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Intellectual Firepower

New threats require new think tanks.

THINKING BEYOND THE UNTHINKABLE: HARNESSING DOOM FROM THE COLD WAR TO THE AGE OF TERROR BY JONATHAN STEVENSON • VIKING
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I grew up at ground zero during an age of terror. Just 10 miles upwind of my elementary school in Omaha, Nebraska sat Strategic Air Command headquarters, its proud motto posted outside the security gates: “Peace Is Our Profession.” A group of radical nuns had once spray-painted “War Is Just a Hobby” on the sign before being dragged away in cuffs. But the certainty of Mutual Assured Destruction was no joke for those of us growing up during the Reagan years. Duck-and-cover drills were an annual occurrence, and air-raided sirens punctuated my play time at depressingly regular intervals.

In *Thinking Beyond the Unthinkable: Harnessing Doom from the Cold War to the Age of Terror*, Jonathan Stevenson, a professor of strategic studies at the Naval War College, attempts to understand why it was that the air-raided sirens never sounded their warning for keeps. His answer focuses on the role of people like

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himself (and me, for that matter), strategists in think-tanks who spent their days contemplating the absolute destruction of life on our little planet, ostensibly in the service of the Strategic Air Command's motto. Stevenson's purpose in delving into this particular intellectual history is to examine the lessons that come from thinking about doom on a daily basis and their possible relevance for us today, living in a new "age of terror." After tens of thousands of words evaluating deterrence through the threat of global annihilation, Stevenson proposes a kinder, gentler way of keeping America safe, one that relies on a more nuanced and pragmatic foreign and security policy devised by a new breed of think-tank denizens. As one who has lived under the shadow of nuclear deterrence and fought the shadowy terror of Al Qaeda, it should be unsurprising that I am an enthusiastic advocate of new thinking—and doing—in the pursuit of lasting peace.

Much of this story has been told before. Twenty-five years ago, Fred Kaplan, now a columnist at *Slate*, tracked the development of deterrence theory through the story of its intellectual architects in his wonderfully titled *Wizards of Armageddon*. Stevenson calls upon the same extraordinary cast of characters and chronicles their struggles to understand the most horrible way of war ever devised. In the wake of the devastation of World War II, the United States harnessed a small group of civilian intellectuals to think about how to use the power of the atom, unleashed at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to keep the peace. Many of them came to work at RAND, the Research and Development Corporation, established in Santa Monica, California (a very nice place from which to contemplate Armageddon) in 1948. The most influential of them was probably Albert Wohlstetter, a mathematical logician born in Manhattan in 1913. His first important work for RAND, in 1951, was a study of how the Strategic Air Command should position its bomber bases; Wohlstetter's conclusion, that they be dispersed as far as possible from the Soviet Union to allow maximum time and space to strike back, both imprinted the concept of second-strike deterrence in the nuclear lexicon and ensured that my childhood in Omaha would occur in the shadow of nuclear devastation. Wohlstetter's 1959 *Foreign Affairs* article, "The Delicate Balance of Terror," was the public revelation of the logic of deterrence; published soon after the launch of Sputnik, it contributed greatly to an American appreciation of the nuclear sword of Damocles under which we lived.

Another important strategist was Thomas Schelling, who used game theory to inform his book *The Strategy of Conflict*. Schelling's most significant contribution, Stevenson believes, was "his observation that those engaged in conflict would usually develop a common symbolic focal point—perhaps a physical or geographical point, perhaps a distinctive operational level of warfare—that

dictated boundaries and limits.” The Yalu River served this purpose in the Korean War, while the use of nuclear weapons itself was a boundary between the Cold War superpowers. The imposition of mass civilian casualties became a focal point in a number of conflicts with substate terrorist groups during the twentieth century; the violation of this tacit bargain by Al Qaeda—and the as-yet-unresolved search for a new symbolic focal point—is one of the things that marks a new phase in terrorism in our own time.

No description of the key thinkers of the nuclear age would be complete without reference to Herman “Genghis” Kahn, who served as a communications sergeant in Burma in World War II—after setting a record on the Army’s intelligence test—and began work for RAND in 1948. The author of *Thinking About the Unthinkable*, from which Stevenson draws his own title, Kahn coined the phrase “wargasm” to describe all-out nuclear war and, according to Stevenson, “was the first to insert the word *only* in front of comparative estimates of civilian deaths that ran into the millions.” Although his greatest impact came in his advocacy of civil defense in order to make surviving a nuclear strike more conceivable (and hence make an attack less likely, as the enemy would be unable to destroy its opposition in one fell swoop), Kahn is most famous as the presumptive role model for the title character in Stanley Kubrick’s classic *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.

