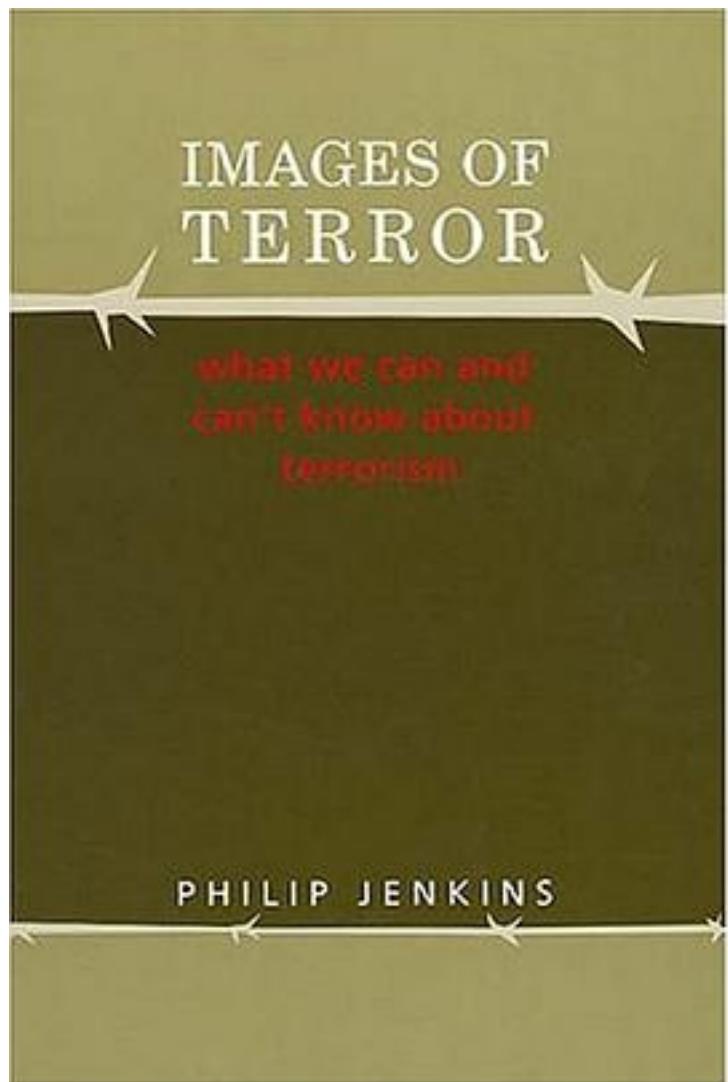


Images of Terror



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Images of Terror provides a critical consumer's guide to the images of terrorism that we are offered daily in the mass media. All too often, scholars and journalists accept uncritically the interpretations of terrorism they receive from governments and official agencies. Our perceptions of terrorism are formed by the interaction of bureaucratic agencies, academics and private experts, and the mass media: The images and stereotypes that we are offered do not necessarily reflect objective reality.

Jenkins, whose earlier books have dispelled prevailing myths about mass hysteria, serial murder, and priestly pederasty, here argues that terrorism, like any other problem, is socially constructed. He does not suggest that terrorism is not a real problem, an authentic menace, or that society should not respond promptly and effectively to terrorist threats. Rather than being something understood identically by people in different societies and different eras, the concept of terrorism is shaped by social and political processes, by bureaucratic needs and media structures. This process of construction applies both to the overall concept, and to specific movements, to groups and their actions. We must understand how we form our stereotypes of terrorism and how we come to see certain terrorists or militants as demon figures, while giving a virtual free pass to other groups or states that are just as dangerous. We must therefore also understand the rhetorical processes by which certain interest groups and bureaucratic agencies present their particular views of terrorism, and try to establish these as the ones that come to be accepted as obviously correct.

For the foreseeable future, terrorism is likely to remain a dominant issue in the political life of the United States, and indeed of much of the world. Philip Jenkins's new book raises important questions about how we form our notions of the enemy to be confronted, and how, when we make statements about terrorism, we know what we think we know.

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