



# WORLDVIEWS FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

A Monograph Series

## An Uncharted Path to Terroism Studies

Stephen Sloan



Presented by  
The Global Connections Foundation and the  
University of Central Florida's Global Perspectives Office  
and Political Science Department.

Spring 2014: Volume 12, Number 2

# **An Uncharted Path to Terrorism Studies**



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Orlando, Florida, U.S.A.

## *Worldviews for the 21st Century: A Monograph Series*

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*Worldviews for the 21st Century*  
Volume 12, Number 2

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The *Worldviews for the 21st Century* series, a key part of the Global Connections Foundation's educational networking activities, gratefully acknowledges the support of the Darden Restaurants Foundation.

# **An Uncharted Path to Terrorism Studies**

Stephen Sloan

There was no specific event that led me into the study of terrorism, nor did I intellectually parachute into the field, since my interest developed before the systematic study of terrorism as an academic focus. In addition, my attention to the subject was not solely academic. I was always concerned about the policy, strategic and operational challenges created by threats and acts of terrorism.

My general orientation toward conflict, violence and warfare took place as a youngster growing up in New York City. It was the 1940s, and I admittedly acquired a very “Hollywood” view of World War II, as I saw the conflict unfold on the screen at the local RKO Coliseum Theater in Washington Heights. All the stereotypes of the enemy and all the righteousness of the U.S. cause were presented, but without displaying the graphic horrors of mass physical conflict. Such movies as “Destination Tokyo,” “Guadalcanal Diary” and “The Sands of Iwo Jima” shaped my early perception of what I eventually realized was sanitized warfare. From childhood, that perception instilled in me a sense of adventure coupled with strong patriotism based on the fact that, like many other families, we had relatives in the military.

As I entered my teens, the requirements of the draft made warfare more salient to me, especially as the Korean War dragged on. To meet my service obligation, I enlisted in the Navy Reserve and

attended weekly drills at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. I must say, I was probably the worst radar operator in the Navy. During one drill in the mockup of the Combat Information Center (CIC), I “navigated” our ship into the Empire State Building by giving incorrect information to the Captain, who was not pleased. On the other hand, despite my relative incompetence as a novice, I like to think I helped to deter a Soviet attack on Brooklyn. Beyond that, I enjoyed my annual cruises overseas and meeting shipmates who came from such strange places as Texas and Idaho, while avoiding the shock and trauma of combat. However, I later acquired gray hair when my younger brother was wounded serving in Vietnam as a combat infantryman and medic, and even more when my youngest son served as an M1-Abrams Tank Driver in Desert Storm.

It was in the midst of my graduate studies that my interest in conflict, violence and warfare was refined. My comparative focus was on what was then called “the politics of transitional areas.” I increasingly became interested in the violent “internal wars” that often marked the transition from “empire” to “nation.” A movie, “The Battle of Algiers,” introduced me to terrorism as an aspect of guerrilla warfare. I still show that classic to my students today. But it was in my graduate courses, especially those in my area of specialization – Southeast Asia – where I began to concentrate on insurgencies and unconventional warfare. I was particularly impressed by the writing of Bernard B. Fall in *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis*, which was assigned in a course on Vietnam I took in 1960. His writings showed the importance of organization for insurgencies in what has variously been called low-intensity conflict, asymmetric warfare and an assortment of other terms.

My interest in conflict initially was secondary to my dissertation topic, in which I analyzed the competition of leading political forces during the Sukarno regime in Indonesia, where I started my field research. But all that changed on September 30, 1965, when there was an attempted coup in Indonesia. The debate over what transpired remains today. It was during the reaction that followed, though, when more than 500,000 people were killed, that the

reality of violence came home to me, especially as I witnessed demonstrations in Jakarta and burning villages in Bali. As a result, my dissertation and first book, *A Study in Political Violence: The Indonesian Experience*, solidified my long-term focus on conflict. In fact, one of my first professional papers, which I presented in 1971, was entitled “The Functionality of Violence in the New States of Asia and Africa.”

I have often wondered what would have happened if I accepted one of two positions offered to me in Bangkok, Thailand, which I visited on my way back to the States. The first was to head a Thai crew in the Gulf of Tonkin as part of a U.S. Navy project. The second was to assess attitudes toward an ongoing insurgency in Northeast Thailand. I chose to stay and finish my dissertation. If not, I might have joined the intelligence community or become the proprietor of an expatriate bar named Sloan’s in Bangkok.

