

Redrawing the Western front
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WAR ON TERROR

Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty-First Century

By Philip Bobbitt

Allen Lane, 672pp, \$35

Churlish it may be to cast stones at an important, learned and original achievement, but a treatise promising a "transformation of the conventional wisdom in international security" warrants no everyday scrutiny.

Terror and Consent has been hailed as the most profound book yet on the global challenges surrounding the so-called war on terror. And it is a searching analysis. Yet despite, or perhaps because of, its 600-odd pages of dense and sometimes over-erudite argument, I was left unpersuaded by its underlying and unyielding conviction that the struggle between terror and consent is the global problem of the century.

Thankfully, many of the book's insights can be absorbed whether or not one fully accepts that conviction, just as when the non-believer admires a medieval cathedral or mosque it is possible to be edified by the edifice without being converted to the faith.

The craftsman of this vast work is the category-defying Philip Bobbitt: strategist, legal expert, historian, Texan, patron of poets and former senior official in multiple US administrations. His international reputation was secured in 2002 by his even longer (900-page) analysis of the evolutionary interplay of the natures of the state and war, *The Shield of Achilles*, reputed to have been bedside reading for John Howard.

His latest book is no doubt already required reading for present and prospective Western leaders or their advisers. And it will likely play no trivial role in framing the foreign and security policy directions of the next US administration. It imposes a novel coherence on many elements of the struggle against Islamist terrorism, warns against complacency and offers a compass for uncertain futures. It is so ambitious in conclusions and construction that it contains something for every reader to object to, thus kindling a valuable discussion about ends, means, strategy and law. Bobbitt rightly considers the lack of such debate to have been a central weakness in the response to terrorism since the 9/11 attacks.

This book is also a challengingly engaging read. Bobbitt writes with a vision, sensibility and linguistic elasticity associated more with poetry than security scholarship. Allusions to masques, Shakespeare and the bent military logic of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* rub shoulders with classical logic, constitutional history, investigative journalism, theory of intelligence analysis, the sexual mores of Caribbean pirates (the terrorists of their time), strategies of deterrence, the science of nuclear weapons and the tragic necessities of triage.

All of which is fine if the author's main intentions are to open minds, overturn convention and confound critics by refusing to have his message caged. But when it comes to so literally life-and-death a subject as how to deal with terrorism, even the most enlightened of governments has limited appetite for subtlety, byways and the grand canvas. This book's daunting length and detail, along with its complex structural integrity, make it an unwieldy manual for servants of the state. Yes, every forward-thinking security bureaucracy should assign a few brave staff to labour in the Bobbitt mines. But it would be cruel to ask them to craft what they find there into bullet points for busy ministers.

Admittedly, the author makes some concessions to tidiness. He takes pains to clarify terminology. This is vital: he custom-makes key terms to compensate for deficiencies in the existing lexicon. To keep the reader on track, Bobbitt regularly revisits his main arguments in summary form. Sometimes this works: he returns repeatedly to three theatres of terror -- globally networked terrorism, weapons of mass destruction and human catastrophe -- as a unifying concept. But a simple alternative to the rhythm of recapitulations would have been some ruthless editing. At risk of vulgarising, here are some of the chief arguments he outlines.

As noted in *The Shield of Achilles*, our globalising world is in transition from the nation-state, which aimed to improve the material welfare of its people, to the "market state", the main aims of which are to maximise its citizens' opportunities and protect their lives. Each new form of the state faces its own kind of enemy, a mutation and mirror image. The foe of the market state is the international terrorist network. This is not yesterday's nation-state variety of terrorism but a new, globalised, decentralised, outsourcing and peerlessly murderous adversary.

The emerging market states, as well as existing democratic nation-states, are "states of consent", based on liberty, law and respect for human rights. Their enemies seek to supplant them with an alternative kind of market state, a state of terror.

The war on terror, therefore, is genuine -- though it should be redefined as a series of wars, requiring campaigns that integrate military, police and civilian capabilities far more effectively than anything yet attempted. The West's struggle against al-Qa'ida is merely the first such war. The identities of future terrorist adversaries -- not necessarily Islamist -- are left vague.

With the globalisation of markets, technology, information and travel, the prospect of terrorists acquiring weapons of mass destruction has become real. Indeed, it may just be a matter of time before a terrorist group gains a useable WMD. The scale of this threat suggests a triage approach to fighting terror: WMD proliferation needs to be tackled as priority No1, even if this means less attention to some conventional terrorism. After all, a nuclear attack by terrorists would be a turning point in provoking a state of consent into transforming itself, through its own fear and wrath, into one of terror.

So the "war aim" for states of consent is to prevent their being turned into states of terror, while buying time for more societies to become states of consent and for market states to maximise more opportunity for more people. To prevail, states of consent simply need to endure, whereas states of terror can maintain themselves in power only by presenting fresh threats.

