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James Kitfield. *Twilight Warriors: The Soldiers, Spies, and Special Agents Who Are Revolutionizing the American Way of War.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. 416 pp. $27.99, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-06470-0.

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The Brotherhood of the Endless War

Today, the United States has military forces operating in more than one hundred countries spread across the globe, especially in the greater Middle East.[1] Engaged in a host of combat and combat-related operations, as well as intelligence-gathering missions, they have served as the leading edge of the United States' ongoing struggle against Islamist terrorists, rogue states, and would-be tyrants. At the helm of this expansive and expensive effort, veteran journalist James Kitfield argues, is a remarkably cohesive set of Americans, a "fraternity of soldiers, spies, and special agents." Working across several armed services and intelligence agencies, they helped birth a "new operational style of war" in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere (p. 11). Confronting enemies that "flourished in the gaps between US law enforcement, intelligence, and military jurisdictions," they collapsed long-standing divisions between different sectors of the national security state (p. 21). Their efforts helped streamline US counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, but did not always bring the desired results. Challenged by intractable foes, image-conscious politicians, and an increasingly apathetic American populace, the "twilight warriors" could only do so much. Their "new model helped keep the nation safer," but it represented "fighting at the tactical level of conflict, not at the strategic level where wars are truly won" (p. 366).

That is the story of *Twilight Warriors.* In a word, it is a book about "synergy." A useful term to capture the mission creep that has transformed the US national security state since 2001, Kitfield stretches it to its limit. He writes of the "unprecedented synergy that developed in the war zones between Special Operations forces, intelligence and law enforcement agencies, and conventional military forces" (p. 8). He tracks the "new style of counterterrorism operations based on synergy," the "synergy created when all elements of the vast national security apparatus were united," and the "synergy created when FBI interrogators were working hand-in-glove with professional CIA analysts" (pp. 33, 58, 74). In short, he tells of the "synergy of collective action" (p. 328).

The book centers on several military and intelligence leaders who have worked with one another over the last two decades. Some, like Generals Michael Flynn, Stanley McChrystal, and Martin Dempsey, or Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, will be familiar to readers. Others, such as FBI agent Brian McCauley, deputy assistant director for international operations, are less well known. Whatever their public profile, Kitfield

insists that each played a crucial role in this new style of American warfare. They brought to the table decades of experience, malleable temperaments, a passion for the job, and, often, working-class Irish-American roots. On an ideological level, they shared the conviction that the United States was "fighting a rear-guard action in defense of a war-weary nation" (p. 348). In their eyes, politicians had overstretched the military by deploying the all-volunteer force to multiple tours in two combat zones. Civilians, insulated from the war's tolls, nevertheless grew tired of war without clear victory. When US leaders placated voters by pulling troops out, the countries they left became breeding grounds for terror.

For the twilight warriors, the United States was in crisis, and only they realized its full extent. Since the late 1970s, when Congress passed new laws governing the CIA, the FBI, and the clandestine branches of the military, Americans had struggled to keep up with the times. Cumbersome bureaucracies paired with inter-agency rivalries and outdated strategic thinking made the United States ill-prepared to deal with new enemies who did not conform to traditional notions of combat, whether spectacular terror attacks like September 11, the use of improvised explosive devices, or the waging of asymmetric warfare.

Groping towards a new strategy, the twilight warriors began working together. First in Afghanistan and then elsewhere, they honed a style of combat known as F3EA, short for Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze. Laboring in the shadows, sometimes in conflict with other US commanders, a crew of Special Operations soldiers, CIA officers, FBI agents, and others shared intelligence, interrogated suspects, and mounted joint missions. At the heart of all of this, Kitfield writes, was a "global communications network that connected and controlled all the moving pieces" (p. 51). "It takes a network to defeat a network," the refrain went. Over time, the NSA started to look more like the FBI, the FBI more like the CIA, and the CIA more like Special Operations. "Synergy" fused these formerly competing agencies into a concerted effort that encompassed both counterterrorism and counterinsurgency. The network was firm yet flexible. Created under President George W. Bush, who tethered it to more conventional military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it expanded and thickened under President Barack Obama, who used it for thousands of targeted killing missions, especially drone strikes. Through it all, the twilight warriors counted some major victories—the elimination of Osama bin Laden, the shattering of much of Al Qaeda's command structure, and the scaling back of the insurgency in Iraq, at least in the short term.

Despite the twilight warriors' efforts, the enemies seemed to multiply. The big question is why. To answer it, Kitfield follows the line offered by his subjects. The twilight warriors had plenty of tactical triumphs, they said, but the politicians failed them by not providing a comprehensive strategy that could win the war. They harped on Bush for foolishly invading Iraq, a campaign that drew attention and resources from Afghanistan while also fomenting Islamist violence in new places. They chided President Obama, who withdrew large numbers of US soldiers from Iraq, for having "confused walking away from a fight with ending one" (p. 258).

