
Title: Unearthing the Roots and Lessons of Conflict

By: Jacob Shively

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Text:

*Vortex of Conflict* effectively tours the history and decisions that defined George W. Bush’s foreign policy after 9/11. Throughout, Dan Caldwell distills vast source materials into a series of concise chapters. Students and policy makers new to this topic will find *Vortex* an approachable primer, while instructors and specialists may find the book helpful in the classroom or as a general reference. Still, *Vortex* dwells on the drama and dysfunction of Iraq at the expense of its promised analysis of America’s “AfPak” experience, and it would likely benefit from some more clearly articulated theories or analytical models.

The book divides into three sections. In the first, Caldwell draws upon vast secondary sources to deliver several concise histories: terrorism in the Cold War; U.S. relations with Middle Eastern and South Asian states; the shift to al Qaeda-style terrorism; and the Bush Doctrine. Balanced and comprehensive, these chapters unite political complexity with the inertia of broad historical trajectories. Readers new to the topic, however, would do well to focus on Caldwell’s central narratives to avoid being swamped by a tide of specific names and events.

Section II comprises the book’s core. Here, Caldwell slices his topic into a series of condensed but comprehensive “issues,” which include the Bush administration’s assumptions regarding al Qaeda, Afghanistan and Iraq; intelligence failures; and war planning. Despite some overlap, such accounts underscore the conceptual mapping most analysts use to understand this period, and they also demonstrate how Washington’s interpersonal and bureaucratic infighting, for instance, can fundamentally shape policymaking.

Unfortunately, Section II also showcases *Vortex’s* two weaknesses. First, Caldwell dwells primarily on the “catastrophic success” in Iraq and addresses Afghanistan and Pakistan to the degree that they offer contrasts to or shed light on the Iraq experience. Fundamentally, the book centers on how U.S. policy proved dysfunctional and misguided throughout 2002 and 2003 and offers a story about how Iraq, more than the Global War on Terror, turned ugly and defines the era. Secondly, *Vortex* includes no theories of foreign policy decision-making. Admittedly, Caldwell never promises to take this path, but given the wealth of theoretical work on the Bush administration and the dangers of inconsistent or anecdotal interpretation, presenting neither basic theories nor an explicit set of standards for analysis seems a curious choice. The “assumptions” chapter, for example, implies that Bush administration officials entertained a catastrophic set of misperceptions, ideological commitments and false analogies.
Presenting some theoretical literature on these phenomena would help the reader contextualize how the Bush era compares to similar periods, such as Vietnam or the Gulf War.

Section III reinforces Caldwell’s main purpose: to offer a resource presenting the who, what and how behind America’s warmaking policies toward Afghanistan and Iraq. In addition to a thorough timeline and exhaustive bibliography, Vortex’s conclusion lists 26 “lessons” and modestly seeks to “not push those lessons too far.” These lessons include calculating opportunity costs when planning a war and remaining willing to compromise with cooperative hostile forces. Newcomers to the topic will find Caldwell’s lessons clearly articulated and the fruit of a growing consensus among informed journalists, military elites and policy-oriented academics. However, this strength is also a weakness: one is hard-pressed to find problems with Caldwell’s advice. Here, again, Vortex might have benefitted from importing some larger theoretical debates. For example, did crusading “veto players” hijack the decision-making process, or was the Iraq War a natural outgrowth of long-standing policies and genuinely held threat perceptions? Caldwell need not resolve such debates, but presenting a few would deepen readers’ engagement with the era’s lingering tensions.

Ultimately, though, Vortex of Conflict displays masterful synthesis and should prove to be a lucid guide for students and scholars diving into this fraught territory.