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## Terrorism and Political Violence

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### A Review of: "Rebecca Knuth. Burning Books and Leveling Libraries. Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction."

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nation in the Arab world” (p. 3). Neither this chapter nor the surrounding chapters sufficiently develop the concept.

The third problem, which relates to the policy proposals, is that Gonzalez’s representation of the Nixon Doctrine is incomplete. Under the Nixon Doctrine and more specifically the “Twin Pillars” policy, Iran and Saudi Arabia shared an intense fear and hatred of communism, pan-Arabism, and other radical elements. The ideological glue that underpinned this security arrangement and the close ties to the United States was anti-communism while the strategic interest was the shared fear of Soviet penetration. Although Gonzalez is not proposing a new Twin Pillars policy per se, the lack of a unifying ideological and military threat to bolster a security arrangement between the United States and potential regional ally is problematic for the application of concept of a new Nixon Doctrine.

Despite these critiques, *Engaging Iran* will inform the public about Iran and, at the same time, offer hope for U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. Readers of this book will take away a deeper understanding of what makes Iran tick and will be encouraged to think about ways in which The United States can use this new knowledge to construct a more effective foreign policy toward Iran. Nathan Gonzalez has not only proposed a new way to think about this crucial relationship, he has challenged all of us to do the same.

Rebecca Knuth. *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries. Extremist Violence and Cultural Destruction*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006. xiv+233 pages. List Price: \$39.95 (UK Sterling Price: £22.99). ISBN: 027599079.

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In the heyday of the 1960s counter-cultural onslaught against philistinism and oppression François Truffaut felt moved to make a film version of Ray Bradbury’s classic short story *Fahrenheit 451*, the temperature at which paper burns. It depicted a totalitarian society where fire-brigades track down secret caches of books and destroy them to safeguard the ‘happiness’ of a society purged of literature, while at the same time stamping out subversion. Such a dystopia assumed fresh significance in the context of Rebecca Knuth’s widely acclaimed *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (2003). Now, in the academic equivalent of a Hollywood film sequel, Knuth invites us to place alongside it in the haven of our own shelves *Burning Books and Leveling Libraries*.

Her story opens with some general reflections on the history of what she calls modern ‘biblioclasm’ and provides a panoramic framework for her topic ‘from Robespierre to Milosovic’ (in which the significance of the Enlightenment as a causal factor in modern libricide is surely overstated). The theme is then explored in depth through a series of case-studies which bring out the different motivations that can inspire ritual acts of book burning. Part I, ‘Grappling for Voice and Power’ analyses the attack by anti-apartheid protestors on the South African Institute library in 1984, and the devastation of the Jaffna library in 1981 as the focal point of ethnic tensions between Tamils and Sinhalese nationalists. Part II illustrates ‘Absolute Power and the Drive to Purify Society’ with the Nazi pogrom on Berlin’s Institute

of Sexual Science in 1933, the Khmer Rouge's destruction of Cambodia's libraries, and the Taliban's war against Afghan culture. Part III opens up the topic further by surveying the mass destruction of books ('libricide') by all combatants in the Second World War, and the extraordinary scale of the pillaging of books in the systemic vandalism that followed the overthrow of regimes in Biafra, Kuwait City, Bucharest, and Baghdad. The final chapter considers the failure of the U.S. army to protect Iraq's cultural heritage in its drive to 'liberate' it from Saddam Hussein.

For bibliophiles this book produces vicarious torments of the sort that secular humanists feel reading the gruesome martyrdoms recounted in *The Lives of Saints*. Professor Knuth, who is Chair of the Library and Information Science Program at the University of Hawaii, is to be congratulated on the scrupulousness with which she has documented yet another aspect of the destructiveness of homo sapiens to supplement 'his' unique, species-specific gift for the annihilation of both fellow human beings and the planetary habitat. However, the book's conceptual framework would have been strengthened had she probed further into the distinctive anthropology at work in modern cultural destruction. There are significant differences at a psycho-dynamic level between the nihilistic impulse that drives conquerors or rival ethnic-religious groups to devastate each other's cultural heritage – such as the 'Catholic colonization' of Latin America or the Nazi subjugation of Poland – and the surgical acts of violence that led 16th century Dutch Protestants to destroy 'effigies' in Catholic Churches, the Nazis to lay waste the library of the Institute of Sexual Science, or the Taliban to blow up the Buddhas in Bamyán. In the first case the purpose is the symbolic and practical one of effacing the identity, history, and collective memory of the demonized Other, and so dramatize their relegation to the status of non-being. The destruction in the second case is 'creative', the prelude to regeneration and palingenesis, involving mechanisms rooted in the human ability to envisage a new time beyond the corruption or anarchy of the present.

