

PREFACE

During more than 25 years devoted to the study of terrorism, I initiated the first course on the topic listed in a college catalogue in the United States, authored or co-authored nine books and numerous articles, and consulted with concerned civilian officials, military and law-enforcement officers, and policy-makers who were responsible for handling threats and acts of terrorism in the international arena, as well as at the national, state and local levels. I continue to engage in these activities today.

In the course of my work, I have had numerous dealings with print and electronic news media. Part of this involvement goes back to 1976, when I helped to organize one of the first conferences that addressed the often controversial issues associated with the news media's coverage of terrorism. The program was entitled "Terrorism: Police and Press Problems," and was produced under the auspices of my home state's largest newspaper, *The Daily Oklahoman*.

I have also confronted these issues personally. For example, I gave more than 200 interviews to American and international reporters on the site of the bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995. I also have trained public affairs officers from various agencies to develop their capabilities to deal with threats, incidents or campaigns of terrorism primarily directed at military personnel or installations. The tragic events of 9-11 have only served to accelerate these activities.

I mention my background to underscore my long-term concern with news media coverage of terrorism and my continuing association with those who monitor a form of political violence and carnage that will seize the world's headlines and both physically and psychologically threaten individual and public security in the years to come.

With few exceptions, my experience with the news media has been positive. Most print and electronic journalists have been professionals seeking to carry out their responsibilities after appalling acts of terrorism while facing the pressure of deadlines. I also recognize that, in a highly competitive marketplace, the old expression – if it bleeds it leads – still to a degree determines whether detailed, objective coverage succumbs to sensationalism.

At this time, I am worried that, given the increased competition among the networks, cable and now the Internet to get the greatest audience share or readership, the type and extent of coverage are driven by the harsh realities of financial gain or loss. The results at times lead to more detailed, in-depth coverage. But all too often, especially on television, national and local coverage has become a form of electronic tabloid, where sound bites replace thoughtful, critical analysis.

Print media have more time and space to engage in broader, deeper coverage. But, again, economic realities have led to increased concentration of newspapers and often an emphasis on form rather than substance. The appearance of a newspaper may be more significant than the news it seeks to convey. Moreover, as in the case of the electronic media, there are serious questions as to whether journalists are simply filling in the program time or column space to get maximum exposure or have a long-term commitment to understanding what they are covering. Is technique overriding knowledge in our understanding of world affairs and where terrorism fits?

Faced with the continuing concern over news media coverage in general, and terrorism is particular, it is heartening to have *Orlando Sentinel* foreign-affairs columnist John C. Bersia as a member of the news media. He represents the best of what journalists should deliver as they cover the increasingly dangerous and rapidly changing environment in which we live.

I first had the pleasure of working with Bersia more than a decade ago, when he began interviewing me on terrorism developments for the *Sentinel*. Whether we were discussing violence in the Middle East or airport security in the United States, I was always impressed with his insightful questions. It was clear that he not only did his homework before the interviews, but phrased the questions in a way that enabled me to clearly convey my expertise.

My intention was to enable readers to place terrorism into an appropriate perspective, neither overreacting nor under-reacting to a phenomenon that is a fact of geopolitical life. The resort to terrorism is a political instrument to achieve either real or mythical goals through the threat or use of purposeful violence.

Bersia's ability to cut through the verbiage, rhetorical slogans, and consequent emotionalism and accompanying sensationalism that often accompany conflict, warfare and terrorism are manifested in the following collection of articles that originally appeared in the *Sentinel*. Each one stands by itself, but taken as a totality the articles offer numerous themes that assist in guiding, educating and informing a public that now has come to grips with the post-9-11 international security environment.

In the first place, Bersia, unlike a number of other journalists who address terrorism and its impact on national security, provides a balanced view, not a partisan perspective. He therefore presents objective analysis instead of polemic, and research-backed positions instead of posturing. This is not to suggest that Bersia does not hold strong views and fails to verbalize them, for he certainly suggests alternatives that should be considered by readers in developing their own evaluation of U.S. policies. He is forthright in his columns; there are no hidden agendas. He neither talks up nor down to readers. He writes for a literate and hopefully concerned audience.

Secondly, and Bersia is excellent in doing this, he places events and issues associated with international tensions, particularly in reference to terrorism, into a context. He does not simply provide a written "snapshot" of an event similar to the recurrent images that were generated by the events of 9-11. He seeks to present a broader view that can enable readers to better understand the full spectrum of the causes, dynamics and outcomes of terrorism.

