

Anonymous, **Imperial Hubris: Why the West is Losing the War on Terror**. *Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 1 July 2005*. Pp.314. \$27.50. ISBN 1 574888625.

Since the publication of the hardback edition in 2004, Anonymous has been revealed to be Michael Scheuer, former head of the CIA's Osama bin Laden unit in the late 1990s. As such, his experience and insights can not be denied, and the book certainly serves as a useful critique of any who may assume Al Qaeda to be a bunch of disorganised hicks, living in caves.

Scheuer is at his most compelling when lamenting the impossibility of exporting and imposing Western democracy and capitalism on those

who, for whatever reason, reject such values. The consequence, in his words, is that the Karzai regime in Afghanistan is unsustainable – ‘a self-made illusion on life-support’ (p.xvi).

He notes the need to understand a problem’s history and context, and complains that ‘the way we see and interpret people and events outside North America is heavily clouded by arrogance and self-centredness amounting to what I called “imperial hubris” in *Through Our Enemies’ Eyes*’ (his previous book, p.165).

Scheuer’s overall thesis is fairly straightforward and well articulated: the West does not face a terrorist problem – still less a criminal one, as some have suggested – rather, we are confronted by a worldwide Islamic insurgency that requires political will and military means to be resolved. Above all, according to Scheuer, we are not hated for what we believe in, but rather for what we do – largely to the Arab world.

Despite being a tough-minded Catholic conservative then, Scheuer sounds remarkably like a whole spectrum of political opinion from the radical left through to establishment-minded think tanks – such as Chatham House in the UK – when he suggests the West should stop interfering in the affairs of Israel and Iraq, and has a self-serving interest in oil.

How could this be? A clue lies in Scheuer’s book itself. While admirably pitting himself against much contemporary opinion, one cannot help but notice that if Scheuer were only to re-read his own work – through his own eyes – he might realise that consistently and throughout he identifies a different enemy to the Islamist insurgency he concludes we should courageously destroy.

From the preface through to the final chapter, Scheuer bemoans the ‘moral cowardice’ of senior leaders, political elites, the media and even generals, as well as some in the intelligence community, who have become ‘risk averse’, ‘hold expertise and experience in low esteem, perhaps even contempt’ (p.245), and would rather have a quiet life than confront the pressing difficulties facing American society.

Nor, would it appear, do the problems confronting the US today simply consist of the ‘anti-Western sentiments of Muslims’ (p.91) he particularly draws attention to throughout his work – drawing on the evidence provided, among others, by Gallup (p.140) and the Pew Trust (p.167).

Scheuer endlessly complains about other targets: political correctness, multiculturalism, creeping legalism and a culture of precaution in Washington and beyond. Indeed, his suggestion that, ‘In a society bereft of talented, manly, pious, and dignified leaders, the mujahideen are both legitimate and romantic heroes’ (p.18), acts as a description that applies beyond the Muslim leaders he decries in that particular passage of the book.

The work is littered with a liturgy of Western failings. ‘Style over credibility every time’ (p.39), he moans, presumably emanating from some of ‘Washington’s desk-bound chest beaters’ (p.50), which he also reserves his ire for. By the end, he subscribes to Niall Ferguson’s therapeutically informed description of the US as a ‘colossus with an attention deficiency disorder’ (p.203).

Now, don’t get me wrong, many of these criticisms are pointed, well-made and largely valid, but surely therefore, they point to a prior battle to be engaged in before his preferred option of a military engagement with all insurgents abroad? It might also suggest that if so many Muslims truly hate the West – as he suggests they do – then maybe they got their ideas from far closer to home than most of us care to imagine.

This domestic self-loathing is what allows Scheuer to conclude in a manner akin to those from the opposite end of the political spectrum, even if his prescription as to a solution – he prefers bloodbaths to peace processes – is somewhat different.

If Scheuer had spent a bit more time reading Clausewitz, rather than Sun Tzu and the American Civil War generals he liberally cites throughout, he might have got to the bottom of his conundrum. For Clausewitz understood that the ‘friction’ of war necessitates the winning of a few battles at home prior to going off on overseas adventures to teach ‘Johnny Foreigner’ a lesson or two.

In February 2003 the US State Department, in its National Strategy for Countering Terrorism, noted the need to engage in just such a ‘war of ideas’. Since then, however, the ideas element has been rather thin on the ground – beyond the bland attempts to superficially re-brand the US that Scheuer rightly lambasts. Western leaders are conscious of the dilemma but have continuously skirted around the issue when talking of the need to defend ‘our values’ or ‘our way of life’.

But what values and what way of life are they referring to? If it is the long list of morally corrupt and culturally degenerate mores and habits Scheuer decries, then I for one, and quite a few Muslims too I imagine, would be with him in building a coherent political opposition to them.

It is only in contrast to these home-grown failings that bin Laden and Al Qaeda – in what is very much an image war – make themselves look good, even if they claim a list of other, more substantive, grievances, from US occupation of the Arabian peninsula to Western support for Muslim tyrants, as Scheuer chronicles.

Scheuer effectively concedes that it is our own decaying system of values and moral confusion that is the real driver when he laments that bin Laden and his coreligionists benefit from ‘a shared mechanism for perceiving and reacting to world events’ (p.xviii). It is, therefore, this loss of any broader sense of purpose at home that drives him to exalt

bin Laden when he notes that at least ‘he speaks in specifics and matches words with deeds’ (p.149).

He identifies how Muslims ‘appear to genuinely love their God, faith and fellow Muslims in a passionate, intimate way that is foreign to me and, I suspect, to many in America and the West’ (p.2), recognising too that, what we label suicide is actually better understood as the sacrifice of those who still perceive ‘a cause that is greater than themselves’ (p.135). All of this is a far cry from the culture of leaks and celebration of defeat he bemoans among Westerners in the closing stages of his book – a society where ‘the threat level wanders between “don’t worry” and “prepare to die”’ (p.164).

The notion that ‘the enemy is at home’ might seem a step too far for some, but as Scheuer himself concludes ‘the United States of America remains bin Laden’s only indispensable ally’ (p.xv). If so, then it is time we mounted an appropriate response. This would surely take the form of a political – rather than a military – assault, and might serve as a rejoinder to the Culture Wars that were – together with Vietnam – truly the US’s greatest defeats of the twentieth century.

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