In particular, the analysis of the fascinating empirical material collated in this book would have been more revealing had Professor Knuth operated a more cogent concept of the relationship between modernity, modernism, totalitarianism, and the drive to wipe out the cultural artefacts of the enemy. Ritual destruction has been a staple product of the human impulse to sacralise and purify reality since the dawn of reflexive consciousness. But – as Modris Ekstein's magnificent *Rites of Spring* (1989) demonstrated so convincingly – modernism is a recent, culture specific phenomenon born of a profound impulse to restore a sense of transcendence and cosmological solidity eroded by Western modernization, a force that through globalization has come to 'dis-embed time and space' even in the most remote non-European societies, producing political forms of modernism to thrive even in Indonesian jungles. It is an aspiration that in the context of a totalitarian regime gives rise to what Zygmunt Bauman calls the 'gardening state', bent on rooting out weeds and weakness, tidying up social disorder, cleaning up society's mess and forging a new sort of human being.

Thus there is something both primordial and highly recent about pogroms carried out against books and libraries by fanatical believers in a 'modern' cause or by 'modern' authoritarian states, something that makes them categorically different from the 'vandalism' of earlier eras (which also had a ritualistic aspect). Professor Knuth might thus like to consider turning these two books into a trilogy, the final volume conceived as a 'prequel' to the other two which focuses on relating her findings to what can be

gleaned from the study of both 'premodern' rites of passage and the inauguration of new eras, and of modernism and modernity, about the symbolic power which the immolation of books still retains in contemporary history despite (or even because of) the impact of liberal humanism and secularization. In the meantime she has produced a powerful argument for ensuring that the next time the West undertakes to liberate a society from the tyrannical clutches of a terror state it pays more attention to safeguarding not just people, but their culture as well.

Philip Smith. *Why War?: The Cultural Logic of Iraq, The Gulf War, and Suez*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 254 pages. \$35.00 cloth. ISBN: 0-226-76388-9.

Reviewed by **D. J. Mulloy**  
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Why war? This is the basic, if deceptively simple question Philip Smith asks in his fascinating and occasionally frustrating new book. Why do nations choose to fight some wars and not others? Why are some wars regarded as legitimate and others not? When are the sacrifices required in all wars seen as acceptable and when are they rejected? The answers to such questions, according to Smith, are not to be found in traditional realist explanations with their emphasis on struggles between—and within—states over power, security, resources and interests. The answers, he says, lie in the cultural realm. Through a series of matched case studies concerning American, British, French and Spanish involvement in the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Gulf War of 1991 and the War in Iraq of 2003, Smith seeks to demonstrate that a combination of binary codes “defining the sacred and the profane in social life” and “a limited pool of narrative structures” within civil discourse “form the cultural bedrock upon which military policy is made legitimate and thinkable” (p. 3).

Smith sees the binary codes of civil society as a “kind of cultural DNA,” drawn, in the western tradition, from a variety of sources, including its Judeo-Christian heritage, the remnants of civic republicanism and various elements of liberal enlightenment thought, and which he amalgamates, in turn, into a master-binary represented as a Discourse of Liberty and a Discourse of Repression—the former denoting the “scared and the valued” and the latter, all that is “profane polluted, evil, and dangerous.” Identifying one’s enemy with the Discourse of Repression is, Smith points out, a “minimal requirement for war,” since “[we] do not attack the good guys” (pp. 15–17). These binary codes, though, are always mobilized through narrative, and here it is to literary criticism and especially to the work of Northrop Frye, that Smith turns when setting out the four narrative structures—or genres—he utilizes to establish the “systematic and universally applicable model of culture and war” he’s aiming for (p. 9).

The first of Smith’s genres is “low mimesis,” which, he says, is the “predominant narrative for our understanding of everyday politics.” With its emphasis on the routine and the ordinary, it is a genre that seeks to “talk down war” by trying to resolve crises through prudence, diplomacy and negotiations. The second genre is “tragedy,” the essence of which is “the futility of human striving,” the sense that things will inevitably go wrong. Like low mimesis, it is not a genre that can sustain