

Naftali, Timothy. *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

David A. Charters

Volume 26, numéro 1, summer 2006

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs26_1br01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Charters, D. A. (2006). Compte rendu de [Naftali, Timothy. *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 26(1), 143–146.

Book Reviews

Naftali, Timothy. *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism*. New York: Basic Books, 2005.

The 11 September attacks have brought the subjects of terrorism and countering terrorism back into “fashion.” They have also generated a flood of books, scholarly, journalistic, and otherwise, with more — it seems — being published daily. Not surprisingly, the quality and value of these volumes vary considerably. Fortunately, Timothy Naftali’s is one of the best. Indeed, it is in a class by itself.

That is a result of the book’s provenance. Naftali, a historian and Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, was contracted by the 9/11 Commission to write an unclassified history of the early years of American counter-terrorism. Based on extensive archival research in declassified documents and interviews with officials involved, the study amounted to a “quasi-official history.” The commission’s wisdom in allowing the author to publish it is to be commended. Naftali has written a book that will be of great value to scholars and others interested in the subject.

One of the book’s major contributions is to place the current “War on Terrorism” in historical context. Although its scale and scope is unique, this war is not *sui generis*. Rather, it represents the latest iteration of a “war” that has been underway for several decades. In fact, the story opens in the latter stages of the Second World War when American counter-intelligence had to deal with alleged Nazi plans to assassinate General Eisenhower and conduct a terrorist campaign against Allied occupation forces. Neither threat materialized, so terrorism was not a high priority immediately after the war. But in passages that eerily presage post-11 September anxieties Naftali writes that after the Cuban Missile Crisis the CIA warned the Kennedy administration that it would be possible to smuggle small nuclear or chemical weapons into the United States. However, only the Soviet Union had that capability and the US doubted that it was likely to take such action.

The spate of airline hijackings in the late 1960s might have focussed US policy-makers on terrorism. But hijackings to Cuba were almost routine; passengers usually were released unharmed after negotiations and minor concessions. So, there was little incentive or enthusiasm to take firm action until the fall of 1972. Then, the Munich massacre, a nearly disastrous domestic hijacking (which included a threat to crash the plane into a nuclear reactor), and the threat of a world-wide airline pilots’ strike, galvanized the Nixon administration into taking the problem seriously. Full screening of passengers and hand luggage began in January 1973, and the number of hijackings dropped to almost nil. From

that point on, terrorism was on the agenda of every president, although its importance relative to other issues waxed and waned over time and between different administrations. Naftali's account confirms Walter Laqueur's assertion in 1987 that the rhetoric about fighting terrorism was never matched by the allocation of vital resources and attention to that fight. In more than one administration the issue fell through the cracks or got bogged down in inter-agency "turf wars." On the eve of 11 September it was not a high priority for the Bush administration, which was focussed on ballistic missile defence. The idea of a major foreign terrorist attack on the US originating *inside* the country, Naftali concludes, was the "blind spot" in American national security policy.

But that doesn't mean terrorism always had been overlooked. In fact, at times it became too all consuming. *Hezbollah's* kidnapping of Americans in Lebanon in the 1980s caused a steady drumbeat of public pressure on the Reagan administration by the hostages' families to "do something" to secure their release. The absence of viable alternatives led to the arms-for-hostages deal with Iran, which mutated into the infamous Iran-Contra scandal that shook Reagan's presidency.

But Naftali shows that the US chalked up a series of counter-terrorism victories as well. Through the 1970s the US government and Yasir Arafat communicated secretly by means of a "back-channel" — Fatah terrorist Ali Hassan Salameh — with two positive results; it helped to nudge the PLO toward the "two-state solution" and gave the West warnings that allowed them to thwart attacks by some rival Palestinian groups. In fact, dismantling the most dangerous of them — the Abu Nidal Organization (ANO) — proved to be America's greatest counter-terrorism success. Using intelligence from sources in Eastern Europe, where the ANO had arranged sanctuaries, the CIA penetrated the ANO's financial network. Later, the US persuaded the Syrians to expel Abu Nidal himself, and then, with help from the PLO, Jordan, and Israel, played upon Nidal's paranoia to destroy the organization from within. What followed was a series of defections and internal reprisals that devastated the group. Working with Peruvian authorities the CIA also played a role in their capture of Abimael Guzman, leader of the Shining Path group.

The author presents all of this in well-documented and highly readable prose; indeed, at times it reads more like a thriller than what was once a government study. This makes it both valuable for scholars and accessible to the interested public.

Scholars will, of course, find points on which to criticize the book, and this reviewer is no exception. I was struck that a few incidents I thought of as notable were not mentioned: the Tupamaros' kidnapping and murder of American police official Dan Mitrione in Uruguay in 1970; the 1973 Palestinian firebombing of a Pam Am airliner at Rome airport, which killed fourteen Americans; and the kidnapping of US General James Dozier by the Red Brigades in Italy in 1981 (and

his subsequent rescue by the Italian anti-terrorist unit). Did these events have any impact on the development of US counter-terrorism policy? If so, it is not apparent in the book.

