



## Counterstrike

*Eric Schmitt , Thom Shanker*

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**Inside the Pentagon's secretive and revolutionary new strategy to fight terrorism--and its game-changing effects in the Middle East and at home**

In the years following the 9/11 attacks, the United States waged a "war on terror" that sought to defeat Al Qaeda through brute force. But it soon became clear that this strategy was not working, and by 2005 the Pentagon began looking for a new way.

In *Counterstrike*, Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker of *The New York Times* tell the story of how a group of analysts within the military, at spy agencies, and in law enforcement has fashioned an innovative and effective new strategy to fight terrorism, unbeknownst to most Americans and in sharp contrast to the cowboy slogans that characterized the U.S. government's public posture. Adapting themes from classic Cold War deterrence theory, these strategists have expanded the field of battle in order to disrupt jihadist networks in ever more creative ways.

Schmitt and Shanker take readers deep into this theater of war, as ground troops, intelligence operatives, and top executive branch officials have worked together to redefine and restrict the geography available for Al Qaeda to operate in. They also show how these new counterterrorism strategies, adopted under George W. Bush and expanded under Barack Obama, were successfully employed in planning and carrying out the dramatic May 2011 raid in which Osama bin Laden was killed.

Filled with startling revelations about how our national security is being managed, *Counterstrike* will change the way Americans think about the ongoing struggle with violent radical extremism.

## Counterstrike Details

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## From Reader Review Counterstrike for online ebook

### Lee Holz says

Counterstrike is an authoritative and comprehensive account of America's campaign against Al Qaeda. It is a must read for anyone interested in the topic. One understands that the price of access to the players and those in the know was certain limitations on what the authors could say on all points. Still, the book has one substantial flaw or rather omission. Putting aside the intelligence failures and the geopolitical stupidity that lead to the invasion of Iraq, the invasion was a disaster in terms of our struggle with Al Qaeda. It gave Al Qaeda an unprecedented public relations victory in the Muslim world, attracting large numbers of fighters for their cause, attracting substantial financial support that would not have otherwise materialized and gave Al Qaeda the opportunity to cost us dearly in lives and money. Although we prevailed over Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, they remain a threat to the Iraqi democracy we nurtured. The book is silent on this point. This failing aside, the book is excellent.

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### Jeff says

There were some interesting tidbits and details regarding GWOT. But, like my review of many of these compendium type books, it felt more like a series of articles the authors attempted to stitch together instead of a well organized thought-out book.

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### Mal Warwick says

One of democracy's most remarkable characteristics is the sheer volume of closely guarded information that can be reported and published without resulting in jail time or torture for the authors. Counterstrike, a remarkable bit of longitudinal reporting by two veterans of the New York Times, brings to light a host of insights and behind-the-scene details about America's decade-long campaign against Al Qaeda and its affiliates and imitators.

The principal theme of Counterstrike is how in the course of the past decade "the government's force of professional counterterrorism analysts has grown from a group small enough to know each other's phone numbers to a vast army linked by supercomputers processing thousands of bits of data in nanoseconds." And, by no means incidentally, spending tens of billions of dollars in the process.

Schmitt and Shanker reveal without editorial comment the strong contrast between the management styles of our last two Presidents: "While Bush showed an appetite for tactical and operational details — [for example,] the number of spies working against Al Qaeda in Pakistan . . . — Obama wanted to understand the strategic nature of the threat and demanded to know when his personal orders were required to break through resistance across the intelligence and security community to make things work at the tactical and operational level." The bureaucratic squabbles, most notably during the tenure of Secretary of Defense Runsfeld, are another theme that stands out.

However, the overarching theme of Counterstrike is the gradual maturation of American counterterrorist policy in the opening decade of the 21st Century, shifting gradually from one bent simply on using brute

force to kill or capture terrorists to a much more sophisticated and broad-based policy of deterrence drawn from the playbook of the Cold War. As Schmitt and Shanker report, “Deterrence — updated, expanded, even redefined — is now official American policy for countering Al Qaeda and its affiliated terrorist organizations.”

