



Book Review: Anonymous, *Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror*

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Introduction

Veteran CIA officer Anonymous[2] continues where he left off in *Through Our Enemies' Eyes*[3], arguing that Osama bin Laden is not a terrorist but rather the leader of a global Islamic jihad aimed, determined not to topple America or its way of life, but to achieve limited foreign policy objectives. He contends that our leaders are blinded by what he terms *imperial hubris*, "interpreting the world so it makes sense to us, a process yielding a world in which few events seems alien because we Americanize their components (165)." Senior members of the military and intelligence bureaucracies, academics, and media commentators are "locked behind an impenetrable wall of political correctness and moral cowardice" and "act as naïve and arrogant cheerleaders for the universal applicability of Western values (xvi)." Given the scope of the threat and the powerful, religiously inspired resolve of the enemy, we are consigned to defeat unless we recognize that "most of the world outside North America is not, does not want to be, and probably will never be just like us (167)."

Perhaps the most important failing resulting from this hubris, Anonymous argues, is the continued insistence that we are not at war with Islam but rather at war with only a few extremist madmen. He sees this is done partly out of genuine ignorance about the outside world but also as a function of "political correctness" and "fear of being labeled a racist or bigot (115)," both of which preclude honest debate. Regardless of the cause for this blindness, he believes that, while Americans do not perceive themselves to be waging war on Islam, bin Laden has convinced a very large segment of the Muslim world that it is their moral duty to wage a "defensive jihad" to protect their way of life from "Crusaders."

Anonymous argues that in most of our dealings with the Middle East, our leaders—including senior intelligence and foreign policy bureaucrats—are failing to "exploit the checkables (22, 83)." That is, they are ignoring the obvious lessons of history, failing to learn from past operational successes and failures, or even to take seriously the repeated written statements of bin Laden and others spelling out the reasons they are fighting. Specifically, bin Laden has six "clear, focused, limited, and widely popular" goals, which he has stated repeatedly since 1998:

- The end of U.S. aid to Israel and the ultimate elimination of that state;
- The removal of U.S. and Western forces from the Arabian peninsula;
- The removal of U.S. and Western military forces from Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Muslim lands;
- The end of U.S. support for the oppression of Muslims by Russia, China, and India;
- The end of U.S. protection for repressive, apostate Muslim regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, et cetera;

- The conservation of the Muslim world's energy resource and their sale at higher prices. (210)

Because of our policies, most Muslims distrust the United States and there is very little we can do in the near term to persuade them of our good intentions.

Cowardly Bureaucrats

The author is dismissive of virtually every person and organization involved in U.S. national security policy, save for the lower ranked personnel—especially, for reasons not quite specified, the female officers—in the CIA's Directorate of Operations and the United States Marine Corps. His sheer contempt for those above him in the decision-making process or who arrive at different conclusions is exemplified by this sentence: "Beyond lieutenant colonel, however, things look iffy, and at the rank of brigadier general and above we find a disaster manned by senior officers, mostly men, who tuck as needed to protect their careers and their institution's insiders club (177)." The book is replete with snide references along those lines: "lame U.S. and Western analytic corps and militaries (69);" "moral-cowardice-driven careerism (84);" "few senior bureaucrats will discount a threat if there is a one-in-a-billion chance it might occur and cost a promotion (84);" "terminally adolescent bureaucrats (85);" "careerism and moral cowardice that appear endemic in our general officer corps (178);" "only a dunce or a man ready to be silent to protect his career (182);" "frothing at the mouth Iraq experts(182);" "ill informed (203);" "dependable moral cowardice of my generation (216);" and "well-dressed, articulate, and politically sensitive dilettantes (245)."

He echoes a lament common to those frustrated by the politics of climbing bureaucracy, such as Ralph Peters and David Hackworth, men whom he quotes frequently in the book:

Expertise is a career killer, especially in the intelligence community. Most prized is the "generalist," the officer who changes jobs ever two years, flitting from Europe to East Asia to arms control to narcotics. Conversant in many topics, expert in none, these usually male officers are fast tracked for senior management (245).

By contrast, as in his previous book, Anonymous is quite effusive in his praise of Osama bin Laden, comparing him favorably to Robert E. Lee (19, 60) and other American cultural icons.

