



2010.05.02

Audrey Kurth Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009. Pp xvi, 311. ISBN 978-0-691-13948-7.

Review by Terence Parker, Salisbury, Wiltshire, U.K. (topromans@aol.com).

Professor Cronin reminds us that—well short of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons use—a terrorist attack may dramatically change the policy or perception of a major power. Thus, terrorism might prompt a negative cascade of reactions leading to far more serious forms of interstate violence, up to and including nuclear war (166). Cronin’s book greatly expands our understanding of this problem and presents a possible solution to it:<sup>1</sup> “in facing this (terrorist) threat, the crucial question is not ‘How are we doing?’ but rather ‘How will it end?’ The United States is searching in vain for ‘metrics’ that will provide insight into counter-terrorism’s progress. The only way the United States and its allies can effectively respond to twenty-first-century terrorism is to formulate their policy with an understanding of how terrorism ends and then follow a plan built on that understanding” (6). This is a recurring theme throughout this book, which offers us three valuable insights: a comprehensive overview of terrorism, a “how to end terrorism” road map, and a strategy to deal with al-Qaeda.

Cronin writes well and displays a thorough understanding of global terrorism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Furthermore, the layout of the book is pleasingly logical: a comprehensive, three-page Contents list, broken down to subject level; a short Acknowledgements; a useful block of Abbreviations; a short but more-than-adequate Introduction (1–13); seven chapters, each devoted to a specific subject area; and finally a short, relevant Conclusion (197–206). Supporting these, we find a sixteen-page Appendix of useful statistical data; seventy-four pages of detailed References; and a fifteen-page Index.

Cronin is at her best when summarizing the history of a particular branch of terrorism:

The reshuffling of international relations that accompanied the end of the Cold War provided a glimmer of hope that the intractable Israeli-Palestinian conflict might be resolvable. The waning years of the bipolar contest saw a sharp increase in popular unrest in the occupied territories. The first intifada, a persistent campaign of civil resistance strikes and violent demonstrations, began in December 1987. Young men and children threw stones at the Israelis, reasoning that using firearms would advantage the better-equipped Israeli Defence Forces and that the resultant media coverage would bring to mind David and Goliath. The PLO leadership, by this point exiled in Tunis, eventually regained limited direction of events, but the intifada was not PLO-initiated and, as a result, religiously oriented groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad dramatically gained support among Palestinians (49).

Her continuing summary of the Arab/Israeli conflict is in-depth and unbiased, as are her profiles of various terrorist groups, although the Appendix data upon which her study is based seems, at times, rather pedantic. For example, Table A.10 (221) shows a start date for Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA) of 1959, even though Basque separatism was a facet of the Spanish Civil War after a revival in 1917.<sup>2</sup> That said, Cronin does acknowledge that “the cycle of violence reflects underlying factors that may continue to exist, and experience periods of flare-up and remission, depending on the degree to which government is able to bring campaigns of violence under control” (96). This allows her some leeway regarding the Irish Republi-

---

1. Cronin, a well-respected specialist in international terrorism, has presented her termination approach in earlier papers: “How al-Qaida Ends: The Decline and Demise of Terrorist Groups,” *Internat’l Security* 31.1 (2006) 7–48 <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1006.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1006.htm)>; “Al-Qaida: End of the Beginning,” *openDemocracy* (11 Sep 2007) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1007.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1007.htm)>.

2. Cf. Antony Beevor, *The Spanish Civil War* (London: Cassell, 2001) 29: “The year 1917 was to see some curious developments... Both Basque and Catalan separatism had a strong economic base and it was no coincidence that their cultural revival coincided with their financial development.”

can Army (IRA), which Table A.10 ends rather prematurely in 2006, even though “Real Irish Republican Army” (RIRA) terrorist incidents (including the murder of two British soldiers) occurred in 2009.<sup>3</sup> However, cause, not weak “government control,” governs the re-emergence of specific terrorism: if Ireland were united there would be no IRA; until Ireland is unified, IRA terrorism will wax and wane. The same could be said of ETA.

