

BOOKS

[*Fighting Identity: Sacred War and World Change*, Michael Vlahos, Praeger Security International, 260 pages]

The Rites of War

By Michael Lind

IN A BRILLIANT SCENE early in *Fighting Identity: Sacred War and World Change*, Michael Vlahos describes how he walked the battlefield of Fredericksburg on the eve of the 145th anniversary of the Civil War battle: “This Victorian Falujah took 9,000 Union shells. It was America’s first real street fighting, its first urban combat, and it was not pretty. Lee remarked that the Vandals could not have looted a town better.” To show that the mentality of the religious martyr is far from alien in America, he quotes a wounded Southern soldier: “I was not only unafraid to die, but death seemed to me a welcome messenger. Immediately there came over my soul such a burst of the glories of heaven, such a foretaste of its joys, as I have never before experienced. The New Jerusalem seemed to rise before me. ... I was wholly unconscious of any tie that bound me to earth.” Vlahos asks, “Was their sacrifice so different from Taliban who ambush that armored American patrol, *phat* with Predator-C41SR?”

As this passage suggests, *Fighting Identity* is not a typical book on U.S. strategy. It is unconventional no less in its literary style than in its historical sweep. It is as though George Kennan’s “Long Telegram” had been rewritten by Arnold Toynbee in the manner of Thomas Carlyle.

Michael Vlahos is a fellow and principal at the Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory. He is also a former director of security studies at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced Inter-

national Studies. His career includes service in the Navy, the CIA, and the State Department, where I had the privilege of serving with him for a time in the administration of President George H.W. Bush. Brilliant and unorthodox, with a broader range of experience and a deeper erudition than most better known scholars can draw upon, he is always fascinating and in this book is at the height of his powers as an analyst who tries to understand politics the only way that it can be understood: from inside the skulls of human beings.

Although the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey sought to ground the human sciences in *Einfühlung*, or empathy, the attempt to understand people from within is not a methodology valued by conventional social science, which in recent generations has been afflicted by economics envy—game theory, rational choice—even as economics suffers from physics envy. Vlahos is a rigorous thinker, though his rigor does not come dressed in equations and does not posit a world of profit-maximizing individuals. He describes his method as “a synthesis of anthropology and history. Anthropology offers a holistic guide for thinking about human culture: our thought and action. History is the observed record of human thought and action.”

At the heart of *Fighting Identity* is a theory of historical change worthy of Toynbee or Ibn Khaldun. Most comparisons of the U.S. with Rome are jejune: we have stadium sports and corrupt sen-

this identity framework today.” Having vanquished its last great-power rivals during the Cold War, the U.S. is now undergoing a metamorphosis from one kind of entity to another, a metamorphosis that is unsought and unplanned but not unprecedented:

After success, system leaders inhabit a worldview of iron conservatism. After all, they are defending not ‘the nation’ but rather its universalist vision. ... But how to defend everywhere with limited resources? ... First, grow and harden the administrative and regulatory bureaucracy to maximize revenue. Second, with this tax bounty, reify and militarize the state. This in no way implies militarizing the society; indeed, the society’s movement away from martial ardor is the core motivation for the state to assume the security burden. ... Hence the state effectively grows and separates to become its own subculture, or rather, a constellation of state subcultures, military and bureaucratic. ... The vast American ‘Tribal confederacy’ of military societies, intelligence agencies, and defense contractors is the legacy of Cold War.

Vlahos is savage toward technocrats in the military-industrial intelligentsia who define jihadism as a policy problem to be solved by techniques like “counterinsurgency” and “nation-building.” Of one such American, he writes that

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ators and mighty legions. Vlahos goes beyond such trite parallels to argue that the U.S. is not an ordinary nation-state but a “system leader,” a civilizational power like Rome, Byzantium, and the Ottoman Empire. The system leader is “a universalistic identity framework tied to a state. This vantage is helpful because the United States clearly owns

“when it came to the nonstate world he had the emotional toughness and steely intent of a Victorian district officer riding herd on Her Majesty’s domains, save just one thing: the district officer’s kit would likely have packed several full canteens of cultural empathy.”