As an example, Bersia looks beyond the territorial conflict against al-Qaeda and recognizes that "...bin Laden offers a different challenge and opportunity in that he represents a movement without borders." In effect, Bersia provides the frame, the big picture that can enable us to place the reality of terrorism into a broader, not solely a short-term crisis, perspective.

At the same time, he recognizes that there are no easy solutions or decisive battles in the war against terrorism. Bersia affirms the view that many terrorism specialists have long known -- that terrorism is a form of protracted warfare that will test the resolve of the American public as well as the international order. But he also makes the succinct case that "...bin Laden and his cohorts miscalculated in a big way. They underestimated the resilience of the American system; failed to predict that the United States would

deviate from its usual measured retaliation against terrorism, and did not anticipate that the United States would rally many countries, even those with which it had differences, to join the cause.” His optimism is grounded on a realism that should not be dismissed.

Thirdly, and this is refreshing, Bersia does not look at the Middle East as a quagmire that cannot be resolved. As he notes, “At this defining moment, with global terrorism challenging civilization, President Bush should sweep aside the defeatist attitudes that too often dominate and limit American thinking about the Middle East – a perception of the region as a wasteland of poverty, multiple animosities and unending violence.” His call for the continued use of diplomacy, the development of a regional common market, and recognition that “insistence on immediate, Western-style democracy would bolster the Osama bin Laden of the region and likely doom Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other countries to the extremist nightmare...” are well taken. The disorderly processes of democratization take time and especially in the short term can foster instability rather than lessen it.

Fourthly, Bersia displays his capabilities to look beyond the immediate and grapple with the macro picture by addressing the continuing discussion as to whether the Cold War paradigm has been replaced by Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations.” He also very insightfully recognizes that in an increasingly technologically interdependent world, people will seek different ways to establish their identity – through ethnicity, language, tribal connections, religion and others. He notes in his article “Global tumult demands bold leaders at all levels” that “local challenges are threefold: fighting terrorism, sorting through globalization” and building community. Further, Bersia puts a human face on addressing the concept of community in his very interesting column, “Islam at Home in Las Vegas.” It is a classic account of how people seek to reconcile their traditional values with their new home in a most unlikely place.

Finally, Bersia, who is also a University Professor and the Special Assistant to the President for Global Perspectives at the University of Central Florida, makes a telling case for the need to encourage international education to break down the barriers that lead to violence and conflict. As he notes, “education points a sword at the heart of terrorism and other forms of extremism.” I share his view, which probably affirms that both of us retain a degree of idealism despite the realism we have acquired from our experiences over the years.

Since this preface was started, profound events have taken place that, if anything, affirm the need for the clarity of thought and objective assessment of journalists like Bersia.

The second Persian Gulf War became a reality, and while the conflict ended in an impressive conventional military victory, the short and long-term political impacts on the region and the international arena have yet to be determined.

The optimism surrounding the military success, as perhaps best illustrated by television images of the toppling of a Saddam Hussein statue, is tempered by a realization that was held by a number of analysts and policy-makers even before the war began. That is, the United States and its allies face an even deeper involvement in the vortex of instability that characterizes Middle East politics.

The breakdown of law and order in Baghdad and throughout Iraq serves to underscore that the challenges of developing an effective, functioning government are in many ways even more complicated than the task of defeating the Iraqi military. In

addition, the instability has exposed the tensions that make Iraq a religious and ethnic powder keg.

During the longer term, there are other fundamental problems that, if anything, have worsened since the war ended. Despite President Bush's call for a "road map" to peace for Israel, the Palestinians and other Arabs, the barriers to peace remain and indeed have been intensified by al-Qaeda's resurgence. Multiple bombings in Saudi Arabia underscore that al-Qaeda is still a force to be reckoned with, and that the United States remains a target of opportunity, both overseas and at home.

Also, the United States and its allies must address threats to national security resulting from the potential for regional conflict, particularly in North Korea and other rogue states that may acquire weapons of mass destruction.

Finally, the tensions created particularly between the United States and France – resulting from their different positions on the war in Iraq and the fact that the United States acted basically in a unilateral manner – raising serious questions about the role of the United Nations in the post-war period. Will the United Nations continue to serve as the major international organization in global affairs as the United States pursues its own goals and regional organizations also seek to maximize their positions?

Given those realities, Bersia's astute observations are needed more than ever. He is a gentleman who combines his vision, concern, idealism and experience to enable readers to navigate the troubled waters of the international arena.

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