Pleasant as it is to contemplate again the Doomsday Device that was the major plot twist of “Strangelove,” Stevenson correctly notes that “the higher calculus of nuclear deterrence is now more a historical curiosity” than a significant factor in international politics. But the story of the wonderful wizards of uranium gains something from being told anew in the wake of September 11. Although nuclear deterrence rested on the basis of a balance of terror—indeed, the story of its intellectual evolution is largely an attempt not to have to rely on holding civilian populations at risk of instantaneous destruction—the very fact that states have return addresses made the balance of terror relatively stable.

This was one of the many intellectual failings of the decision to invade Iraq in March of 2003. There are thousands of years of history to support the contention that deterrence works against states, and while the ruler of Iraq may have been a very bad man, there is little to suggest that he was anything but a rational political actor. Even if Saddam Hussein had gained control of nuclear weapons, self-preservation would have precluded him from using them, just as it had prevented a succession of Soviet leaders from unleashing this horseman of the apocalypse. Meanwhile, the risk that his proliferation would have been discovered and punished would have deterred him from giving nuclear weapons

to sub-state actors, who had no territory at risk. September 11 did not, in fact, change everything, and one of the things that it did not change was the fact that states can be deterred.

Non-state actors, however, cannot be deterred so easily. Stevenson gets to this point about two-thirds of the way through *Thinking Beyond the Unthinkable*, and this is where the book begins to plow fertile new ground. The process by which Al Qaeda made the decision to attack the World Trade Center and the Pentagon is instructive: Al-Qaeda's *shura*, or council, sharply debated whether the shock of attacking the World Trade Center and the Pentagon would be worth the probable loss of Afghanistan as a base, and ultimately was persuaded that it was. So the threat of devastating retaliation against territory that had proven so reliable a deterrent during the Cold war was unavailing against al-Qaeda's most

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powerful leaders. They seemed to view not only the destruction of September 11 but also the robust U.S. response as a catalyst to a self-perpetuating and intensifying jihad that would somehow realize the group's violent eschatological vision of an America destroyed. In that light, any feasible punishment administered by the United States was

not merely futile but, in fact, inspiring to the jihadists.

We now face enemies who not only are unconcerned that the fruit of their labors will be the destruction of everything they hold dear, but are absolutely gleeful at the idea. This is a new challenge, and not one which Kahn and Wohlstetter can help us with very much.

Unfortunately, they are not the only thinkers to have left this field fallow. The challenge of radical Islam is not something to which the United States devoted much thought as it grew stronger, encouraged by a reaction to globalization and by some of our own foreign policy decisions. In a judgment some readers will likely take personally but is almost certainly true, former RAND President Harry Rowen said that before September 11, "The scholars of Islam available in the West—certainly in the United States—were a pretty sorry lot." They did not, by and large, see this one coming.

Stevenson doesn't claim to have seen it coming, either. But he does offer a "third way" to the vexing problem of deterring those who see punishment in a positive light. Rather than appeasing or dominating Muslims, he suggests "a new way of thinking about American power and place" that accepts the uncomfortable fact that American power is less relevant in this kind of war than it was

during RAND's glory years. He proposes reviving a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy—one that is more respectful of “other ways of being in the world,” to use Louis Menand's phrase, and one that takes advantage of America's more positive and progressive vision of the future. Such an approach could, over time, help reverse the economic and political misfortunes of Islam as a whole.

This is interesting and helpful, and also somewhat general; Stevenson does not develop the ideas as fully as he could. The part of the solution he fleshes out most fully, perhaps unsurprisingly in a book that focuses on think tanks, is the creation of a new institution to examine the causes of radical Islamic extremism, the objectives of that creed, its likely avenues and tools, how to mitigate its effects, and ultimately how to defang the serpent. One may argue that we have such places already, like the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) and RAND. But the NCTC is an operations center, and its daily responsibilities preclude it from doing the primary research required to form an intellectual base for prosecuting the Long War more effectively. And though RAND itself has done some work on Islamic terrorism, Stevenson finds the work unsatisfying. He argues—somewhat unconvincingly—that existing think tanks are too wedded to bureaucratic practices to allow “new stream thinkers” to do the radical reevaluations of American policy that are necessary.

