

Review - Counterstrike

Written by Zachary Keck

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ZACHARY KECK, SEP 12 2011

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Can al-Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups be deterred? The Bush and Obama administrations both eventually concluded that they can be, according to an important new book by *New York Times*' National Security Correspondents Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker. In *Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America's Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda*, Schmitt and Shanker use extensive interviews with high-ranking U.S. officials to trace the evolution of U.S. counterterrorism (COTERROR) strategy over the last decade since 9/11. Their use of first-hand accounts by participants in the debates makes the book Bob Woodwardesque and differentiates it from other histories of the Global War on Terror (GWOt); most notably, Peter Bergen's *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda*.

Page numbers referring to the text appear in parenthesis.

I. The new deterrence

The most important takeaway from *Counterstrike* is the story of how the United States gradually came to adopt a deterrence strategy against al-Qaeda. This "new deterrence" strategy both drew from and expanded upon the successful deterrence strategy the United States adopted vis-à-vis the Soviet Union.[i] Much like "nuclear deterrence," Washington's deterrence strategy towards al-Qaeda has been mostly improvised and adopted in an ad hoc fashion. A constant obstacle to implementing this strategy has been the tension between the different government bureaucracies with a stake in COTERROR. Although the authors point to many areas where the U.S. government has made significant strides in integrating the different "stovepipes" or bureaucracies, the search for a "whole-of-government" approach in the COTERROR realm remains elusive.

In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration rejected the notion that a deterrence strategy could be applied to transnational terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda. In its 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States, for instance, the administration argued, "traditional concepts of deterrence will not work against a terrorist enemy whose avowed tactics are wanton destruction and the targeting of innocents; whose so-called soldiers seek martyrdom in death and whose most potent protection is statelessness." This was not an unreasonable assumption; after all, as the national strategy pointed out, al-Qaeda operatives do not value territory or even their own lives, both of which had been crucial to deterring the Soviets.

A few years after the 9/11 attacks, however, a viable long-term strategy for prosecuting the GWOt had still not materialized. Frustrated, senior Defense officials began searching for such a strategy in the lower echelons of the Pentagon. Douglas Feith, undersecretary of defense for policy, eventually found one in an ambitious new project being undertaken by Barry Pavel, a mid-ranking official who the authors describe as a "veteran Cold Warrior," and Matthew Kroenig, then a summer graduate intern at the Pentagon who was pursuing his doctorate in nuclear proliferation issues at University of California at Berkeley.[ii]

Pavel and Kroenig acknowledged that al-Qaeda didn't value territory or their own lives in the way that the Soviet Union had. Nonetheless, they argued that the terrorists did value other things that the United States could threaten. As Kroenig explains, "Terrorists are deterrable. While they may have a preference structure that's different from ours, they do value things- things we could hold at risk-and we can, therefore, influence their decisions (51)."

In their presentation-which made its way to then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who presented it to President Bush at Camp David in 2005- Pavel and Kroenig listed twelve different things that al-Qaeda leaders and operatives value:

- Calculus of chances for success of their attacks
- Personal glory
- Personal reputation
- Support among Muslim populations
- Publicity
- Network cohesion and dependability
- Trust in fellow cell members

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- Well-being of their family
- Enhancement of the Muslim community
- Material assets
- Growing membership for the movement
- Strategic success (53)

II. Implementing the new Deterrence

Although Washington has remained vigilant in carrying out “kill and capture” missions against the terrorists, from 2006 on the United States has begun supplementing these kinetic operations with ones designed to threaten these twelve things. *Counterstrike's* best moments are when the authors explain the (often creative) ways in which Washington has tried to operationalize this new deterrence strategy.

A. Financial Disruption

Some of this is relatively straightforward. For example, to target al-Qaeda's material assets the United States has tried to crackdown on the terrorist group's financial operations. Thus, one of the primary characters in the book is Juan Zarate, a former Justice Department COTERROR official who transferred a few weeks before 9/11 to the Treasury Department to handle this same topic for that department. Working with other governments-notably those in the Persian Gulf that are home to most of al-Qaeda's high-level donors and financial markets- they have tried to shut down the financial hubs through which al-Qaeda leaders fund their operations.

