



State of Terror

War by any other name . . .

BY GARY SCHMITT

In spite of the fact that virtually every major act of terrorism over the past thirty years has been state-supported or state-directed, Americans and their elected officials continue to interpret the phenomenon as the violent, random deeds of the world's lunatic fringe. It's as though we would rather see terrorism as akin to natural disasters than to policy made in an adversary's war room.

The reason is that, as horrific as terrorism can be, its human and material costs have a minimal impact on the American population. Oh, we loudly demand that the culprits be caught and justice meted out. But that indignation passes rapidly as the terrorists' deeds fade and the terrorists themselves disappear into the shadows. And the dirty little secret is that governments are often happy that's the case. If terrorism is state-sponsored, then governments are faced with a choice between waging war in return and ignoring an act of aggression, neither of which is without consequences.

It is precisely this dilemma that Middle East scholar Laurie Mylroie examines in *Study of Revenge: Saddam Hussein's Unfinished War against America*. Are we willing to face the fact that most terrorism consists of acts of war being waged by identifiable nations? No, says Mylroie, as she focuses on the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the government's apparent willingness to ignore the evidence that pointed toward Iraq's hand in the effort.

Instead, the effort to topple one Trade Center building into the other, bringing

down both amid a cloud of cyanide gas, killing thousands in the process, has been handled by the government as a plot carried out by a loosely connected group of Islamic radicals. But, early on, as Mylroie points out, those involved in the investigation and prosecution were well aware of both the holes in this theory and the loose ends that strongly suggested Baghdad had covertly manipulated a largely inept and unimaginative group of Muslims—united only in their hatred of America—into conducting the most audacious terrorist attack ever attempted.

The key is Ramzi Yousef, the mastermind behind the February 1993 bombing. Taking on the role of detective, Mylroie shows how phone records, escape plans, doctored passports, personal histories, and physical incongruities all point to Ramzi Yousef's being an agent of Iraqi intelligence. To this day, these leads have never been followed up by the government.

Study of Revenge argues that a significant problem in the investigation was the division of labor between the Department of Justice, whose job in these cases is to prosecute individuals, and the national security bureaucracy, whose job it is to find out whether the terrorism has a foreign sponsor. But once a prosecution is underway, Justice's concerns become primary, pushing all others into the background. And when the individuals have been caught, convicted, and put behind bars, Justice considers the case closed, its job done. As one Justice Department official put it, Ramzi Yousef's real identity is immaterial: "It doesn't matter. . . . We just try a body."

Study of Revenge
Saddam Hussein's Unfinished War against America
by Laurie Mylroie
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Of course, this bureaucratic indifference doesn't have to rule, if the administration as a whole is interested in getting to the bottom of things. But, as *Study of Revenge* recounts, the last thing the Clinton White House wanted during its eight years in office was to deal with Iraq in a serious way. The list of what Hussein has done during Clinton's watch is long: an attempt to assassinate former president Bush, a threat to re-invade Kuwait, a program to continue developing weapons of mass destruction, an attack on American-backed Iraqi opposition forces, a successful effort to curtail and then end U.N. weapons inspections, and—as Mylroie contends—a global campaign of terrorism against the United States. But the Clinton administration either refused to notice or, when it did notice, acted indecisively.

The most President Clinton and this team of advisers wanted to do was "contain" Hussein. Pursuing evidence that Iraq was behind an attempt to kill thousands of Americans in New York City on the anniversary of Iraq's defeat in the Gulf War was an investigative road they didn't want to go down. If it had been shown that Baghdad was involved, the administration would have been forced to take action. For Saddam Hussein, the Gulf War never ended. Coming to terms with that fact would require the American government to take steps to remove him and his regime from power.

Study of Revenge, then, is about an ongoing war. But this war by unconventional means is not recognized as such. Rather, as Mylroie points out, the conventional wisdom is that terrorism today is chiefly a product of transnational organizations, motivated by religious extremism, only loosely tied together and, more often than not, directed and funded by a single individual, Usama bin Laden. Witness our initial reaction to the attack on the USS *Cole*. Putting aside for the moment that even bin Laden depends on state sanctuary and state assistance to operate, isn't it reasonable to ask what states had the most to gain from raising the price for our presence in the Gulf?

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When first confronted with terrorism in the late 1960s, U.S. intelligence and the American elite were convinced that most of it was the product of indigenous social-political factors, with few connections to our enemies' capitals. With hindsight and revelations from the archives of the former Soviet empire, we now know this was mostly wrong. Laurie Mylroie's *Study of Revenge* urges that we not repeat this mistake. Given the growing, deadly sophistication of the weapons terrorists can use, it's a point we can't afford to ignore. ♦