He proposes, instead, creating a Federally Funded Research and Development Corporation, or FFRDC, dedicated to thinking about the Islamic terror threat in the same way that RAND thought about the Soviet nuclear threat. Stevenson suggests the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) as a model. It is undeniably a good and long-overdue idea, with likely payoffs hugely exceeding the few hundred million dollars such an organization would cost the taxpayer every year. But beyond the basics, Stevenson is working from the wrong mould. RAND was so influential not least because it was the brains behind an enormously large and powerful set of muscles called the Strategic Air Command, where peace was a profession and war just a hobby; DARPA provides thinking that feeds the mammoth U.S. defense industry. Stevenson's proposed think tank would need similar need bone and muscle. But unlike the Strategic Air Command or the Department of Defense, the muscle we need today would motivate soft power, rather than hard steel.

It is not for me, a scribbler in a think tank, to denigrate the idea of creating another one. In fact, an underreported cause of the recent turnaround in Iraq has been General David Petraeus' creation of his own brain trust consisting of many of the military's brightest strategic thinkers on the challenges of insurgency [See Rachel Kleinfeld, “Petraeus the Progressive,” on page 107 of this issue].

If Petraeus could do so much on his own, just with thinkers he knew personally, imagine what the nation could do with a call to service by a president who valued thinking hard about problems?

The first step would be to eliminate the phrase “Global War on Terror” from the lexicon. Counterinsurgency theorist David Kilcullen is one of many scholars who correctly notes the difficulties inherent in declaring war on an idea. He recommends that, instead, “We must distinguish Al Qaeda and the broader militant movements it symbolizes—entities that *use* terrorism—from the tactic of terrorism itself.” But important as new thinking can be, it is insufficient. What we need now, as Stevenson notes, is what the Wizards of Armageddon enjoyed then: “A sense of mission wedded to national purpose.”

If we did, in fact, have the sense of mission that the murder of 3,000 Americans deserves, we could now be waging a true total war on Islamic extremists, rather than relying all but exclusively on an overstretched military instrument of power. This is war on the cheap from the national perspective, war carried on the backs of just the relatively few who have volunteered to perform military service in a time of war. Instead of a nation with a sense of mission, driven by national purpose, we are, in Stevenson’s sad words, “Still Behind the Curve.” Seven years after the attacks of September 11, we have not mobilized the American nation for war. We have not taken appropriate cautions as a result of realistic fears. We have not put our best minds to work, in an organized way, to think about the problems of this new age of terror. Stevenson’s book, in short, is a useful primer on the nuts and bolts of constructing the tools to wage a better war. But a dedicated think tank is only the first step.

A true total war against radical Islamic extremism would call upon all elements of U.S. national power. Philip Bobbitt, in his book *Terror and Consent*, notes the fundamental inadequacy of an international law of war designed to govern the conduct of war between states, not the new challenges of today. Bobbitt criticizes the American government, which, “rather than seeking legal reform” to address the new challenges of terrorism, “has used the inadequacy of currently prevailing law as a basis for avoiding legal restrictions on government entirely.” A better answer would be an international conference leading to an updated Geneva Accords, focusing on state sponsors of terrorism. It would hold that any state that actively or passively enabled terrorist organizations acting on its soil would share responsibility for the terrorist activity, to include financial liability; states could also be held responsible for control of fissile material produced inside their borders. Because deterrence is a function of both capability to punish and credibility that threats will be fulfilled, an international consensus on state responsibility for terror would be far more useful than threats to attack

Islam's holy cities, without the added negative second-order effect of inspiring additional jihadis to fight us to defend them.

But winning this war will take more than changes in international law; it will take new or renewed national institutions. As part of a true total war on Islamic extremists, the United States Information Agency, which played such an important role in winning the war of ideas during the Cold War, should be reinstated. A total war would include a new Marshall Plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan to get at the roots of the economic despair, one of the primary causes of the Taliban's appeal. The lack of a coordinated economic, political, diplomatic, and military counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan is one of the reasons that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, recently and correctly told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "I'm not convinced we're winning it in Afghanistan. I am convinced we can." The United States cannot win the war against Al Qaeda and its associated movements by itself; a strategy for this war requires that we train and equip our friends for this long fight. Military training teams that embed inside Afghan National Army battalions may seem a long distance from nuclear strategists—but, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has noted, these are the wars we are in, and these are the wars that we have to win.

Herman Kahn's gravestone in Chappaqua, New York is inscribed with one of his favorite sayings: "Barring bad luck and bad management." In *Thinking Beyond the Unthinkable*, Stevenson has reminded us that we once put some of the nation's best minds to work attempting to minimize the possibility of bad management of a capability that could literally destroy humankind. If the threat we face today is not as immediate and all-consuming as it once was—at least for those who lived in Omaha—it is certainly worth much more hard thinking and doing than we have given it thus far. Stevenson's book is a good place to start. ■