What makes Vlahos essential reading is his perception, based on a profound

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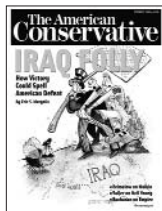
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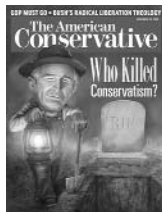


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personal and scholarly knowledge of the contemporary U.S. military as well as history ancient and modern, that while there may be technocratic strategists, there are no technocrat soldiers. Soldiers on both sides—the Roman Empire and the barbarian tribe, the Pax Americana and the nonstate terrorist—belong to communities, treasure their identities, and fight on behalf of creeds.

"The original American Way of War was insurgency, the war of the armed citizen, the militiaman: the Republic," Vlahos writes. He warns that the republican creed that originally inspired the American citizen-soldier is giving way, among America's professional soldiers, to a warrior ethic at odds with the values of civilian society and resembling the warrior ethics of military professionals in other times and places. Vlahos is troubled by the emergence of what he sees as a military subculture that in many ways is also a military counterculture. "We are no longer a fighting society. Hence the emergence after three generations of an intercessor nation: The Tribal Confederacy. ... The reality of a forever-altered American ethos shows why and how Bowie, Travis, and Crockett could be replaced in the 'warrior' heart by the 300."

According to Vlahos, "The confederacy grew up in the Cold War, where the tribal confederacy was everywhere needed—and presumably, for eternity." This military subculture has its own distinctive ethos: "History's greatest professional armies—including our own—also embody deep cultural convictions, even if they are unacknowledged, that make for identity power." As a result of the "forever war" against enemies real and imagined, in which the vanished Soviet threat was soon replaced in the American imagination by a vaguely defined, pervasive, and universal terrorist threat, Vlahos sees a "formal separation of American national identity" into civilian and military subcultures ... on one side the regular, maybe-voting American citizen is held in contempt by a hoplite of the 300 and the millions who are citizens of the confederacy. Likewise, on the other side, the regular guy sees the

digital-camo dude like he was a Roman legionnaire or a space Marine in *Halo 3*: honored, but also alien and afar."

In the very process of waging first the Cold War and then what the Pentagon has called the "Long War" or the "War on Terror" or GSAVE (Global Struggle Against Violent Extremism), the military and the U.S. itself have been warped by America's enemies, who in turn are changed by and defined against the United States. After 9/11, "America's leaders out of their own prophecy saw apocalyptic war: a full-blown Great War in which humanity would be redeemed through altruistic military action." For their part, jihadists are acting out solipsistic, anachronistic cultural rituals that they mistake for politics and strategy. Young jihadists think of themselves as medieval Muslim knights, while young American soldiers refer to Iraqis as "Indians" as though Mesopotamia were the Wild West. "It is not simply that Western—or U.S.—military units are forced to fight the enemy's war, in the enemy's battle environment," writes Vlahos. "Far more significantly we fight as world managers against mythic heroes sacrificing themselves for 'the river' of their particular humanity. ... The role we play as the Other in their passion play—evil, weak, even subhuman—is central to a cultural ritual that is almost primitive in its emotional intensity and passionate symbolism."

Vlahos is profoundly American in his dread that the pressures of engagement with the world could make America less American. "My prescription is hardly original and almost ordinary: National Service. All citizens. No exceptions. Reintegrate American national identity." But he recognizes that his longing for the citizen-soldier is nostalgic: "I know this will not happen." The reader is left to wonder whether a nation divided between centurions and consumers can still be described as a republic. ■

Michael Lind, the Whitehead Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation, is the author of The American Way of Strategy.

[*Blood & Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism*, Michael Burleigh, Harper Collins, 592 pages]

Clear & Present Dangers

By Piers Paul Read

MICHAEL BURLEIGH is a British historian, now in his mid-fifties, who established a considerable reputation for his work on Germany's past. His research in the federal German archives in Coblenz culminated in *The Third Reich: A New History*, rightly praised as a major achievement.

What was new was Burleigh's understanding of the religious nature of fascism in general and National Socialism in particular. This insight led him on to broader studies of religion and politics in Europe—*Earthly Powers*, which starts with the French Revolution, the point at which mass moral enthusiasms became detached from the Christian religion, and ends with World War I; and *Sacred Causes*, which takes the story on from World War I to today's war on terror. Burleigh, a Roman Catholic, quotes T.S. Eliot in an epigraph to this book: "O weariness of men who turn from GOD ... to fevered enthusiasm/For nation or race or what you call humanity."

