IF THE WORLD DID not change on September 11, 2001, at least most people’s perception of it did. Yonah Alexander has assembled a fascinating collection of pre- and post-9/11 perceptions of terrorism and how it has been dealt with in a number of nations.

This book’s insights are derived from professional assessments of what has gone right and what has gone wrong in the struggles of the United States, Argentina, Colombia, Peru, Spain, Britain, Israel, Turkey, India, and Japan with a wide range of terrorist movements in recent years. The nation that has gone through the sharpest transition has been the United States, with its quick movement from a pre-9/11 response heavily rooted in law enforcement and focused on prosecuting individual terrorists to its post-9/11 approach of, essentially, a worldwide war: indeed, designating the Cold War as World War III, Eliot Cohen and Norman Podhoretz have now termed the current struggle against terrorism World War IV.

What works and what doesn’t? The jury will be out for some time, and the verdict will not be a simple one. There are, however, some characteristics that successful antiterrorist campaigns have in common: good intelligence; being candid with one’s own people; dealing with root causes where practical (as the Spanish have limited the effectiveness of ETA by granting many of the wishes of the Basques regarding language use, schools, etc.); and firm resolve, even ruthlessness, where it can be focused on the terrorists themselves. On
the other side, failing counterterrorist programs exhibit brutality toward civilian populations, insensitivity to the need for reforms, rigid and inflexible tactics, intragovernmental rivalries and confusion, and wishful thinking.

Terrorism is developing into the great plague of our post–Cold War age—especially where there is any chance that terrorists may get their hands on weapons of mass destruction—and its multitudinous causes are well chronicled here. Its impact—through both the deadliness of its tools and the vulnerability of its targets—is vastly enhanced by many of the characteristics of modern society.

The modern world is a society of networks of all kinds—the Internet, food production and delivery, oil and gas pipelines, and so on—virtually none of which has been put together with a single thought having been given to the dangers of terrorism. We have now seen two of those networks—civil air transport and mail delivery—turned into mechanisms for killing Americans on and after 9/11. Other networks await such exploitation in this nation and in others.

In any war against terror—in addition to taking the fight to the enemy—it will be vital for government and industry to work together to fix major vulnerabilities in networks and to restructure their incentives so that our societies and economies evolve in more decentralized, distributed, resilient directions. Further, policies that promote efficiency in the absence of terrorism, such as just-in-time delivery of manufacturing components and maintaining hospitals at very high occupancy rates, look very different if, due to terrorism, aircraft do not routinely arrive on time or large numbers of people, stricken by bioterrorism, find hospitals already full.

Another major area requiring a fresh look is the tie between terrorists and states that support them but do so covertly and indirectly. We may well need to move in the future against states for which there is no smoking gun regarding their support of any particular terrorist act but who, nonetheless, must be thwarted. It is wise to remember in such cases that absence of evidence of a given state’s specific ties to a particular terrorist act is not evidence of the absence of other types of support. We will have hard decisions to make if we are to drain the swamps from which terrorists come and where they find sustenance and support rather than merely swatting individual terrorist mosquitoes.
Yonah Alexander and his colleagues have assembled an extremely useful collection of the dos and don’ts of fighting terrorism. There is no better way to tell if a perception about terrorism is sound or if a counterterrorist strategy or tactic is likely to be successful than to examine with care the various responses that have been made by serious people. All the rest is hunches and arm waving.

Take a look, with Yonah and his colleagues, at what has worked and what has not in the real world. This is the only way any of us can begin to make sense of the extremely difficult task that will constitute the great struggle of our era.