- Viewed from any angle, Osama bin Laden is a great man, one who smashed the expected unfolding of universal post-Cold War peace (103).
- For nearly a decade now, bin Laden has demonstrated patience, brilliant planning, managerial expertise, sound strategic and tactical sense, admirable character traits, eloquence, and focused, limited war aims (114).
- Well-spoken, kind, considerate, pious, and humble, bin Laden also killed more than three thousand Americans on 11 September 2001, and with that act-defying the mighty in deed as well as word-completed the composite picture of a classical Islamic hero (123).
- [T]here is no reason, based on the information at hand, to believe bin Laden is anything other than what he appears: a pious, charismatic, gentle, generous, talented, and personally courageous Muslim who is blessed with sound strategic and tactical judgment, able lieutenants, a reluctant but indispensable bloody-mindedness, and extraordinary patience (168).

One would be tempted to conclude Anonymous had "gone native," except that he is "a career-long 'headquarters' officer (ix)." In fact, the author is merely trying to convey the deep and widespread respect

that bin Laden has earned in the Muslim world and that, by dismissing him as a mere "terrorist," we grossly underestimate him. Unfortunately, as in his previous book, he occasionally writes in the voice of the enemy and obscures this. The use of words like "kind" and "pious" to describe the mastermind of the mass murder of thousands of civilians is incongruous at best and quite likely diminishes the author's credibility with his Western readers. This is a shame because he makes a fundamentally important point:

What the West sees as tragic brutality practiced by despairing or deviant individuals is perceived in much of the Muslim world as a heroic act of self-sacrifice, patriotism, and worship, an act to be greeted not with condemnation and revulsion, but with awe, respect, and a determination to emulate (135).

While many Islamic leaders condemn terrorist tactics, many others consider them a reasonable recourse and much more of the rank and file than our leaders want us to believe.

Losing the War on Terror

Anonymous argues that the United States is losing the war on terrorism, largely because we think we are fighting 1970s-style state sponsored terrorists rather than a loosely coordinated Islamic jihad. Because terrorism is fundamentally a criminal activity, we have always treated it as a matter of law enforcement, with offensive military and paramilitary operations relegated to sideshow status. Despite rhetoric on the part of the Bush administration that this has changed since 9/11, the author strongly believes otherwise.

He finds it inexcusable that we were not prepared to launch a massive strike on al Qaeda's bases in Afghanistan within hours of the 9/11 attacks. He notes that there had been "six major al Qaeda victories" before 9/11^[4], most recently the attack on the USS Cole, giving us ample warning, and that "numerous journalists and even John Walker Lindh" were able to find him.

Washington's failure to have its military ready for a crippling, next-day attack on al Qaeda turned into a catastrophe. It cost America its best-and perhaps only-chance to deliver what is called a "decapitation" operation, one with a chance to kill at a stroke many al Qaeda and Taliban^[5] leaders. . . . America probably lost the war against al Qaeda on 11 September because the U.S. military had been caught completely unprepared (24-25).

The reason for this delay, he charges, was entirely political. It was not that we lacked sufficient intelligence to conduct an operation, but rather the law enforcement mentality and the resulting need to have irrefutable evidence that al Qaeda was the culprit; an obsession with garnering international support for the operation; and a desire to launch a strike without killing innocent Afghans all tied our hands until it was too late.

When action finally came, Anonymous believes, it was action that gave the appearance of victory to reporters and a public that had no way of knowing any better. However, in reality, the actions taken by American forces in Afghanistan against al Qaeda simply returned the Taliban to its more natural insurgent role. He argues further that various claims that the United States wasted a treasure trove of human intelligence in Afghanistan, namely, failing to utilize the "multiple hundreds" of skilled professionals that had been in that country for decades as a result of the 1979 Soviet invasion. "And the thing these American experts knew best and above all others was that there was no possibility of installing a broad-based, Western-style, democratic, power-sharing central government in Kabul (29)." The operation was further botched, in his view, because it was managed by diplomatic bureaucrats who themselves were guilty of imperial hubris:

Having banished these unwashed, medieval Islamists to the periphery of politics, the diplomats intended to give the bulk of the new government's post and power to people more like themselves: secularized Afghans; westernized Afghans who refused to fight for their country and spent a comfortable, self-imposed exile in Europe, India, or the United

States. . . . As always for Western diplomats, well-coifed men who dressed well, spoke a smattering of English or French, and shared an aggressive contempt for region, were preferable as rulers to hirsute men wearing funny looking pajama-style clothes who had merely fought and defeated a mass-murdering, superpower enemy in a ten-year war. Style over credibility every time (39).