The challenge for the West is to prevent catastrophic loss of civilian life and preserve opportunity-maximising institutions and infrastructure, such as the free flow of information and energy, "to allow society to develop and maintain consensual government". These terms for victory require a new concept of war, not pre-emptive or even preventive but "preclusive".

Achieving these preclusive victories will require the integration of lawfulness and strategy, and here the US under George W. Bush has failed spectacularly. This does not mean that all coercion, monitoring or curtailment of freedoms are ruled out. An effective strategy in the wars against terror requires adherence to the rule of law, and where the law is inadequate, "a vigorous and transparent effort at law reform".

But there are limits, and torture is beyond the pale. Bobbitt warns of the need to be able to judge when an act of violence "represents a legitimate effort to preclude terror and when it is itself an action of terrorism", and all torture -- the infliction and the prospect of severe pain -- is terror. Instead, he proposes, at the end of the book's most exhaustive and sophisticated argument, the establishment of a lawful, jury-like system that in extreme circumstances could authorise non-violent forms of coercive interrogation -- for instance, involving sleep deprivation, isolation and drugs.

Effective wars against terror cannot be waged unilaterally by the US, but only with international partners, especially Europe, though Australia gets a nod of approval for its military's "constabulary" abilities. And the enemy is not solely terrorism, but also any large-scale threat to the safety of populations and thus to the environment needed for states of consent. Ultimately the wars on terror should also involve mobilisation to avert ethnic genocide and even to provide humanitarian aid following natural disasters. The role of the US Navy in providing relief after the tsunami in Aceh is lauded as the way of the future.

What are fair guideposts for judging so large and bold an accomplishment, a book that concludes with a set of recommendations titled nothing less than "A plague treatise for the twenty-first century"? I will settle for questions about completeness. Does the reader need to accept the complete picture Bobbitt presents? And does Bobbitt present the complete picture?

The short answers are no and no.

It is not necessary to define Islamist terrorism as an intrinsically existential or strategic danger to recognise it as a grievous threat to lives and order in many countries, Western and non-Western, not all of them fully fledged states of consent. Sometimes this threat will warrant a military response, including expeditionary and sustained counterinsurgency action. Always it will demand a greater sense of national resilience than most Western countries have demonstrated in circumstances outside conventional war.

This includes hardening and decentralising infrastructure and a willingness to endure risks and casualties without being cowed into policy surrender or into lashing out with irrational misdirection of force. And although I believe the possibility of terrorists acquiring a nuclear weapon tends to be exaggerated, it cannot be dismissed and so strenuous measures are required to minimise this risk.

But a holistic consideration of terror must place it in the context of other dangers, not only ethnic massacres or random natural disasters, but the possibilities that the wholesale security impacts of climate change or large-scale clashes of interests and values between states will put the struggle against terror in the shade. Russia has just reminded us that interstate war is not dead.

Bobbitt's point about the need for states of consent to respond effectively to natural disasters could be construed as a creative first step in linking the security paradigms of counter-terrorism and climate change. But the messy reality is that international efforts to deal with climate change -- whether acting preclusively or responding to impacts -- will demand massive and early co-operation involving states of all kinds, including those that are not market states or states of consent.

A more particular deficiency of *Terror and Consent* from an Australian perspective is the minimal attention it pays to Asia, and in particular to the fast-rising powers of China and India. A chart depicting a global breakdown of "jihadi targeting by national interests" inexplicably makes no reference to the frequent terrorist assaults on the world's largest democracy, though elsewhere there are mentions of individual atrocities in India. Much of the terror the West faces is or will become the East's enemy too. And the capabilities and co-operation of rising powers will be vital to keeping it at bay.

Perhaps their near-exclusion from the analysis was based on their not yet fitting the definition of market states. If so, there seems an inconsistency in time frames. The threat of transnational terror is described not by way of its present reality but of its future shadow. Yet in identifying how this danger interacts with the society of states, and in suggesting how they should mobilise to fight it, Bobbitt focuses overwhelmingly on the present-day US and Europe, which he casts as a G2, playing a leadership role in concerted action by democracies.

He notes that a mobilised Atlantic alliance against terror would wield most of the present world's military weight. But if the need is to wage wars against terror well into the century, then a fuller account must be taken of Europe's and even the US's projected relative decline

in strategic weight and the corresponding need to enlist new partners. These may or may not be market states, and in China's case something less than a state of consent. That poses deeper questions about the inevitability of Bobbitt's projections regarding the nature of the state.

It is not enough to say, as Bobbitt does, that the wars against terror offer opportunities for collaboration among major powers, and that habits of co-operation thus practised could prevent "wars between the market states of the future". If this is indeed the Asian century, yet its epochal struggles are to be waged between states of terror and states of consent, then new labours of analytical synthesis await.