Now, in *Blood & Rage: A Cultural History of Terrorism*, Burleigh shifts his attention from the mass movements to the smaller cadres of fanatics who have sought to goad history in a particular direction with the cattle-prods of massacre, assassination, and atrocity.

His survey is not comprehensive: there is nothing on terrorism in South America, Sri Lanka, or Kashmir, nothing on the Mau Mau in Kenya or EOKA in Cyprus. But it has historical depth, starting in the 19th century with the Irish Fenians and Russian Nihilists and bringing us into the 20th with the terrorist tactics of Jews and Arabs in Israel prior to

the establishment of the Jewish state, the Algerian FLN, the Italian Red Brigades, the German Baader-Meinhof Gang, the PLO, Black September, the Provisional IRA, the Basque separatists ETA, and finally the ongoing terrorism of the Islamic jihadists.

The chapters on 19th-century terrorism are accomplished and concise, and there are interesting pointers of things to come: earnest young women played leading roles in the anti-Tsarist conspiracies and were also prominent in the Baader-Meinhof gang in the 1970s; Sergei Nechaev's nihilism resurfaces in the 20th century as "the philosophy of choice for adolescents who have read a bit of Camus"; and the large proportion of Jews among the Russian terrorists ("Some 30 percent of those arrested for political crimes were Jewish, as were 50 percent of those involved in revolutionary organisations, even though Jews were a mere 5 percent of the overall population") presages the terrorism of the Irgun and the Stern Gang in Palestine.

Burleigh's scholarship is remarkable. So, too, the lucidity with which he conveys a mass of historical information to his readers. He describes himself as "a conservative realist, sceptical of zealous neo-cons" and considers the concept of a "war on terror" as meaningless as "a

blankets used as curtains and the lingering odours of dope and unwashed clothes."

Here idealism is often a pretext for crazed, self-indulgent banditry and psychotic self-expression. Burleigh is contemptuous not just of the dissolute Andreas Baader but also of the PLO bosses who speed "from diplomatic junket to junket, or from sell-out to sell-out, in their fleets of Mercedes, in between tripping the light fantastic in villas and luxury hotels." He reserves a particular contempt for the fellow-travelling academics and intellectuals—"Jean-Paul Sartre, that loathsome enthusiast for the purifying effects of political violence"; "the celebrity useful idiot ... Heinrich Böll, once a greedy Wehrmacht soldier in occupied France"; and the "various charismatic academic charlatans espousing heterodox forms of Marxism ... a fusion of Freud and Marx, leavened with a bit of Gramsci." He quotes a German terrorist: "theory was something that we half read but fully understood."

Burleigh distinguishes only in passing between terrorism used as a tool in wars of national liberation—for example, the FLN in Algeria—and the futile campaigns of robbery, kidnapping, and murder of the Italian Red Brigades and the German Red Army Faction or the

THE USE OF TERROR MAY NEVER BE JUSTIFIED—THE END NEVER JUSTIFIES THE MEANS—BUT IT WAS UNDENIABLY EFFECTIVE IN EXPELLING IMPERIAL POWERS FROM THEIR POSSESSIONS IN, FOR EXAMPLE, ALGERIA, CYPRUS, IRELAND, AND VIETNAM.

war on *blitzkrieg*." But a war on terrorists is another matter. Burleigh is vehement in his distaste for the self-appointed champions of the people: "the milieu of terrorists is invariably morally squalid, when it is not merely criminal." Literally squalid, too. In West Berlin, the seedbed of Baader-Meinhof terror in the 1970s, "communal apartments and squats had the usual atmosphere of overflowing ashtrays—even hubcaps were never big enough—soiled sheets,

pointless atrocities of al-Qaeda jihadis in New York and London. This conflation of the two types of terrorism impedes an understanding of the phenomenon. The use of terror may never be justified—the end never justifies the means—but it was undeniably effective in expelling imperial powers from their possessions in, for example, Algeria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Vietnam. Former terrorists such as Mohamed Ahmed Ben Bella, Jomo Kenyatta, Menachem Begin, Robert