With respect to policy itself, the book is perhaps a little too focussed and this may reflect its origins. Naftali has put American counter-terrorism policy under a microscope to good effect, but as a historian I was troubled by the lack of wider context. Laqueur's astute comment about the dichotomy between rhetoric and action on terrorism is germane here. It can be explained — at least in part — by the policy priorities of different administrations. But those priorities are largely absent through much of the book. One is inclined to ask: what else was on the presidents' desks and agendas when terrorism was being discussed? For example, how important was terrorism as a policy issue compared to US-Soviet arms control negotiations? Did the Reagan administration's fixation on Soviet sponsorship of terrorism have any impact on that centerpiece of strategic policy? Likewise, America's experience of terrorism in Lebanon was shaped to a considerable extent by the actions of its ally Israel, but the book doesn't set that experience within the context of the wider US/Israeli strategic relationship that was developing during the 1980s. Did the Americans come to share Israeli perceptions of the problem, as some critics have suggested, and if so, did this influence its approach to counter-terrorism, for better or worse? Finally, US policies and actions generated criticism both domestically and among its allies; the interception of the *Achille Lauro* hijackers and the air raid on Libya are cases in point. But there is scant mention of public or allied dissent and whether it subsequently influenced decision-makers and their policies. Clearly, American policies were not developed in a vacuum, but the reader could be forgiven for concluding that this was the case.

Finally, scholars rarely pass up an opportunity to critique the use of sources. Naftali has made excellent use of declassified primary sources in the official and private archives and presidential libraries. These give the work its authoritative stature and scholarly credentials. But he appears to have overlooked a number of worthwhile secondary sources, such as William Regis Farrell's *The U.S. Government Response to Terrorism* (Westview, 1982), which was the first to explore the inter-agency battles over counter-terrorism jurisdiction, starting under the Nixon administration. Mark Celmer, *Terrorism, U.S. Strategy and Reagan Policies* (Greenwood, 1987) did the same for a later period. David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War on Terrorism* (Harper and Row, 1988) is a solid journalistic history of US counter-terrorism in the Reagan era. Brent Wilson's chapter on American efforts to counter international terrorism in this reviewer's edited volume, *The Deadly Sin of Terrorism* (Greenwood 1994) provides a scholarly perspective that spans the period from the Nixon to the first Bush administration. This is not to suggest that any of these studies comprised the last word on the subject, but rather that one would expect to see them cited if only to demonstrate the author's awareness of

the full spectrum of extant writing on the subject — and to provide him with the opportunity to correct the earlier record. On the other hand, to help substantiate the dismantling of the ANO, he does cite journalist Patrick Seale's book *Abu Nidal: A Gun for Hire* (Random House, 1992), which advances the bizarre thesis that since Nidal's operations were so damaging to the Palestinian cause he must have been an Israeli agent. Naftali, of course, doesn't buy that argument, but nor does he use his book to discredit that conspiracy theory.

These limitations, however, are largely of interest only to the specialist scholar and do not detract from the overall value of the book. The 9/11 Commission is to be commended for initiating this study and for choosing a scholar and writer of Timothy Naftali's calibre to write it for a public which deserves such a balanced exploration of America's counter-terrorism past. It is likely to be the definitive work on the subject for the foreseeable future.

David A. Charters is a Professor of History at the University of New Brunswick.

Born, Hans, and Ian Leigh. *Making Intelligence Accountable: Legal Standards and Best Practice for Oversight of Intelligence Agencies*. Oslo: Publishing House of the Parliament of Norway, 2005.

To say that the business of national security has become increasingly complex in the post-11 September world has become something of a cliché. Of course, this does not make it untrue. Governments increasingly rely on security and intelligence organizations, in turn elevating the risk of abuse of these services. In *Making Intelligence Accountable*, Dr. Hans Born, senior fellow at the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, and Ian Leigh, co-director of the Human Rights Centre and professor of law at Durham University, compile a catalogue of best practices in the oversight of intelligence agencies. They do so with an eye toward raising awareness of good governance in the field of intelligence and encouraging sound security policy to protect agencies and citizens against political abuse. By comparing and evaluating intelligence oversight legislation from over 20 states, each with its own mix of organizational structures, democratic maturity, and political culture, Born and Leigh have assembled perhaps the most comprehensive study of intelligence accountability methods to date.

While *Making Intelligence Accountable* reads more like an instruction manual for intelligence oversight reform than it does an argumentative piece of scholarship, one can still discern at least three main contentions. The authors' first key claim is that the oversight of intelligence agencies is a responsibility