My emphasis on violence and politics often had a major theme – that violence was not a form of political pathology to be intellectually quarantined as a field of study. I continue to hold the view that violence is a normal aspect of global affairs. I have also recognized that while force and violence are traditionally thought to be the monopoly of the nation-state, we are witnessing the emergence of the new mercenary and the privatizing of public violence.

While I had studied terrorism as an aspect of an insurgency, it was not until my first visit to Israel on assignment for *The Daily Oklahoman* that the study of terrorism became a central aspect of my research. Despite the shock and need to formulate means to counter the skyjackings of the 1960s, the impact of the Munich massacre and other violent acts, terrorism per se was not subject to systematic studies. It also did not have a home in any particular academic discipline and was not the central subject of college or university courses.

Thus, when I returned home, I offered my first course specifically on terrorism in 1975. While exciting, it was also a lonely experience

in that terrorism was not yet viewed as a respectable topic, much less part of the political science mainstream. But this isolation quickly ended as I began to interact with other pioneers in the field. My correspondence with such individuals as Paul Wilkinson and Brian Jenkins helped me to join others who were seeking, both academically and operationally, to understand terrorism.

I will always have a special place in my heart for a 1980 conference, “Terrorism and Beyond,” sponsored by the Rand Corporation under the guidance of Brian Jenkins and Robert Kupperman, for it brought together those in the academic, governmental and corporate sectors who would blaze the path to counter-terrorism in the years to come.

My own comparative analysis was initially largely a result of the outstanding work of graduate students in my early courses on terrorism and those who participated in my Study Group on International Terrorism at the University of Oklahoma. While having to work with very limited information, a few chronologies and reports from leading newspapers, we were able to engage in one of the first comparative studies of terrorism. With graduate student Richard Kearney, now a very distinguished professor, we wrote a seven-part series first published in *The Daily Oklahoman* and later distributed internationally by *The New York Times* under the title “Can Terrorism be Stopped?”

The publication of the study had a bittersweet result. On the one hand, I was able to reach a global audience; on the other, my departmental colleagues gave me no credit for it since it had not appeared in a refereed journal. From that point on, although I did write numerous academic articles and books, I made a choice to focus on reaching the widest audience, especially those involved in countering terrorism.

When I look back, I am particularly struck by the early state and local assessment of terrorist threats conducted by my students. It is particularly ironic that in our early surveys of terrorist threats at the local level, my students singled out the federal building in Oklahoma

City as a highly symbolic target, as well as a very vulnerable one, given its openness and reliance on glass as part of the architectural design. A decade and a half after that study was published, the Murrah building sadly became the target of the most lethal U.S. domestic terrorist attack until the events of 9/11. It had special meaning to me since I lived only five blocks from the bomb site. After the attack, I spent the next ten days on the scene, and ultimately was involved in helping to establish the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism in Oklahoma City. That institute was initially dedicated to engaging in research to prevent terrorism and training, especially local police and other first-responders. This was as it should be, for all terrorism is local.

It was my wife, then a young assistant professor of theater, who sent me on a path that has been central to all my work. As a specialist in improvisational theater, she suggested that I use such techniques to conduct full-scale, non-scripted simulations of terrorism to assist those who were charged with combating it. The details on those simulations can be found in my book, *Simulating Terrorism*, co-authored with Robert J. Bunker, and *Red Teams and Counterterrorism Training*. The simulations ranged from limited exercises with the police to a skyjacking.

As the field continued to evolve, I took particular pride in the cutting-edge work I oversaw inside and outside the classroom. In 1999, for example, my students at the University of Oklahoma conducted a crisis-management simulation for a manufacturer of equipment for the oil industry. The students were able to “seize” the firm’s computers and create numerous false orders for equipment that overwhelmed the operational ability of the firm to conduct its business. We had moved into the arena of cyber-attacks and net war.

There were other, similar, notable developments – too many to list – during the decade and half that has followed. Altogether, I have spent about a half-century studying terrorism and political violence. Many times, people have asked me what I consider to be the most rewarding aspect of my work. That is fairly easy to answer: mentoring



individuals who have gone on to become academic authorities and senior officials in the domestic and international counterterrorism arena. I hope many of my other students will follow in their footsteps, for we have an endless need for their talents.

Looking forward, it is important that we avoid the danger of accepting conventional wisdom as the field of terrorism studies matures. It is not enough to “think outside of the box.” One should not be “in the box” in the first place when confronting an imaginative, implacable and dedicated adversary who is engaging in a protracted conflict and often a war against all.

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