Those arguments have some weight, but pinning failure solely on civilian policymakers misses a key dynamic. It also lets the twilight warriors off the hook. As other scholars have shown, the "tactical victories" achieved by the twilight warriors proved evanescent because they often worked against the goal of defeating terrorists and building stable, democratic states in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.[2] Targeted killings carried out with greater precision—the twilight warriors' signal achievement—still provoked ire against the United States, its forces, and its mission in the Middle East. Moreover, killing one set of terrorist leaders did not mean that others would not take

their place. Kitfield writes of a "counterterror network" struggling to "keep pace" with a "rapidly evolving threat" (p. 238). Perhaps. But it is worth questioning whether that network was not just trying to "keep pace" but in fact helping create some of the problems it aimed to fix. It seems likely, given how the invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan played out on the ground. US military intervention produced unwanted though not entirely unpredictable consequences. That was most obvious in Iraq, where the Coalition Provisional Authority provoked a Sunni insurgency that helped lay the groundwork for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and then the Islamic State.

Some of the twilight warriors said nearly as much. After retiring to teach at Yale University, General Stan McChrystal feared targeted killings had lulled US policymakers into complacency, like a narcotic. Since few US troops wound up in harm's way in this new style of war, politicians could substitute "showy gestures" for "solving root problems," winning symbolic victories while losing the overall struggle. McChrystal was right, and that points to a deeper flaw in the book. Kitfield argues that these new tactics and techniques were and are "revolutionary when combined" (p. 366). But if all that the twilight warriors had achieved was to give US leaders another means to obscure war's costs by signifying victory rather than achieving it—the "showy gestures"—were they really all that revolutionary? To put it another way, if US objectives seemed even farther away in 2016 than in 2001, what had the twilight warriors really accomplished? For Kitfield, the answer is simple. The United States was "safer." However, the new American way of war has drawn the United States further into more complex conflicts in which military power, however arrayed, offers no obvious solution. In turn, the expanding pattern of US intervention holds great potential for blowback, both abroad and at home.

Those issues muddy a clear and flowing narrative. So does the author's cartoonish framing of the enemy. Al Qaeda are the "unholy warriors" (p. 311). The Paris attackers wished to "spread the darkness in their souls" (p. 367). And so on. That language reflects common tropes in US political culture, recalling George W. Bush's frequent conjuring of "evildoers." However, it does not do much to explain why people join Islamist groups or why they use violence. Readers seeking more nuanced interpretations of Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Al-Shabaab should search for answers elsewhere.[3]

Still, in a book mostly about Americans, that is a minor issue. More germane is Kitfield's often hagiographic treatment of his subjects. Nowhere is that more clear than in his portrayal of Lt. General Michael Flynn, who served as the intelligence chief of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) before Obama appointed him to run the Defense Intelligence Agency. Forced out by Obama after two years, Flynn was tapped by President Donald Trump to serve as his national security advisor. Within weeks of starting his new job, he had to resign when allegations surfaced that he accepted illegal payments from Russian and Turkish agents over the last couple of years. During this time, and not coincidentally, Flynn had expressed a growing affinity for strong-arm leaders such as Vladimir Putin and Recep Erdoğan.[4] Meanwhile, his son circulated fake news reports, including one about Hillary Clinton running a pedophile ring in a pizza shop.[5] It would be unfair to critique Kitfield for not predicting Flynn's fallout. But the man that appears in his book seems so different from the one we have come to know lately that it is hard to take Kitfield's portrayal of other key figures seriously. Something is missing.

What is more, Flynn's recent troubles suggest that the twilight warriors' worldview deserved deeper analysis. Career military and intelligence officers, they liked to dismiss popular fears about the wars' costs at home and abroad. Instead, they railed about leakers, journalists, and a finicky public. When new threats emerged in place of—or alongside—the old ones, the twilight warriors

griped about the politicians who had failed to create a workable policy and a broader strategy in the interests of political expedience. Recalling how many US military leaders understood American failure in Vietnam four decades earlier, they argued that the problem was the media and the middlemen, not the military.

Yet Flynn, McChrystal, Dempsey, and the rest of the bunch clung to the same core assumptions that guided the presidents and lawmakers they disparaged. They might have disagreed with policymakers about the specifics, but they all believed the United States could transform the greater Middle East, if only Americans got the formula right. In contrast to "neoconservatives and hawks," the twilight warriors insisted the military should not be the sole tool of US intervention. To their credit, they recognized that other institutions and actors must play a role, too. As General Martin Dempsey put it, "the use of the military instrument is extraordinarily complex—shame on us if we allow it to be a simple answer to a complex problem." Nevertheless, the twilight warriors were confident that there was an answer and that the United States could find it. They were wedded to the idea that Americans had to go to "those dark corners of the world," defeat "the fanatics under the black flag," and then rebuild "the foundations of civilization" (p. 368).

Such hubris has deep roots in the history of US foreign relations. The twilight warriors might have revolutionized the American way of war, but they did not quit the wishful thinking that led the United States into the greater Middle East. Therein lays the real problem. Sixteen years after the first US Special Operations troops arrived in Afghanistan, the "fraternity of soldiers, spies, and special agents" remain convinced they can bend the world to their liking. For historians of the United States and the world, ***Shadow Warriors*** offers a compelling if at times uncritical treatment of these men and their wars.

Notes

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Kyle Burke

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