Cronin finds it difficult to present her own premise—the importance of the demise of terrorism—so clearly and convincingly: “Modern terrorism draws its power from the nation state, and the only way to avoid being drawn into a tactical dynamic of attack and counter attack is to understand how individual terrorist campaigns have ended and then drive towards that aim” (1). This reflects the weakness of Cronin’s premise: while it seems sensible to understand how a terrorist campaign might end, to base one’s whole approach on the endgame seems a little foolhardy. True, an accurate endpoint assumption might preserve resources, but the more optimistic assumptions of military planners have proved notoriously unreliable (“the Iraqis will greet us as liberators when we overthrow Saddam Hussein”).

Cronin approaches her subject like a proud forester touring her wood, examining each tree to assess its growth and condition, without noticing the storm raging above the wood and threatening to topple her trees. Terrorism, like all violence, is driven by emotion and exists as discontinuous strands in a mesh of individual violent acts, tumultuous revolutions, and destructive wars. For example, Irish terrorism, extinguished by World War II, rekindled briefly in the late 1950s and then exploded following sectarian civil rights struggle in the late 1960s. Three decades of murder and property destruction followed, before negotiation and the “9/11” switch-off of American support almost extinguished Irish terrorism; but the IRA remains a threat.<sup>4</sup> The Republic of Ireland’s prosperity has recently roller-coasted from 1980s deprivation to 1990s Celtic Tiger riches (which encouraged the peace negotiations) and back to deprivation in the new millennium. Consequently, great care needs to be exercised when comparing terrorist movements and “terminating” a particular movement; timing and scenario are very important.

Cronin’s Introduction summarizes the history, evolution, conceptual framework, and terminology of terrorism. It then offers an overview of subsequent chapters, six of which examine a specific “terrorism termination mode”: decapitation, negotiated settlement, achievement of aims, implosion of the group, forceful suppression, and, finally, tactical reorientation. Each of these six chapters compares instances worldwide of its pertinent termination mode, then focuses on the demise of one or more particularly relevant terrorist groups. Summaries of salient facts end each “termination mode” chapter, and a final, seventh, chapter looks forward to “How Al-Qaeda Ends.”

Chapter One: “Decapitation: Catching or Killing the Leader” (14–34). Cronin examines every aspect of the targeted capture or killing of terrorist leaders: operational impact, moral implication, public relations, etc. She draws the obvious conclusion that removal of the leader of a small group markedly dampens terrorism but has little effect in the case of a larger group. More importantly, Cronin recognises the human dimension of terrorism: “Human nature is such that, when a cause is well established and has built up a significant following, killing its mouthpiece and organizer will not end its viability” (34).

Chapter Two: “Negotiations: Transition toward a Legitimate Political Process” (35–72). After noting that necessity, rather than inclination, prompts democracies to negotiate, Cronin examines the principal influences: the need to end the violence, learn more about the terrorist group, gain tactical advantage or split the terrorist group, or undermine the group’s broader support within the community by offering an alternative to violence. She follows this up with a review of the terrorist group’s incentives, and then presents three case studies: The Northern Ireland Peace Process; The Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process; and The LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or Tamil Tigers). Charting success and failure, Cronin emphasizes the need for strong leadership and powerful, effective third party (sponsor and/or mediator) involvement. She

---

3. See Henry MacDonald and James Sturcke, “‘Real IRA’ Claims Murder of Soldiers in Northern Ireland,” *Guardian* (8 Mar 2009) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1008.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1008.htm)>.

4. See *ibid.*

concludes that negotiation alone rarely ends terrorism and is best viewed as an essential element of the overall termination strategy.

Chapter Three: “Success: Achieving the Objective” (73–93). Cronin first explains what she means by “success”: in essence, achievement of a strategic or political goal (e.g., assumption of power), rather than a single triumph (e.g., destruction of the Twin Towers). After a broad review of case histories, she examines two successful terrorist organizations in greater detail: Irgun Zuai Le’umi (IZL), and The African National Congress (ANC) and Umkhonto. While she condemns terrorism as a means to an end, she concedes that, in a few instances, terrorism has achieved its objective—particularly when supported by the broad flow of history. (One might note the influence of Britain’s imperial decline, and former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s “wind of change” speech.)<sup>5</sup>

Chapter Four: “Failure: Imploding, Provoking a Backlash, or Becoming Marginalized” (94–114). To support her thesis that “terrorist groups do not last long” (95), Cronin lists the principal causes of group demise: failure to gain public support or downright alienation; failure to convince the next generation; infighting; differences in ideology; loss of interest; loss of control; or even fatigue. After concluding that groups often defeat themselves, Cronin lists in Table 4.1 (111) the many terrorist organizations that have failed though implosion, mistakes, burnout, or collapse. Erroneously, perhaps, she includes the still-active RIRA.<sup>3</sup> After further detailed review of failed terrorism, she concludes: “Waiting passively for failure is insufficient; but understanding these self-defeating dynamics and nudging them along through carefully targeted, synergistic counterterrorism is indispensable” (114).

