

**Us Versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam,
and the Rise of the Green Threat**

Douglas Little

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The intersection of Islamophobia and US foreign policy has attracted considerable scholarly attention since 9/11. Landmark books exploring this connection include Mahmood Mamdani's *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terrorism*, and Deepa Kumar's *Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire*.

Douglas Little's *Us Versus Them: The United States, Radical Islam, and the Rise of the Green Threat* is not as ambitious as these studies. It does not forge new theoretical ground in our understanding of how Islamophobia is instrumentalized to bolster US foreign policy objectives. But this is not necessarily a criticism. Little's purpose is more modest, though his project no less difficult. He seeks to provide a lively, accessible introduction to US engagement with Muslim extremists since the end of the Cold War and the problematic paradigms that have shaped this policy. In this task, he succeeds admirably.

Little narrates the evolution of US national security policy across four presidential administrations, from George H.W. Bush to Barack Obama, to illustrate how the "Green Threat" of radical Islam gradually supplanted the "Red Threat" of international communism that dominated US Cold War thinking throughout the late twentieth century. What binds both threats together is the reliance on an "us versus them" framework that sets "us" apart from a larger-than-life enemy that presumably poses an existential threat to the nation. Little demonstrates how presidential administrations worked within this framework to adapt what were Cold War national security and foreign policy strategies—containment versus rollback—to the new threat posed by Muslim terrorist organizations and rogue states after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

To provide context for the shift from the "Red Threat" to the "Green Threat," Little devotes Chapter 1 to an examination of the US's reliance on the policy of containment in the Muslim world during the Cold War. In an effort to maintain access to oil reserves in the Persian Gulf, as well as to protect its alliance with Israel and to pursue its goal of subverting the Soviet Union, the US sought to contain governments in the Middle East that had fallen under the influence of its Cold War nemesis. This policy was particularly directed at Arab nationalists such as Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt. To contain them, Washington relied both on CIA covert action and the financing of autocrats in the region whose interests aligned with the US. Most presidential administrations during this era did not grasp the potential explosive mixture of religion and politics in the Muslim world that could come back to haunt the US. Instead, they saw in Islam a bulwark against the atheism spread by the Soviet Union.

It was during the George H.W. Bush administration that the nation transitioned away from an obsession with the "Red Threat" and a policy of containment in the Middle East. In Chapter 2, Little discusses this tran-

sition and the new future awaiting the US after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In approaching this new future, Bush and his advisers envisioned a policy that moved beyond containment, one in which America would be the sole superpower leading the global community into a New World Order. But events in the Muslim world did not allow Bush much time to implement this new vision. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, combined with the military coup in Algeria that dismantled the electoral threat posed by the Islamic Salvation Front, raised concerns among Bush advisors that the gravest threat facing America at the end of the century was emerging in Muslim-majority regions.

In Chapter 3, Little addresses how Muslim extremists, "appalled by westernization, angered by American support for Israel, or outraged by the growing US military presence in the Persian Gulf" (p. 92), began to take up arms and push back more aggressively against perceived US imperialism. In the late 1990s, Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda exemplified this wave of extremism as it carried out successful attacks on US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya and on the USS Cole. As the Clinton administration struggled to address extremism, it also developed a policy of "dual containment" with Iraq and Iran in an effort to keep anti-American regimes in these nations at bay while the US pursued a peace process between the Israelis and Palestinians. This policy ultimately did not help America achieve its goals in the peace process. This failure paved the way for hard-liner Cold Warriors in the next administration to consider more aggressive strategies for dealing with rogue states in the Middle East.

Little turns his attention to the administration of George W. Bush in Chapter 4. He notes Bush was dismissive of Clinton's soft power approach to global affairs. Bush wanted America to be a more assertive force in the world, even if he also acknowledged that with some global powers, including Russia and China, containment was still the best approach. His advisers, however, encouraged rollback for rogue states such as Iraq and pushed for unilateral actions to achieve this goal. All of this was on the table prior to the 9/11 attacks, which paved the way for the aggressive pursuit of the rollback strategy. First Afghanistan and then Iraq became targets of the US effort to recreate Muslim nations in its image through regime change. A policy of preventive war and exporting democracy, however, quickly ran into numerous roadblocks after the toppling of Saddam Hussein. Sectarian violence in Iraq and growing Muslim extremist movements in Pakistan and Afghanistan, not to mention the ever-present challenges of Hamas and Hezbollah, kept the US mired in conflicts where

victory was elusive. Iraq became a breeding ground for other extremist groups. By the end of his second term, it was clear rollback was a failure and that the Middle East was more unstable and more violent than when Bush first came to office.

The election of Barack Obama marked a new direction in US policy. In Chapter 5, Little coins a new word to describe Obama's approach to the Muslim world: "contagement." Contagement combined engagement (as opposed to isolation) with a dose of strategic containment. It was intended to balance national security interests with a healthier, more constructive relationship with Muslim-majority countries. In the Middle East, this meant "the United States must embrace the moderates and isolate the extremists" (p. 174). Obama pursued this strategy initially by ramping down the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and investing more in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. He also engaged in stealth counterterrorism efforts, including drone strikes, to allow room for his contagement policy to play out. But the policy never really panned out, largely due to the political upheavals of the Arab Spring combined with intransigence in the Afghan and Iraqi governments.

Obama's efforts in the Muslim world were rendered all the more difficult by rising Islamophobia at home. In Chapter 6, Little addresses the surge in anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination in American during the Obama years. American Muslims became stand-ins for the Muslim extremist enemy abroad. Right-wing bloggers and professional Islamophobes peddled conspiracy theories involving a radical Muslim takeover of the country, while law enforcement and intelligence agencies viewed the vast majority of American Muslims as potential security threats. Some opponents of Obama insisted he was secretly a Muslim—"one of them, not one of us" (p. 213). As the 2016 election approached, the "us versus them" narrative was as potent as ever as the specter of radical Islam at home and abroad became central to the campaigns of many GOP candidates.

Little's book has few drawbacks, though religious studies and Islamic studies scholars will be put off by his casual use of "radical Islam." Indeed, some effort to interrogate this term and to explore its genealogy would have enhanced Little's project, particularly since the phrase emerges from an "us versus them" mindset. Even so, the book excels in many ways, from its engaging style to its straightforward analysis of complex policies to its concrete suggestions for how the US can "break this vicious cycle of mutual demonization" (p. 243). *Us Versus Them* makes an important contribution to our overall understanding of US national security and foreign policies

in the Middle East and the troubling paradigms and premises that have sustained them for much too long.

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