He predicts that it is only a matter of time before the Taliban returns to power, since they—not the secularists whom the media focused on after the regime was toppled—represent the will of the Afghan people. Because the press, too, is guilty of imperial hubris, they are unable to see that most of the Islamic world is actually devoutly religious and does not equate modern Western values with "freedom." Anonymous derides press coverage of Afghanistan generally, noting that it was largely uncovered except for obsession with such things as "the failure of Taliban leaders to prove themselves radical feminists (143)."

He saves his most bitter criticism for the launching of what he terms "an avaricious, premeditated, unprovoked war (xvii)" in Iraq.^[6] Though a very small part of the book, this aspect has received the most attention in the early press, which is not surprising given the shock value of a sitting CIA officer criticizing an ongoing war. He entitled the section dealing with the war, "Iraq: The Hoped for but Never Expected Gift," and argues that there was virtually nothing the United States could have done that would have more predictably energized the Islamist insurgency. More importantly, it spread our resources too thin and left the business in Afghanistan half finished.

While he notes that there have been numerous significant victories in the war against the jihadists, he believes them to be overmatched by victories on the other side. Further, he notes, we cannot even agree on how large the enemy force to be defeated is, much less possess an "order of battle" for al Qaeda (67-68).

As a result of these failures and others, "the war on terrorism has failed to defeat the main enemy, lost focus on national interests in favor of a quixotic attempt to democratize and secularize Islam, and is generating enemies and animosities faster than we can kill or quell them (215.)"

American Way of War

Anonymous observes that, though the United States has fought numerous military actions since 1990, "we have not once definitively and finally defeated the foe—military, paramilitary, or armed rabble—we defined as the foe. . . . We have seen no huge body counts, no stacking of arms, no formal surrenders, no masses of prisoners of war, and no tangible evidence of victory (170)." We have come to expect quick victory, with almost zero friendly casualties, and most incredibly with almost no damage to the enemy infrastructure or civilian population. He argues that this mindset virtually guarantees defeat against the Islamist insurgency we are now faced with.

Given the nature of the enemy, he argues we can only prevail by achieving a decisive and bloody victory.

Killing in large numbers is not enough to defeat our Muslim foes. With killing must come a Sherman-like razing of infrastructure. Roads and irrigation systems; bridges; power plants, and crops in the field; fertilizer plants and grain mills—all these and more will need to be destroyed to deny the enemy its support base. Land mines, moreover, will be massively reintroduced to seal borders and mountain passes too long, high, or numerous to close with U.S. soldiers (241).

Not only must we go back to an older notion of warfare, we must also stop counting on international organizations for help in this war, given that it is the United States that is the prime target of the jihad. He believes not only that "others will not do our dirty work, but that others will stop us from doing our dirty work as completely as possible (243)."

Prescriptions

After noting that intelligence officers are engrained "from their first workday" never to make policy recommendations, Anonymous feels obliged to offer some given his substantial criticisms of the extant policies. Mostly, they revolve around the attitude of the American public and its leaders. Among them:

- *Relax*. He argues that the constant clamoring about terrorist threats is both frightening and demoralizing the public with no tangible benefit. He shows particular scorn for the "indoor traffic signal" color-coded alert system.
- *Stop Celebrating Death and Defeat*. He believes the constant, maudlin reflection on our casualties, particularly 9/11, is undignified.
- *Accept that We are Hated, Not Misunderstood*. We are not defending "freedom" but our foreign policy interests.
- *Get Used to and Good at Killing*. Quoting Ralph Peters, "We must avoid fantastic schemes to rescue those for whom we bear no responsibility....If we want to avoid the needless, thankless deaths of our own countrymen, we must learn to watch others die with equanimity (251)."
- *Professional Soldiers are Paid to Die*. While he doesn't want to see American soldiers' lives "wasted," he argues that we are too afraid to have them risk their lives, which they have volunteered to do. He believes we must stop our "knee jerk yellow ribboning (243)" and constant calls for bringing troops home.