Chapter Five: “Repression: Crushing Terrorism with Force” (115–45). It is a basic human instinct, says Cronin, “to fight fire with fire” (115); but she recognizes that violent state reaction to symbolic acts of terrorism may offend modern liberals. Drawing lessons from past wars and terrorist campaigns, Cronin compares the U.S. response to the 9/11 attack to the Allies’ strategic bombing at the end of World War II. She then looks closely at six significant “repressions”: Russia and Narodnaya Volya; Peru and Sendero Luminoso; Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party; Uruguay and the Tuamaros; Russia and Chechnya; and Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood (1928–66). She concludes that repression may lead to “a pyrrhic victory. If the ideas that are the source of popular mobilization persist, repression will be temporary, even counterproductive” (141) and the response itself might undermine the legitimacy of the state. “The core of the relationship is between states and communities that are competing over the capacity to mobilize support, and it is success or failure in that dimension which ultimately determines whether or not repression ends terrorism” (145).

Chapter Six: “Reorientation: Transitioning to Another Modus Operandi” (146–66). Cronin points out that the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in July 1914 [*sic*; actually 28 June 1914] triggered the First World War, which overwhelmed all other considerations (147). She reminds us, too, of the fluid nature of terrorism: “Colombia never really became a modern nation state. The continuing factions within its territory grow out of that unusual predicament, which has yielded a weak central government and endemic corruption, lawlessness, and fighting. In such a muddled context, labeling the violence presents special difficulty, with pundits variously calling it terrorism, narco-terrorism, insurgency, criminality, and civil war” (149).

After reviewing four representative “terrorist transitions” (Columbia and the FARC; the Philippines and Abu Sayyaf; Algeria and the GIA; and India, Pakistan, and the Kashmir Separatist Groups), Cronin contends that “no matter what we name it, success or failure in mobilizing a following determines the form the violence will take, be it terrorism, insurgency, guerrilla warfare, or civil war” (166).

---

5. Delivered before the South African Parliament on 3 Feb 1960: “The wind of change is blowing through this continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact. We must all accept it as a fact, and our national policies must take account of it.”

Chapter Seven: “How Al-Qaeda Ends: The Relevance and Irrelevance of History” (167–96). Cronin’s analysis of al-Qaeda cannot be faulted: it is a masterpiece of historical review and careful explanation.<sup>6</sup> After holding al-Qaeda up to the light to determine how it might end, she dismisses killing the leaders, negotiations, and achievement of its objectives, but sees some hope of failure through implosion and/or diminishing popular support. Crushing al-Qaeda with force is also dismissed, but she recognizes that: “Transitioning out of terrorism and toward either criminality or full insurgency is the final, worrisome historic precedent for Al-Qaeda” (191). I would question “criminality” because, just as moral integrity underpinned British imperial expansion, unacceptably extreme religious integrity seems to sustain al-Qaeda. However, full insurgency, in support of local resistance groups such as the Taliban, seems a real possibility. The current Middle East policy and presence of America and its allies could transform such an insurgency into all-out war.

Cronin’s brief Conclusion succinctly draws together her findings and restates her view that “once we concentrate on how terrorism ends, forging a successful strategy can begin” (206). While I am not convinced that endings of terrorism are the key to strategy, I applaud the outstanding analysis in this book. By meticulously selecting, recording, and examining terrorism, Cronin has provided an excellent foundation for the planning and implementing of counterterrorism.

---

6. It is worth noting that the word “Iran” does not appear anywhere in Chapter Seven. Indeed, there are only two references to Iran in the whole book, dramatically fewer than the fifty-eight times former British Prime Minister Tony Blair mentioned Iran in his evidence to the Chilcot Inquiry into the Iraq War. See Seumas Milne, “The Lessons of Iraq Have Been Ignored. The Target Is Now Iran,” *Guardian* (3 Feb 2010) <[www.miwsr.com/rd/1009.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1009.htm)>.