At first blush, deterrence might seem futile against an enemy willing, even eager, to die for his beliefs. However, as Schmitt and Shanker reveal, there is a wide range of tactics available to delay or prevent terrorist attacks. Among these are multi-faceted techniques such as cyberwarfare to disrupt the communications and financial transactions of the Al Qaeda network and creative actions by local CIA or military officers. (In the most amusing of the latter, American officers first set high bounty prices on Al Qaeda commanders, then lowered them to imply that the terrorists’ importance had declined; soon, to prove their continuing importance, the terrorists revealed their locations by striking out against the Americans in impulsive and foolhardy ways. The result is that they were then either killed or captured.)

So, there is considerable substance in Counterstrike. The discussion of how deterrence policy evolved into the U.S. strategy against Al Qaeda is especially illuminating. Unfortunately, the structure and writing style don’t enhance the reader’s experience. The book is slow going, consisting largely of one long expository paragraph after another, relieved only by lengthy quotes from some of the hundreds of individuals the authors interviewed. Schmitt and Shanker might have benefited from a few lessons in nonfiction writing by a master of the craft such as Tracy Kidder, Erik Larson, or even Bob Woodward.

(From [www.malwarwickonbooks.com](http://www.malwarwickonbooks.com))

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### **James Pritchert says**

This is an interesting read that details the fight with Al Qaeda. It deals with the personalities and the enormity of the battle that is raging against terrorism. The political ins and outs are fascinating and the people who are waging war against terrorism are a select breed of warriors. Although the information is a bit dated in the rapidly changing war, this is valuable and critical background for those of us who are outside the circle of direct participants. This is a must read for anyone who is seeking a background on the war on terrorism and who enjoys the ins and outs of politics.

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### **Owen says**

It is rare that I rate a book higher than the general population. I will tell you, having been in Afghanistan, having trained Afghans as a Marine and worked within the intelligence cycle, this is a fantastic book. The general population is missing the boat on this one. This was an exceptional book, recommended to me by a former intel operative. The concept of the evolution of deterrence fascinated me, as did the speed with which intelligence could be transferred up and down the chain (shown relatively well in the *Act of Valor* movie, actually. Ignore the acting and watch the tactics- they’re gorgeous). These are the people you want defending your freedom, trust me. I saw them work and you can read about them in this book. Any complete picture of our current geopolitical world and the way we interact needs this book.

-Owen Gardner Finnegan

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### **Noel Burke says**

The one thing I was most surprised about was the apparent level of detail of operations and strategy that was presented in this book. Towards the end of the book they were talking about things that had occurred only a few years ago. It seems to me that this book could be treasure trove of info for the enemy. I don't mind bring light to operations if it is declassified (i.e. this is what happened during a war 20 years ago), but the American public does not need to know that much detail about how we keep our freedoms so close to the war we are still fighting. I am all about holding the government accountable, but when the elements of surprise and unpredictability are needed to be successful, we sure shoot ourselves in the foot for the sake of being transparent. Let's give the boys fighting for our freedom time to fight their fight without us having to tell the world what they are doing. Of course, that is just my opinion. Other than that the book was good. I found it interesting that the book began before 9/11 and shared insight into little known attacks that a majority of the US never heard about. Listened on my iPod.

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### **Tech Historian says**

Must read, but suffers from short story-itis.

This is an invaluable book for anyone seriously trying to understand the war on terror over the last decade. Kudos to the authors. The other 5 star reviews tell you why this book is worth reading.

My only gripe: The authors did a ton of first hand interviews and have assembled a series of vignettes that when stitched together paint the picture of our evolving war. The problem is that the reader has to do the stitching - the authors strength at writing short NY Times stories is the books weakness. There is laundry list of agencies, names, players, programs and somehow the authors expect you to know who they are. An org chart, glossary or someway to connect the dots (both visually and in the text would have been extremely helpful.)

