clearly forbids targeting civilians. But at the same time, Al-Qaeda's theological line has very deep historical roots in Islam, tracing back to Wahabbi in the seventeenth century (a version of Islam which Saudi money has recently made dominant through much of Asia), to ibn Taymiyya in the thirteenth century (who held that jihad in the sense of killing unbelievers was more important than any of the traditional five pillars of Islam). And ibn Taymiyya was a kind of Reformation figure; in his exaltation of jihad, he was rejecting all of the Islamic scholarship of the preceding five centuries, and trying to return to a kind of 'sola scriptura' depending only on the Quran and the hadith, in which with one ill attested exception there was no concept of a "greater" or "inner" jihad. It is difficult for moderate Muslims to mount a theological response to the jihadists, especially when the "ulemas", the scholarly establishment within each Muslim country, are so closely identified with governments that are repressive, or dismissive of sharia law, or both.

The second part talks about the developing awareness of the problem in the U.S. through the nineties, and all of the obstacles that prevented sufficient mobilization. This is less important for most of us to know than the preceding material, but the authors' position as insiders, especially in the light of partisan blame tactics sometimes used on both sides, more or less obligated them to assess that history.

The two most important obstacles were: (1) a mindset that saw terrorism as a tactical tool used by rogue states or liberation movements, and smugly imagined that Al-Qaeda was just more of the same. At its top

levels, the Clinton administration got over this hump by 1995; and the Bush administration, initially convinced that Al-Qaeda was a minor annoyance that Clinton had blown out of proportion, climbed a steep learning curve and changed its mind by the summer of 2001. (2) The difficulty of making the sense of urgency in either administration trickle down through the federal bureaucracy, in the absence of any media appreciation of the seriousness of the threat. The only way to overcome the enormous inertia of Treasury, State, and FBI would have been to share the information that, to avoid compromising intelligence, the cabinet and NSC level people had to keep close to their chests. September 11 did a great deal to put both problems to rest, but the book warns that institutional inertia and counterproductive turf wars, especially at the FBI, still pose significant risk.

A third short section assesses the current (2002, at least) state of play, and considers short and long term strategies for dealing with terrorism when it springs from a "virtual state" like Al-Qaeda. The outlook is both grim (terrorists *will* sometimes succeed, and civil liberties will be compromised) and hopeful (we have a lot of natural allies, Bush has restored the funding he originally cut for dismantling Soviet nuclear weapons, and Al-Qaeda's attempts to groom operatives who are ethnically western offers a potential handhold for better human intel.)

The authors criticize the CIA for not using its paramilitary Special Activities Division to hunt bin Laden, writing that the White House thought that the CIA had no confidence in them. "Their performance in Afghanistan suggests that this was not the case," they write. Huh? It wasn't SAD that was the issue, it was that the CIA lacked confidence in the Afghan tribal agents they recruited. But, yes, SAD had been somewhat gutted after the Reagan years.

The authors struggle to somehow paint Aum Shinrikyo in Japan as influenced by Christianity. The authors also paint Tim McVeigh as a Christian terrorist, although he himself claimed not to be a Christian.

Gabe says

This is a good book for people interested in international relations. It explains the rise of al-Qaeda and radical Islam and provides interesting background from authors who worked for the National Security Council. It is a little biased at times but provides insight into the forces that shape our world.

Ed says

Very good overview of what factors have created the current error of Islamic terrorism. The authors focus primarily on Islamic terrorism but also branch off into other religions and states to show their influence on each other. The authors also convincingly illustrate how this era has been created not just by the US and its allies but by the middle eastern nations as well. The blame is spread all around as the reader is guided through the history of Islamic based terror.

Carol says

This is an excellent recounting of the birth of Al Qaeda and Al Qaeda's message and how it relates to Muslims. In this case, the history is much more strange than any fictional account could be. It is well

researched and documented.

It really helps to read this book to understand what is going on with Al Quaeda.

I reccomend this book to everyone.

Carmine says

Very good (although dated) book on the philosophy of the internaitonal jihadi movement -- does a good though not always convincing job of connecting it with similar movements from other religions in different eras. A similar book, just as good, is The Looming Tower.

Maria says

There is and was a lot I do/did not know about Radical Islam. This book has encouraged me to do more reading on the topic and become more culturally aware of the Middle East and its peoples and thier various faiths.

Bernie says

The first couple hundred pages took a long time to read since they described the beginnings of Islam, but wasn't too bad.

David Carroll says

Great historical, cited, context of why the Jihadist movement is what it is. Shows the roles of mullahs, politicos, and warriors and why this is really about haves and have nots and always will be.....