But targeting the group's finances also brings up another point the United States' national security apparatus eventually came to appreciate. Namely, that although hardcore terrorists like bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri might not be deterrable, other crucial members of the al-Qaeda network are not so ideologically committed to the Jihadist cause.[iii] The group's financiers are a good example.[iv] These financiers help al-Qaeda leaders transfer money through modern global financial networks undetected, which is crucial to al-Qaeda's ability to recruit members and carry out attacks. However, the financiers perform their services for the group because of the personal monetary benefits they receive from doing so, not because of any ideological convictions for Jihadism. By targeting these individuals, then, the United States can deter talented financiers from working with al-Qaeda. This, in turn, hinders the non-deterrable terrorist leaders' ability to act upon their vicious intentions.

B. Discrediting al-Qaeda

Another interesting part of the book is the authors' discussion of how the Bush and Obama administrations differed in their approaches to discrediting al-Qaeda in the eyes of the Muslim world. The Bush administration carried out a “war of ideas” that pitted Western values of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism against al-Qaeda's violent ideology in a sort of zero-sum competition for the hearts and minds of the Arab Muslim world.

While certainly desirable, the Obama administration concluded that promoting American values was not required to discredit al-Qaeda. Rather, all discrediting al-Qaeda required was to aggressively attack its message, ideology and tactics. Given that these were usually incompatible with the beliefs of the vast majority of humanity in general, and Muslims in particular, this task was much more achievable. As one Defense official explains, “We have come to a realization of what is in the art of the possible and what is not and what's our role, and more importantly, what is not our role. Now it is learning how to better execute those parts that we think we actually have a role in (177-178).[v]

Counterstrike reveals many of the creative tactics the Obama administration has devised for the parts they decided they had a role in. One example is a *YouTube* video the administration created last Spring that spliced together a video of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri from 2008 saying “there is no hope to remove the corrupt regimes in Muslim countries except by force” with pictures of the Egyptian masses celebrating the resignation of Hosni Mubarak last February (175).

Another strategy the Obama administration has relentlessly pursued is highlighting al-Qaeda attacks that kill

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Muslims, particularly vulnerable targets such as women and children. To do this, however, the administration has learned that any message from the United States is likely to be viewed skeptically, at best, by most of the Middle East. Therefore, the administration has sought to enable more credible sources to relay the facts. For example, Schmitt and Shanker note that the military often gives background facts of an attack to Arab and Muslim journalists who then chose whether and how to write stories based upon them.[vi]

A more familiar example is the particular pieces of intelligence that the Obama administration chose to release from the trove collected from the raid on bin Laden's compound last May. Thus, the administration released videos of an elderly, defeated-looking bin Laden huddled under blankets watching press accounts of himself. Administration officials also tried to emphasize the fact that the terrorist leader had been living in comfortable quarters far from the violent battlegrounds of Western Pakistan, which many of his ardent followers inhabited. All of this was an attempt to demystify bin Laden, who had painted himself as a courageous underdog fighting the U.S. superpower on behalf of the Muslim world (*Ummah*).

In all these examples the point isn't to make the Arab world love the United States, rather just the much simpler task of making Muslims hate al-Qaeda.

C. Cyberwarfare COTERROR tactics

But perhaps the most interesting and creative COTERROR tactics were the ones designed to sow mistrust between the members of al-Qaeda and make them doubt the reliability of their primary modes of communication. To do this the administration has increasingly relied on cyberattacks; the authors in fact dedicate an entire chapter to discussing the Obama administration's decision-making regarding cybersecurity in general.

That the West has taken to using cyberattacks to thwart al-Qaeda operations was not unbeknown before this book. A prominent example took place last June when MI6 hacked into al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's English-language publication, *Inspire*, and replaced bomb-making instructions with Ellen DeGeneres recipe for "The Best Cupcakes in America."

Counterstrike, however, devolves much deeper into the West's cyberwarfare tactics against al-Qaeda. Schmitt and Shanker also report that cyberwarfare triggered some of the most intense interagency debates among those dealing with terrorism. As the authors note, "It is an ironic but important footnote to history that these debates over taking down terror Web sites resulted in the largest interagency meetings held since the 9/11 attacks (139)."