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### **Jerome says**

Counterstrike tells a brief but fast-paced and mildly optimistic story of how US counterterrorism policies, strategies, and tactics evolved after 9/11 up to the killing of bin Laden. The authors argue that such a quick, smooth surgical in-and-out operation could not have been carried out ten years ago.

It mainly focuses on a group of intelligence, law enforcement and military officials and how they devised a new counterterrorism strategy.. It is also an interesting case study of how to apply "deterrence" to counterterrorism policies, a concept I had found absurd because we are fighting Islamist that think it is their God-given duty to kill us all. This strategy, I learned, also includes propaganda on how to portray Islamist extremists negatively in such a way as to gain traction in the Muslim world, which was fairly interesting. It also explores the military's "Cyber Command", which aims to counter Islamist websites and Internet propaganda. It also briefly describes the military's and CIA's UAV programs, as well as US Special Operations Forces operating in Pakistan.

The principal theme of Counterstrike is how in the course of the past decade "the government's force of professional counterterrorism analysts has grown from a group small enough to know each other's phone numbers to a vast army linked by supercomputers processing thousands of bits of data in nanoseconds." And, by no means incidentally, spending tens of billions of dollars in the process.

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However, the overarching theme of Counterstrike is the gradual maturation of American counter-terrorist policy in the opening decade of the 21st Century, shifting gradually from one bent simply on using brute force to kill or capture terrorists to a much more sophisticated and broad-based policy of deterrence drawn from the playbook of the Cold War. As Schmitt and Shanker report, "Deterrence -- updated, expanded, even redefined -- is now official American policy for countering Al Qaeda and its affiliated terrorist organizations."

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The book shows how these novel, unconventional strategies were employed in planning and carrying out the raid that got bin Laden.

This is a brief read; check it out. It's fairly interesting, and won't take you all that long.

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## **Wade says**

The narrator on the audio book had a tone that almost put me to sleep but the book was good. It was great to hear about all the government is doing to combat terrorism. I never hear of most of these techniques in the newspaper. The holistic plan by the US is wider than expected. It makes you feel better about the US military than any other press they get.

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## **Mike Maurer says**

I thought this would be an interesting book about how US special forces going into the dark places. It has a little bit of that. A lot of it has more to do with how US intelligence services learned over 10 years how to do their job better in light of the new threat of stateless terrorism.

Some of the intelligence work is neat. The stories there are gripping. But other areas simply drag and felt like reading dull history. Which this isn't, as it is actual events in the recent past.

The biggest revelation is that many of the intelligence gains were more happenstance. Or that instead of compartmentalizing the intelligence, it took a high ranking general to take advantage of those gains. Agencies don't like sharing, even if it means not finding the bad guys. Now it is much better, at least.

As someone who has read a lot about conflict in the 20th century, the topic is relevant, but the flow wasn't there for me.

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## **Jimmy says**

Radical Islam isn't going away anytime soon so this book definitely has its place. This is the story of the United States' effort in Counter-Terrorism following September 11th. It is the incredible story of how various parts of the Government matured in their fight against Al Qaeda. The book focuses not only the frontline agencies against terrorism such as the State Department, the CIA, the FBI and the military but also certain key individuals that have shaped the policies in their respective agencies. We read in the book the story of the early days after September 11th in which the government was struggling to know who their enemy was. The book does not cover up the embarrassing extent of the ignorance of various officials in the government concerning Al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. But as the government kept moving forward in its war against Al Qaeda we find that certain men eventually shaped institutional changes to their agency in order to adapt to the stateless terrorist threat of Al Qaeda. For example, the book talks about how the intelligence community at first collected everything as potential data but this led to an ineffective process of sorting out and producing good intelligence analysis. Soon "intelligence triage" was developed in order to better handle incoming potential intelligence data along with directing it at the right analysts. The academic world also had a place in the war on terror in which the intelligence community wisely saw that the academic world can better analyze certain data especially those that weren't urgent actionable intelligence; this led to the founding of the Combating Terrorism Center based at West Point.

