

TRAPPED

IN THE WAR ON TERROR

FEAR AND SPENDING IN AMERICA

BY SUE RARDIN • PHOTO BY JON PERLMUTTER



Professor Ian Lustick says that before September 11, al Qaeda was “so small that they were actually more irrelevant to the Islamic world than the Aryan Nations are to American politics.”

“The Americans took the bait and fell into our trap,” crowed al Qaeda security chief, Seif al-Adl.

The bait was the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001. The trap is the war on terror — both the war in Iraq, which has boosted al Qaeda leaders to a level of prominence and rallying power that had previously been denied them, and America’s rush to achieve an impossible level of security.

That’s the thesis of a new book by Ian Lustick, the Bess W. Heyman Professor of Political Science.

Trapped in the War on Terror asserts that in terrorism, as in judo, the strategy of the weak is to exploit the strength of the powerful. The 9/11 terrorists used box cutters to turn American airliners into missiles. That day’s events, Lustick argues, set off a disproportionate response that continues to draw the nation’s resources into a vortex of anti-terrorism activity.

The author of several books and many articles, Lustick has two areas of particular expertise: Arab-Israeli relations and the use of computer simulation to predict the effects of shifting social and political factors in a society. In 1989, he spent an hour-and-a-half with the first President Bush and his top national security staff discussing American policy toward Israel and Palestine. He has consulted at lower levels of every administration since 1979, when he spent a year in the State Department.

Lustick affirms the importance of sensible security measures to fight terrorism but insists that national fears have been inflated by “massive exaggerations of the likelihood of terrorist attacks capable of inflicting levels of destruction at or above that experienced” on September 11.

Most of the “terrorist cells” that the government turns up, he says, like the one exposed last June that was said to be planning an attack on Chicago’s Sears Tower, turn out to hold only minor or premature threats, or no real danger at all.

Before September 11, al Qaeda was “a small group of the extreme Muslim school of the Salafis and the jihadis,” Lustick contends, “a group so small that they were

anticipating the effectiveness of security measures and thus the inability of officials to choose the best ones, which leads them to fund too many.

Lustick details one way such funding expands. In “red-teaming,” groups of scientists, intelligence operatives and even Hollywood screenwriters are assigned to imagine scenarios for new kinds of terrorist attacks. “Every scary and

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actually more irrelevant to the Islamic world than the Aryan Nations are to American politics.” Unable to inspire Muslims to create a regional caliphate or even to overthrow the governments of Saudi Arabia or Egypt, al Qaeda decided that “in order to become relevant, they needed to get the United States to play by a script that they had written to make the world look like it was really based on crusaders and Jews fighting against Muslims.”

That they have done, Lustick maintains. They have drawn into their “trap” thousands of Americans and Europeans who, while serving as targets, also kill Muslims on Muslim soil, thereby legitimizing the position, power and worldview of al Qaeda among many Muslims.

Lustick’s book focuses primarily on America’s mounting efforts to keep the nation safe. He describes the forces in that trap, including officials’ eagerness to defend the country, the “irresistible” exploitation of fear by political and commercial interests, and the difficulty of

plausible idea produces its own requirement for countermeasures,” he explains. “These are almost always more difficult and more expensive [than existing measures]. Nor will they ever be foolproof, especially against the most imaginative schemes that subsequently constituted red-teams can produce.”

According to Lustick, funding for the war on terror is “so high, so widely distributed through the government and so rapidly changing” that real costs are hard to calculate. He points out that since 2001 the war, including its central front in Iraq, has cost more than half a trillion dollars. How appropriately is the stateside share of that money being spent? In 2004, Lustick asked an official in close touch with allocations to rank the terror war on a scale of one to ten, with ten representing appropriateness of funding and one being responsiveness to political posturing and pressure. The contact’s response was “between 1 and 1.5.”



AP/Chris Wedel

UNDERSTANDING IRAQ

WHO CLUES AMERICAN MILITARY PERSONNEL ABOUT IRAQI POLITICS AND SOCIETY?

One answer is the Middle East Center at Penn, which has provided training to Army Reserve officers whose help in rebuilding roads, schools and hospitals involves frequent interactions with Iraqi civilians. The center's training programs have given these officers a deeper look into the customs and attitudes of Iraqis.

Kathy Spillman, associate director of the center, reports enthusiastic responses. "One lieutenant colonel said that our training may have saved lives," she says.

In June 2006, the center hosted — on Penn's neutral turf — an unusual, off-the-record conference between military civil-affairs officers and representatives of international non-governmental organizations (NGO) who had been working in Iraq. "Relations between international NGOs in Iraq and the U.S. military have been strained," Spillman observes. "This conference afforded them an opportunity to reach a better understanding of the work on both sides."

Besides such special services, the Middle East Center works to link the University's programs in early Middle East languages and civilizations with scholarship on modern Middle East politics and societies.

—SUE RARDIN

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A particularly insidious force, Lustick insists, is our Madisonian or interest-group form of democracy, which encourages groups to urge their own claims for funding. Agencies and states are not alone in wrestling over the spoils. The airline and insurance industries were among the first of many commercial interests to make claims. Professional associations, including district attorneys, veterinarians, pharmacists, pediatricians and psychologists, have made appeals for funding. Even Dunkin' Donuts franchises have pulled out a plum — \$22 million in Small Business Administration loans.

Universities also have their forks deep into the pie. "Along with hundreds or even thousands of new counterterrorism consulting firms," Lustick notes, "dozens of new institutes dedicated to studying terrorism, counterterrorism, homeland security, bio-security and so on have sprung up in universities across the country, while previously established centers have seen their funding rise sharply." Hundreds of colleges and universities — and 80 percent of community colleges — offer courses in homeland security designed to enhance their eligibility for such funding. (See "City Security," p. 5.)

Harry Kreisler, executive director of the Institute of International Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, says that "Ian is uniquely positioned because of his understanding of Middle East politics to question the assumptions of the war on terror and also to show its domestic impact — how it corrupts our interest-group politics."

Formerly affiliated with Penn's Solomon Asch Center for Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict, Marc

Sageman, Res'95, is a government consultant on al Qaeda and author of *Understanding Terror Networks*. He calls *Trapped in the War on Terror* "a courageous book that runs counter to conventional wisdom." America's "overreaction" to the 9/11 attack "may play well with the public," Sageman says, "but it's a disaster on an international level. It is fueling the hate against the U.S. and inspiring young Muslims to join the jihad."

The way out of America's fear and spending, Lustick believes, is a new presidential administration, followed by a more realistic analysis of how much security we can sensibly hope to attain. He points to the 1947 analysis of the Soviet Union's nuclear threat by adviser and diplomat George Kennan, who showed how the United States could stand against the Soviet Union without going to war. That analysis, Lustick asserts, laid the foundation for two generations of American foreign policy and strengthened the nation for decades of life under the peril of annihilation, a far greater threat than the one posed by terrorism.

Given the tenacious trap Lustick's book describes, such a national redirection will not be easily achieved. The "wounds inflicted by the ... use of our own enormous power can be the most damaging result" of a terrorist strike, Lustick writes. "We can recover" from even the worst imaginable act, but "only a society based on confident resilience ... and leaders acting out of courage and discipline rather than impulse and bravado could survive such an ordeal without lashing out so massively as to render the planet unsafe for Americans for generations." ■

Sue Rardin writes for magazines, nonprofit institutions and corporations.