In fact, it is in the arena of cyberwarfare that the U.S. government seems to have struggled most with achieving a "whole-of-government" approach to COTERROR. The issue of shutting down terrorist websites, for instance, presents an irreconcilable clash of interests between the various agencies' charged with prosecuting the GWOt. To cite just one example: whereas the military favors shutting the sites down because terrorist operations that kill U.S. troops are often planned on Jihad forums, intelligence agencies advocates allowing them to continue because monitoring them yields valuable intelligence.[vii]

Despite these types of difficulties, *Counterstrike* documents a number of successful ways in which the United States has used cyberwarfare to disrupt terrorist operations. For example, Schmitt and Shanker report that the administration has hacked into terrorists' cell phones and sent text messages to other terrorists that sow confusion and distrust between the operatives. A senior officer from CyberCom explains one instance of this:

We had the ability to hack into their phones and we would text message guys. It was primarily telling them 'Hey, brother, another guy is cheating you out of money.' The bad guys would get this text message and be like, 'Oh Shit!'... We texted a few of his guys and basically some of his guys gave him up. It was really freaking cool. (147-148).[viii]

The authors report other interesting cyberwarfare tactics the U.S. has relied upon. For example, Schmitt and Shanker write, "There is at least one case confirmed by American officials in which a jihadist Web site was hacked by

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cyberwarriors to lure a high-value al-Qaeda leader to a surreptitious meeting with extremist counterparts only to find a U.S. military team in waiting (147)."

Although al-Qaeda is likely to catch onto these ploys quickly, that is partially the point. As U.S. drones push terrorists further and further underground, they become increasingly dependent upon cell phones and the Internet to communicate with each other and outsiders. By making al-Qaeda operatives distrust these modes of communications, Washington is significantly increasing the difficulty terrorists encounter in trying to carry out their violent activities. And since, as Pavel and Kroenig noted, terrorists value successful attacks, their failure to conduct successful operations just might ultimately deter them from trying altogether.

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[i] Although the authors make the point that the new deterrence strategy drew from those used against the Soviet Union during the Cold War, they do not elaborate on this fact in great detail. For example, they do not say whether certain Cold War administration's deterrence strategies were more influential or not. Rather it seems that what they have in mind is just the general principle of deterrence; convincing an adversary to not take an action. As we shall see, linking the Cold War nuclear deterrence to the new deterrence is somewhat inappropriate since the latter does not rely on the promise of overwhelming retaliation, which was at the core of the United States' and Soviet Union's deterrence strategy towards each other during the Cold War. The literature on deterrence is vast. For a useful recent overview of this literature see, Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2003). For an analysis of the variations in U.S. strategy towards the Soviet Union across different Cold War administrations see, John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of American National Security Policy During the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). For an insightful analysis of how the Soviet Union perceived U.S. strategy and the international balance of power during the Cold War, see, William Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

[ii] Kroenig is now a recognized nuclear proliferation scholar who's written at least two books and numerous scholarly articles on various aspects of this phenomenon. He is currently an assistant professor at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. Before his current stint at Georgetown he also returned to the Pentagon for a year under the Obama administration where he worked on Iran's nuclear program and other Middle East defense issues.

[iii] As Barry Pavel, the co-author of the new deterrence, explains, "The stereotype and monolithic image of the guy with the suicide bomb on his back isn't the only type of actor in a terrorist network. It is far-flung; it is multifaceted and multifunctional.... This guy is a banker; he is deterrable. This guy is a financier, this guy is a logistician (181)."

[iv] Another example is the profit-seeking criminal groups that often sell al-Qaeda and like-minded groups weapons purely because of the monetary reward (188).

[v] Similarly, with regards to working with different groups to counter al-Qaeda's message, another senior defense official says, "This is not about getting them to love us. It is about getting them not to challenge our interests (178)."

[vi] This strikes me as an excellent example of how the Obama administration sometimes prefers to "lead from behind," as an anonymous senior administration official put it to Ryan Lizza, a reporter for *The New Yorker*. In this instance, the anonymous source was referring to the Obama administration's response to the Arab Spring but the comment seemed to imply that the principle held in other areas as well.

[vii] The authors also report that intelligence agencies also insert agents into these Jihadist forums who spend weeks building up their credibility and then begin posting comments that are aimed to create confusion and dissent among the users of these sites.

[viii] At the beginning of this month, *Wired* magazine's *Danger Room* blog reported a similar tactic only applied to a Jihadist forum instead of cell phones. In this case, (presumably) Western intelligence agents hacked into a prominent Jihadist forum writer's account and sent his fellow forum members messages and perhaps spyware.

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