I appreciated how the authors described various elements of the government starting to work together in order to defeat Al Qaeda. This was dramatically different compared to the pre-9/11 world where government agencies' jealousy meant an agency became territorial with what they were willing to share and do. Before 9/11 communications between the FBI and CIA faced many difficulties; the FBI's computer network system was out of date and incompatible with the other government agencies. That would eventually change. We also read in the book of how the military and the intelligence community grew to become better reliant with each other. The military improved their ways of gathering information and intelligence and also improved on how this was shared to the intelligence community. In turn the intelligence community enhanced their evaluation and analysis in order to hand over to the military "actionable intelligence." I love the example of how a platoon of US Army soldiers unknowingly stumbled upon an intelligence treasure trove in Sinjar, Iraq

that was then properly exploited by the intelligence community that helped the military to operationally downgrade Al Qaeda in Iraq. There is also the story of the book of how the NSA would also have people sent to Iraq to better assist the military.

The book also had a discussion throughout the book about deterrence theory against Al Qaeda. We see a whole chapter devoted to the discussion about Cold War deterrence theory and the problem with it in relations to Al Qaeda. Obviously, it is difficult to get someone to back down when they are willing to martyr themselves in the attempt to destroy the West. However I think the book makes a good point that there is a role of deterrence as a tool against Al Qaeda and other Islamic extremists once we understand the network nature of Al Qaeda and other radical terrorist groups. This new deterrence theory recognizes that in order for Al Qaeda to function there is the need for a terrorist network that is able to provide logistical needs. Not everyone in this network is a suicide bomber since a suicide bomber himself would need someone who is a recruiter, a financier, trainer, etc. This new deterrence theory is not necessarily directed towards the bombers and fighters themselves but towards those supporters who have much more to lose since they are still committed to being of the world (so to speak) and attached to certain things that allow the US leverage.

Recognition of this also means that our tools against Al Qaeda isn't just military but also other means such as legal, financial and cyber capabilities. As the book mentioned, "it takes a network to fight a network."

The book also talked about the problematic and at times ironic relationship the US has with Pakistan in the War on Terror. I also found it informative that the authors discussed the threat of the loan wolf home grown terrorists inspired by Al Qaeda.

While the book was published before the current geopolitical threat of ISIS, I think readers will find this book informative as to the historical development in the long war against Islamic terrorism. Highly recommended work.

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### **Mark says**

If you want a behind the scenes look at the American intelligence and special operations actions in Southeast Asia, this is an excellent book. From the fall of the Twin Towers to the killing of Bin Laden, this book describes actions of policy makers trying to deal with the elusive war on terror. If you are a policy/state type wonk, you will enjoy this book as it struggles to deal with conducting a war but not against a defined state.

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### **Ray says**

?When I wondered if I should read this book or not, I feared it might be little more than the retelling of the tracking and killing of Osama Bin Laden, which by now has been told several times?. But I started the book, and soon found out it was much more than that. The authors ?are experienced reporters from The New York Times, ?and well versed in security issues. They take the reader through the significant changes in the U.S. approach to counterterrorism over the years. I think the post 9/11 stories about the dysfunction between our intelligence agencies and the inter-department turf wars between the FBI and CIA showed that we could, and must, do a better job of intelligence gathering and sharing. And Schmitt and Shanker take us through that process.

?After 9/11, America barely knew who or what Al Qaeda was. We learn a little more about how we went from that as a beginning point to our refinements and intelligence gathering of today. Much of what goes on is behind the scenes to most citizens, and things like cyberwarfare, intelligence gathering techniques, and

disruption of terrorist funding don't get much recognition. But hearing that those techniques are being used, effectively in most cases, is helpful. This is especially so since many intelligence "successes" remain unknown to us, since revealing them could reveal sources and techniques which need to remain secret.