In addition to a new attitude, he also proposes that we reconsider our foreign policy to make it less offensive to the Islamic world and to reform the bureaucracy to make it less conducive to careerism. Among these:

- *Do Not Deal with bin Laden as a Terrorist*. We must fight a full-on military campaign, not a counter-terrorist intelligence battle.
- *Demand Energy Self-sufficiency*. We must do whatever it takes to wean ourselves off Middle Eastern oil. Given that several of bin Laden's grievances are tied to our support of despotic regimes with which "we have nothing in common" and which we support only because of our "obsession with cheap oil," we could have a more rational Middle East policy with energy independence.
- *End the Fifth Column of Senior Military and Intelligence Retirees*. He argues that the lure of lucrative private sector jobs after achieving a relatively early pension causes flag officers and senior bureaucrats to be even more afraid to speak their minds than would otherwise be the case. He proposes a ban on many such post-retirement jobs in exchange for longer careers after which they would retire with full pay and benefits.

While not listed as a separate section in the final chapter, it is clear throughout the book that Anonymous is very critical of America's policies toward Israel, which he believes are almost reflexively pro-Israel.

Evaluation

As with any large undertaking, the book has several minor errors. For example, he repeats the oft-repeated tale of the FBI assisting a "dead of night exodus" (24) of the bin Laden family after the 9/11 attacks, which was finally put to rest by the report of the 9/11 Commission.^[7] In fairness, the Commission report, while slightly beating this book on the shelves, came out weeks after it went to press. He lists Kosovo among a series of "half-started wars that will be refought later (178)." While it is certainly

conceivable that war could break out again given that some underlying ethnic-border disputes are unresolved, the Milosovek regime was ousted from power and there is no indication that Serbian troops are likely to re-invade Kosovo.

Regardless of whether one is persuaded by Anonymous' arguments with respect to how the war should be fought, it is hard to agree, even by his own standards, with assertions like this one: "Simply put, the enemy wants war and is not listening; he has no reason to listen, he is winning (253)." While he makes a powerful argument that the United States is no closer to defeating the Islamists than before 9/11 and may indeed be making things worse, wars are fought to achieve political objectives. As he notes, bin Laden has listed six of them. There is no evidence presented in this book that any political objectives are any closer to fruition. Indeed, U.S. sympathy for the Israeli cause vis-à-vis the Palestinian terrorists is higher than it has been in years; we have stopped condemning Russian atrocities in Chechnya and began buying their assertion that they are part of the war on terrorism; we are more tied than ever to Arab leaders who are willing to ally with us against the Islamists; and we have more forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq than we had before 9/11. It is true that we have drawn down forces in Saudi Arabia, although mainly to take the heat off the Saudi regime. Oil prices are up, although owing to increased demand from China and other factors rather than any policy changes.

Anonymous is an intelligent, dedicated man who has spent his adult lifetime studying terrorism, Islamist radicalism, and Osama bin Laden. As such, his insights deserve attention. His core argument—that we are fighting against a large, Islamist jihad rather than a discrete terrorist organization—is quite compelling. Many of the conclusions that follow from that premise, while exceedingly frightening and anathema to the current mores of American political culture, should be debated. My fear is that the powerful arguments he marshals here will be largely dismissed because of the sneering tone and style. It will certainly be taken less seriously by the key decision makers whom he insults than it would have had he restrained his desire to vent his frustrations.

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References

1. In the interests of full disclosure, I should note that I was employed by Brassey's, Inc. from August 2002 through February 2004 as an acquisitions editor. I had nothing to do with acquiring or editing this book or its predecessor, however, and have no financial stake in either.
2. The identity of "Anonymous" has been revealed as "Michael Scheuer, a 22-year CIA veteran who ran the Counterterrorist Center's bin Laden station (code-named "Alec") from 1996 to 1999." This has apparently been an open secret for some time, with Scheuer required to write anonymously for reasons of bureaucratic protocol rather than any issue of personal or national security. Indeed, Scheuer has subsequently done media interviews as "Mike." See Jason Vest, "[The Secret History of Anonymous](#)," *Boston Phoenix*, 30 June 30 2004. I will nonetheless refer to him as "Anonymous" throughout for sake of consistency.
3. Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam & the Future of America* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2002).

4. Attacks in Aden, Yemen (1992); Mogadishu, Somalia (1993); Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (1995); Dharan, Saudi Arabia (1996); Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania (1998); and a second attack in Aden (2000).

5. Note: The author spells it "Taleban," a transliteration preferred by many scholars. To establish consistency, *Strategic Insights* adopts the *New York Times* spelling in all such cases and I have adopted that style throughout, including direct quotations.

6. See, for example, Julian Borger, "Bush told he is playing into Bin Laden's hands," *Guardian Unlimited*, 19 June 2004.

7. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks against the United States, The 9/11 Commission Report, 22 July 2004.

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