

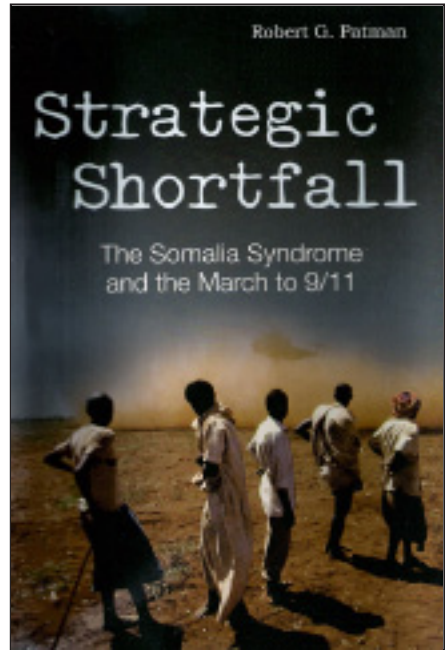
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US failures in strategy and the ‘CNN effect’

Strategic Shortfall: The Somalia Syndrome and the March to 9/11, by Robert G. Patman. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010. 185pp. ISBN: 978-0-275993-62-0

IN THIS short, but interesting book, Robert Patman argues that US policy failures in the lead up to and aftermath of the October 1993 ‘Blackhawk Down’ incident in Mogadishu facilitated the conditions for the terrorist attacks on the US mainland in 2001. The thesis that the US merely reaped the bad fruit of its foreign policy on 9/11 is not new, but Patman’s approach is.

Rather than blame the historical content of US foreign policy (as a form of neo-imperialism that bred resentment in the Muslim world), he argues that the US failure to adapt to the changed security environment that followed the end of the Cold War, particularly the impact of globalisation and the resurgence of primordial conflicts in failed states, contributed



heavily to al-Qaeda’s rise as a political actor as well as its ability to project irregular force world-wide.

Patman places the failed 1992-94 UN attempt at peace enforcement in Somalia at the centre of his claim. The crux of his argument is that the US misread the post Cold War international security environment because it remained locked in a realist mindset focused on inter-state conflict and contingency planning for major war in which overwhelming force was the preferred way of engaging in combat operations (under the so-called ‘Powell Doctrine’ implemented in the first Gulf War). This prevented it from understanding the opportunity provided

to unconventional warfare actors by failed states, which were considered too peripheral to 'core' US security interests to warrant full attention. This made the US resistant to participate in UN-led humanitarian intervention in low intensity conflicts in failed states, and when it did belatedly intervene as part of a UN-led multinational force in Somalia in 1992, it did so on an ad hoc and short-term basis in which an exit strategy was a major priority and mission creep was a constant as the rationale for intervention shifted from famine relief to confronting warlords and imposing order.

US failure to adopt a 'tough' approach to peace enforcement in Somalia was due to an aversion to casualties and Congressional resistance to expanding the mission into combat roles, coupled with misgivings about allowing US soldiers to serve under foreign commanders, all under blanket media coverage of events on the ground. The latter turned the aborted attempt to capture General Mohamed Farah Aideed in October 1993 into a 'major league CNN-era disaster', according to one of the decision makers involved (p. 58).

The failure to capture Aideed emboldened not only Somali warlords but also al-Qaeda, which had operatives on the ground in Mogadishu (to include people involved in the Blackhawk Down incident), whose leader-

ship saw the US withdrawal from Somalia in 1994 as evidence of a lack of US stomach to engage in irregular conflicts where its core interests were not immediately involved.

US aversion to taking casualties was a legacy of the so-called 'Vietnam Syndrome', which along with the 'CNN effect' of real-time uncensored news coverage compounded US administration concerns about the negative domestic political impact of involvement in UN peacekeeping missions. That led to the 'Somalia Syndrome' (a term apparently coined by Senator John Kerry, as quoted on page 83), which was codified in the Presidential Decision Directive 25 of May 1994 outlining the seven criteria that were required for a use of US force in multinational peacekeeping efforts.

