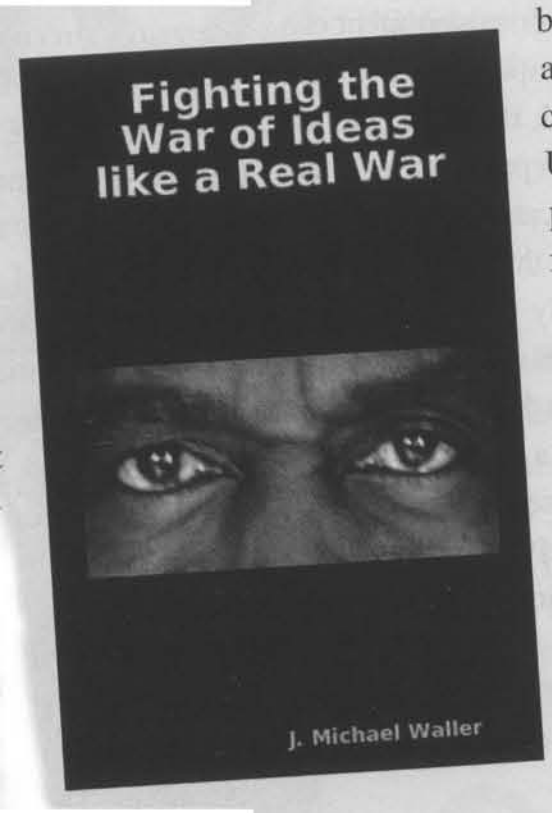
Fighting the War of Ideas Like a Real War

J. Michael Waller. Washington, D.C.: The Institute of World Politics Press, 2007. 152 pp. $19.95.

Reviewed by Lieutenant Dan Reiher, U.S. Navy

Discussions abound throughout government halls, think-tank board rooms, and academic circles regarding the lack of a cohesive communications message from the United States to the world. One has only to pick up the latest copy of the daily news to see instances in which the U.S. government is sending messages that do not clearly support its national strategic aims. In this book, J. Michael Waller proposes immediate steps the government can take to "course correct" its strategic communications message.

The author stakes the claim that we are losing a propaganda war within Iraq and then offers a way to "wage this pivotal battle in the immediate-term." One of his central tenets is that the United States is under psychological siege from radical Islamists who are still mistakenly characterized by many public officials as religious rather than political antagonists. The United States must do more than continue political diplomacy efforts which, though useful, can only produce results over the long term. What is needed, argues the author, are tools to break this siege now rather than later. Using U.S.-Soviet Union relations as a case study, Waller demonstrates how the United States has allowed itself to be "semantically penetrated" first by the former Soviet Union, and now by global terrorists. He makes a strong argument that this has largely occurred and is occurring because of our reluctance to counter the terms and definitions handed out to the world public by our enemies.



A keystone of this argument is the use of the term *jihad*. Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations are quick to justify their actions as examples of jihad, a term with multiple meanings, many of which are seen as palatable by the greater *ummah*—community of believers. Waller argues that by using the term handed to us by our enemies, we cede the field of battle in the war of ideas. He proposes instead the introduction of the term *hirabah* in official statements to counter the false use of jihad by our enemies. Hirabah, which carries a connotation of unjust warfare, is more aligned to the context with which the United States wants to frame al Qaeda and other groups in the war on terrorism.

Rife with citations that support this argument, the text clearly demonstrates that the new thrust in the war of ideas does not have to originate in U.S. government public releases. Public statements against terrorist organizations who claim jihad as their moral cover have already been made from within the ummah, most notably in the Spanish fatwa of 2005, which condemned Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda. This fatwa is an example that the U.S. government can use as a ready-made weapon in the cognitive-domain battleground. By moving to the ideological offensive, Department of State and Defense communicators can reclaim the operations tempo in this war of ideas.

By focusing primarily on the offensive aspects of strategic communications, the author has made a worthwhile contribution to what must be a key component of U.S. strategy in the terrorism war. For those who find themselves in a position to affect U.S. communications efforts, or to influence our image among allies and adversaries, this book should be placed at the top of their must-read list.

Lieutenant Reiher is a surface warfare officer, currently pursuing a master's degree in Information Warfare Systems Engineering at the Naval Postgraduate School.