Counterstrike; The untold story of America's secret campaign against Al Qaeda, by Eric Schmitt & Thom Shanker, (Henry Holt, New York, 2011).
Reviewed by Tamsin Lee-Smith, U K Defence Forum Researcher

'When all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail' - that's how the New York Times security correspondents Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker would describe the Bush administration's counter-terrorism doctrine. Counterstrike is the culmination of eleven years' interviews with security-cleared personnel. It traces the evolution of a singularly focused 'capture and kill' policy towards a subtler set of coercive methods at the Obama Administration's disposal. Although initially thought to be irrelevant to countering terrorism, their hypothesis is that deterrence is now fundamentally central towards all efforts.

The over-arching reason for this shift, they argue, is the re-conceptualisation of Al Qaeda's threat. Decision-makers considered it to be existential in the aftermath of 9/11. (Despite the testimony from a senior Whitehouse official that many people in the building couldn't spell Al Qaeda - 'literally I remember being asked, "Is it one word or two?"'). 'In those early days, believe me, we saw them all – nuclear, biological, chemical, smuggled in and planned for use in the U.S. It all affected the psyche of policymakers,' told one staff member of the National Security Council.

Seen from this perspective deterrence could have no role in the War on Terror, which required an unconditional assault. After all, deterrent threats are punctuated with 'ifs' and 'buts'. If an adversary crosses a red line, then you'll shoot. But as long as their aggression is suppressed there will be no fire. In fact, as one Cold War theorist wrote, deterrence is a method of 'war avoidance.'

It would only gain traction amongst policy-makers once all-out war was down-graded to 'tackling violent extremism.' According to their analysis of National Security documents, Obama – unlike Bush – 'pauses before authorizing the use of military force against other extremist organisations.' If Al Qaeda affiliated individuals or franchises are not a direct threat to the United States they will be left alone. A whole category of conditions are now on the table and with them a space for bargaining has been opened.

The interesting parts of the book do not so much concern why deterrence was ignored, but how it has been adapted. As a key Pentagon source explains: 'People thought that terrorists were irrational, that we had no control over the things they valued, so we couldn't threaten to hold it at risk. But terrorists are deterrable, while they may have a preference structure that's different than ours, they do value things – things that we could hold at risk – and we can, therefore, influence their decisions.'

Indeed Al Qaeda has mutated from a vertically organised hierarchy to an amorphous ideological

front. It is just as well that surveillance and human intelligence as well as evidence from interrogations present a whole spectrum of values as opposed to physical entities for threatening.

The Al Qaeda system's support from the Muslim masses is the most compelling example offered in this book. The movement's relationship with its political constituency has been of serious concern to its spiritual leader, Ayman Al-Zawahiri. 'We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of our Umma,' he once wrote to the head of Al Qaeda in Iraq, as he scolded him for acts of ruthless violence. Schmitt and Shanker argue the leaders of well-resourced affiliates such as AQAP and AQIM should be persuaded that the response to mass casualty attacks would damage as opposed to raise credibility.

There is some evidence this could work: Consider the way in which Al Zawahiri denied the failed plot to bomb the Jordanian Embassy in 2004. It was clearly an attempt to distance his organisation from an unpopular form of political violence: His statement was released only after people took to the streets to protest. Whether this level of concern could actually affect their risk-calculus is another matter. By 2008 Al Qaeda were spending over half their airtime defending casualties they had taken. Schmitt and Shanker are right to question the extent to which the U.S. Government's comms capabilities could reduce popular support for Al Qaeda in the Middle East.

If it is too difficult to attack their credibility it may be easier to threaten Al Qaeda's chances of operational success. A plot to blow up Brooklyn Bridge in 2003 was thought to have been aborted after doubts were placed in the mind of its architect. The Kashmiri-born Ohio truck driver Iyman Faris had apparently been watched 'for months.' After hearing increased chatter extra maritime defences were assembled along the Hudson. On the very day of expectation an intercepted message from Faris read: 'The weather is too hot,' and the plans were subsequently abandoned. 'We made a very visible presence there,' disclosed the NYPD's counter-terrorism chief, before Schmitt and Shanker conclude that 'deterrence was part and parcel of that effort.'

Here they prove how well-placed they are to offer off-record briefings but their analysis is too assertive and in this particular case, it over-steps the mark. There can be no way of knowing for certain that Brooklyn Bridge remains intact today due to a deterrence success. Failure would be obvious: It looks like a big attack. But any argument which seeks to prove why exactly something didn't happen - especially when it concerns the inner thinking of an adversary -will always be counter-factual.
Given their access to power it is perhaps unsurprising that Obama comes off very well in the book. From day one as the President Elect he is a policy sage that trouble-shoots and delivers. In one memorable passage he enters into the Roosevelt room unannounced to confront a handful full of Pakistani diplomats lead by the notoriously powerful General Kayani. There and then he issues a threat: Stop supporting Haqqani's militants in North Waziristan or else your sovereignty will be disrespected without prior warning. Here is an easily observable example of deterrence - the instrumentalisation of fear - being exercised. The narrative in such parts is excellent. Like a pair of film-makers they do not so much tell as show how stories unfold in the middle of the Whitehouse.

The President is not the only individual to receive near canonization. In fact, most of Schmitt and Shanker's named sources are presented as All-American Heroes of the Pentagon and West-Wing. But if that is the price the reader must pay for an insightful history of counter-terrorism doctrine then it is worth the occasional introductory paragraph of tedium.

Their view of the centrality of deterrence is a little premature. And it certainly lacks the careful theoretical under-pinnings that such a complex concept requires. (A foreword by Schelling whom they interviewed would have sufficed without interrupting their well-packaged story.) Nevertheless, Counterstrike will be of interest to all those concerned with past and future efforts towards tackling transnational insurgency, particularly as it will gain currency after the 2014 withdrawal date.