

Book Review: Illuminating the Dark Arts of War: Terrorism, Sabotage, and Subversion in Homeland Security and the New Conflict

by Blog Admin

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*In this book, terrorism, sabotage, and subversion are analyzed to challenge the dominant views that a 'new conflict' is now posing unprecedented threats to U.S. homeland security. Since 9/11, the dominant view is that we have entered an era of 'new conflict' in which technology has empowered non-state actors who now pose unprecedented and unmanageable threats to U.S. national security. From homegrown and foreign terrorism to the possibility of cyber sabotage and fears of religious subversion, **David Tucker** challenges every aspect of this 'new conflict' argument, writes **Maria Kuecken**.*

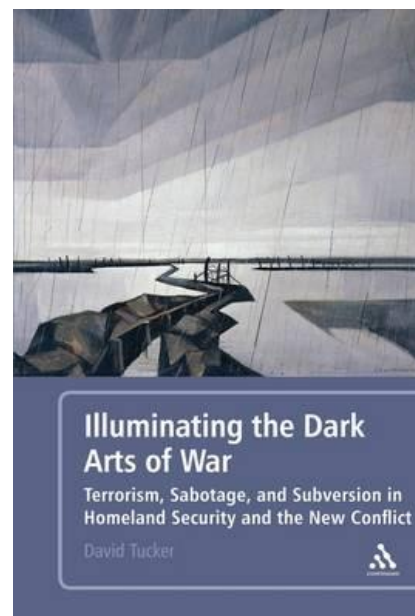


Illuminating the Dark Arts of War: Terrorism, Sabotage, and Subversion in Homeland Security and the New Conflict. David Tucker. Continuum. May 2012

In its relatively short history, the incidence of political violence in the US is a long one—one that covers a wide range of acts from rioting in the run-up to the American Revolution to terrorism in the post-Civil War south to racial violence in the twentieth century. In his book, *Illuminating the Dark Arts of War*, David Tucker leverages past examples to put current concerns about terrorism and political violence into historical perspective.

Tucker, an Associate Professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California, claims that the threat of 'new' terrorism is overstated, given that political violence has declined over the long-term. Domestic terrorism reached its zenith in the mid-1970s but has declined ever since. Though the government has improved its ability to uncover plots, a greater frequency of detection does not necessarily mean threats have increased. (It is evidently difficult to ascertain what would have happened in the counterfactual situation.) For example, Tucker illustrates that “more than five times as many people died in terrorist attacks between 1970 and 1978 as have died from Islamic extremism since 9/11.” In spite of this decline, the “perception of the threat from terrorism,” specifically the outcry over religious extremists, has increased since 9/11.

From an individual standpoint, the choice to turn to terrorism manifests only after a series of many complex decisions motivated by grievances over injustice, be it economic, political, or ideological in nature. Yet costs are understandably high to the individual terrorist, explaining why many turn to a clandestine organization. A clandestine terrorist organization may be motivated by grievance but feasibility is key—they must build support via pre-existing networks in terms of both recruiting new members and fundraising. In doing so, a terrorist group faces a paradoxical predicament—though they hold a political objective which would otherwise require them to influence the public and build support in order to attain legitimacy, they must remain clandestine. This forces them to trade-off between tightening security and reaching out. Tucker argues that, though the face of such political violence may have evolved on the surface, the base characteristics remain similar between modern terrorist groups and past terrorist groups, like the Molly Maguires, throughout America's history. And, in a strategic competition between terrorists and an established government, the government holds the best cards as, among other reasons, it can better



establish legitimacy.

A good example of Tucker's point is technology, which is widely touted as one reason why terrorism has fundamentally changed. The argument attests that new technology makes communication secure and cheap, thereby allowing organizations to decentralize their networks. Moreover, it expands recruiting abilities, improves surveillance, and opens up the possibility of online training. However, Tucker shoots down these alleged improvements by demonstrating that they actually help very little or not at all—for example, initial face-to-face meetings to build trust are crucially important for recruitment, while training seems to operate with less effectiveness online since it can do little to alter the way in which individuals process and learn information. On top of these unintended technological consequences, governments themselves continue to expand their technological capacities. Rather than falling behind, they keep pace with the changing dynamic and exploit technology to counter non-state actors.

Tucker goes on to describe that the threats from sabotage and subversion are similarly overestimated while governmental capacity and popular resilience tend to be understated. Though his deconstruction of critiques has a tendency to be buried in point-by-point takedowns of other authors, he nevertheless paints a convincing argument as to why the seemingly 'new' terrorist threat is not so new at all. His strength lies in peppering the analysis with historical examples to show how terrorism, sabotage, and subversion can be put into perspective by the long history of political violence in America. For political violence, as well as with many other current issues, the true threat and the perceived threat should be carefully compared by policy-makers and ordinary citizens alike.

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