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### **Sameer says**

This book follows a high level policy path following 9-11. It charts the mindset shift from cold war deterrence of MAD doctrine to decisive Counteracting asymmetrical warfare as the guerilla terror attacks are referred to now.

The book is candid enough to discuss, analyze and dissect the on the job learning through mistakes and cultural issues during the two administrations from 2001 through 2012. It ends with the raid on the compound in Abbottabad Pakistan. It has an excellent analysis of how the inter-agency conflicts led to compartmentalization and reticence on information sharing. It also covers how National Counter Terrorism Center came into its own.

Having said that, the book appears to be exclusively written with the author based stateside. It lacks field experiences, on the ground interviews and takeaways. Unless they came from a 3 star general or cabinet level staffer. In short, the focus is on political end of the policy making with some coverage of military decision making. The book completely skimps on the Iraq detour while en-route to Afghanistan. It completely skips special forces initial response that was covered in 12 Strong: The Declassified True Story of the Horse Soldiers 12 Strong: The Declassified True Story of the Horse Soldiers. It also does not cover Hamid Karzai coming to power.

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### **Johnny says**

This book provides the narrative for a major shift in dealing with terrorism, a shift which began (surprisingly to me) in the administration of George W. Bush. *Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America's Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda* is the story of an attempt to apply the principles of nuclear deterrence as applied during the Cold War to the War on Terror. At first, this approach to counterterrorism seems counterintuitive. During the Cold War, MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) assumed that if one superpower destroyed population centers in another superpower that the victim superpower had sufficient resources to exact equal or greater destruction on the population centers of the aggressive superpower. Terrorists don't really have population centers or even territories, for that matter. So, how does one apply this principle.

General James E. Cartwright, one of the architects of this policy explained the idea of deterrence for missiles as, "In missile defense, you hope to inject a high level of doubt into the mind of a potential attacker that a first strike will be successful and certainty that it will provoke retaliation. Ditto with deterrence and terrorism. 'If you can remove a certainty of success in striking an objective, if you make the price too high, then you increase the opportunity the adversary will not strike, ...'" (p. 55). The problem with providing this assurance is that it feels like, "America has all the watches, but the terrorists have all the time." (p. 204)

Yet, even though the terrorists don't have "territory" per se, they do have matters that they care about. For

example, terrorists care about their reputations. Downgrading the hefty federal bounties on known terrorists wounds their pride and “smokes them out” because, “He wants to say I’m alive. He wants to prove he is still important and worthy of the higher bounty.” (p. 189) As a result, the terrorist plans something and creates enough noise and movement that the intelligence community can get a bead on him. As General McChrystal said, “When a person moves, that’s when we can get them. If they sit in a hole and are not taking any chances, we can’t get them.” (p. 189). Other techniques involve starting rumors that terrorist commanders aren’t paying the promised funds to the families of suicide bombers or that they hadn’t provided the promised long lines of Iraqi women willing to service their followers (p. 159) These are all fascinating techniques. And, since revealing them exposes some of our intelligence techniques, one has to wonder what new tricks our counterterrorism community has added to the toolkit.

I was also intrigued by the brief description of counter-broadcasting against insurgent “pirate” radio stations, both by overriding with a stronger signal over the precise frequency, but also providing counter-programming with a different message just to the left or right of the dial of that jammed frequency so that “...the insurgents’ audience lands instead on the favorable programming on the adjacent channel. This system not only blots out the insurgent transmissions but also drives listeners to channels filled with programming that counters the extremist message. The trick is that this has to happen in real time, since some of the pirate stations are in the backs of trucks or even towed in trailers behind motorcycles.” (pp. 175-6)

Frankly, this book opened my eyes to the efforts being made to keep the U.S. “reasonably” safe and underscored the reality that we will never be truly safe again. It is simultaneously encouraging and discouraging. I’m very glad I read it.

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