Given the difficulties in meeting those requirements, PDD 25 amounted to a refusal by the US to get involved in sub-national conflicts in failed states (such as in Rwanda), and when it did (be in Haiti, Bosnia, or the containment of Saddam Hussein), it did so tentatively and always with its eye on the door. Patman contends that this led to a power vacuum into which al-Qaeda flowed, which then allowed it to plan and carry out the 9/11 attacks. By the time the US realised the seriousness of the al-Qaeda threat, it was too late.

There are some oddities in the book. Much of chapter two, which details the George H. W. Bush administration's reluctant and confused participation in the Somalia imbroglio, is based upon interviews conducted in 1999-2000 by the author with former US policy-makers.

Likewise, chapter four, which disingenuously argues that, in spite of its much smaller commitment of military assets in a much more benign security environment in Baidoa, the Australian role in Somalia offers an alternative model to the failed US approach in Mogadishu, is based on interviews and primary data collection done in 1994-95.

Yet there is not a single interview with Clinton-era decision makers and much less primary source data on US security policy from 1994-2001 even though the bulk of the failures to recognise the looming threat of transnational terrorism ostensibly occurred during that period (which is the subject of chapters five through seven). The book has a retro-fitted feel to it, as if Patman started another research project about Somalia in the 1990s, put it down for almost a decade, then cobbled together an *ex post* argument about the 'march' to 9/11 using his original interview data and primary sources on the H.W. Bush administration's and Australian approaches to

'Operation Restore Hope' along with mostly secondary data on everything that followed.

This leaves some gaps in Patman's interpretation of the Clinton administration's approach to international security affairs, particularly its commitment to cooperative security, multilateralism and operations other than war (in fact, the cornerstone of the original Clinton approach, cooperative security, is not mentioned once in the entire book). In explicit contrast to the H.W. Bush administration's view of international security, the Clinton administration initially worked hard to develop a form of 'Wilsonian pragmatism' that supported UN peacekeeping and nation-building efforts under the banner of 'assertive multilateralism'.

Its original cadre of foreign policy appointees understood they were faced with a changed geopolitical landscape and attempted to meld idealist and constructivist initiatives into the US foreign policy paradigm while maintaining the core realist principles that were the backbone of US national security policy. Those efforts were undermined from the onset by Republican-majority congressional opposition to US participation in peace enforcement missions.

They also were the subject of intense debates between Clinton appointees such as Secretary of

State Madeline Albright and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Morton Halperin (who is never mentioned and yet was a key polarising figure in US defence circles on the subject of peace-keeping) and more traditional-minded policy-makers in the Pentagon, CIA and NSC such as Secretaries of Defence William Perry and William Cohen.

After the Blackhawk Down incident and given the political balance of power within the foreign policy bureaucracy and *vis a vis* Congress, and confronted by a pressing domestic agenda, Clinton had to relent on his commitment to the type of aggressive multilateralism that Patman believes would have averted 9/11. By 1996 pragmatists had won over idealists and constructivists in inter-agency debates, and realism was restored as the dominant lens through which international security affairs was viewed.

Thus, it was not so much US failure to recognise and adapt to the post-Cold War international security regime as it was the opposition of political opponents, inter-agency policy disagreements on how to respond and leadership weakness and myopia (in the persons of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, respectively) that thwarted any hope that the US

would change its cautious approach to multilateral armed interventions in peripheral failed states in which irregular warfare actors congregated. That set the stage for al-Qaeda's rise and 9/11.

Along with some minor editorial errors, the omissions in Patman's coverage of the Clinton administration's perspective do not detract from his argument. His coverage of the W. Bush administration's non-response to the looming irregular threat, while also heavily reliant on secondary sources, is succinct and convincing in showing that Bush and his advisors ignored the belated warnings offered them by their predecessors. Although the book is not meant to be an academic treatise, in chapter seven Patman gives it a measure of scholarly gravitas by persuasively offering four 'causal associations' to justify his claims about the link between the Somalia Syndrome and 9/11 (consistency, strength, specificity and coherence of association (pp.136-40)).

As an alternative interpretation of events Patman presents a well-organised narrative that is richly detailed and very well documented, in a good example of a 'thick description' approach to foreign policy analysis. As such the book is a worthy addition to the literature on US foreign policy after the Cold War.