

Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001

By Steve Coll

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The Rise of bin Laden

By Ahmed Rashid

As millions of people around the world gathered in front of their TV Sets in March and April to observe the public hearings held by the independent commission investigating the September 11 attacks, the one name that seemed to hover over the room was Osama bin Laden. While they watched, one senior official after another from the Clinton or Bush administrations spoke of the numerous attempts by the CIA before September 11 to capture or kill him.

Some of the stories of their efforts to capture bin Laden had already been told. Those who had followed recent accounts of the work of US intelligence knew that the Clinton administration would not give an order to kill him in February 1999, when he was at a hunting camp in southern Afghanistan With a group of Arab princes. They also knew that the CIA hired both an Afghan mercenary group to kidnap him from an al-Qaeda farm in Kandahar in Afghanistan and a group of Pakistani commandos to do the same. Some of the listening public probably knew as much as the members of the commission.

Among the best informed were those who had read Ghost Wars by Steve Coll, a remarkable book published a few weeks before the public hearings began, which got much attention among people who follow intelligence matters, although nothing like the publicity given shortly afterward to Richard Clarke's Against All Enemies.¹ Clarke, after all, was one of the most powerful experts on terrorism in the White House. That he would openly say that the administration he once worked for was fighting the wrong war was wholly unexpected. Steve Coll's background is quite different. He was a reporter in Afghanistan, and he has been the managing editor of The Washington Post since 1998.

Ghost Wars, which has taken him twelve years to write, spells out the CIA's covert work in Afghanistan ever since the Soviet Union invaded that blighted country in 1979. Coll recounts in detail the CIA's encouragement and support of the Islamic jihad against the Soviets, and the consequences of this support for the rise of radical Islamists like bin Laden. Not surprisingly, the book gives particular emphasis to the critical period during the late 1990 after bin Laden established himself in Afghanistan and then, with the help of the Taliban regime, began his global jihad against the US and the West.

Coll was able to secure secret documents about the CIA's operations. He talked not just with its officials, but with spymasters and spies in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and other countries. No one else I know of has been able to bring such a broad perspective to bear on the rise of bin Laden; the CIA itself would be hard put to beat his grasp of global events. Rarely has a book been able to anticipate, as Coll's has, the revelations of government bureaucrats, such as Richard Clarke, about intelligence. It does so, moreover, in a more comprehensive way than the recent testimony of US officials has done.

Coll has avoided a pitfall facing any reporter who is given access to Secret government files. The CIA has a long record of manipulating the press and television and putting out its own interpretation of events. And its chief, George Tenet, the only high-level official who has served both Clinton and Bush, is a master of political survival and spin. Some writers given access to the innermost corridors of power appear mesmerized by their proximity to the real players, and it shows. It does not show in Coll's book.

Bob Woodward's Bush at War² got more attention than any of the other post-September 11 books. Woodward was given access to the decision-making process in the White House in the days following September 11, which led to the US attack on Afghanistan. From Woodward's account, George Tenet and the CIA come out smelling like roses; clearly, they were prime sources of his book. Woodward would have us believe that the CIA had "assets"-informants and agents-on the ground in Afghanistan; that it was fully in command of the facts about bin Laden; and that it was raring

to start covert operations in that country before the war in Afghanistan began. The CIA thus wanted to put to shame Secretary of State Colin Powell and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld because they did not appear to have the resources that Tenet claimed to have. Coll shows that the reality was entirely different-very few CIA agents, for example, spoke any one of the languages of Afghanistan.

Woodward's book made some of his fellow journalists cringe with embarrassment. In uncritically reporting Tenet's views to his readers, He wrote as though he was the court note-taker for a medieval king. He Rarely questioned what he was told, he seldom offered a nonofficial point of view, and he accepted Tenet's self-serving version of events.

We can be thankful that Coll is not mesmerized by access to the Powerful and does not feel obliged to defend the CIA. Instead, he offers us a much more balanced account, blaming the CIA for not having had an adequate presence in Afghanistan and for not knowing much about the country. He also blames the Clinton and Bush administrations for having prevented the CIA from taking action against al-Qaeda. In contrast to Woodward, Coll draws on a variety of different sources and a show how there was conflict within both administrations over the seriousness of the threat of terrorism. Particularly striking is the portrait he gives of Clarke as the tough-minded expert on terrorism who fought for stronger measures against al-Qaeda.

At least some of the facts are simple enough. During the 1980s, the CIA paid hundreds of millions of dollars in covert aid to the Afghan Mujahideen, an Islamist force that opposed the Soviet domination of Afghanistan and was also backed by Saudi Arabia and the Pakistani Inter services Intelligence (ISI). Following the initial success of the anti-Soviet campaign, CIA director William Casey persuaded the Reagan administration in 1985 to increase this support dramatically. The CIA particularly encouraged the recruitment of radical Islamist fighters- many of whom were linked to the Muslim Brotherhood-believing them to be more dedicated to the defeat of the Soviet occupying forces than secular or royalist Afghani groups. As Coll writes, the United States adopted a policy that looked forward to a new era of direct infusions of advanced US military technology into Afghanistan, intensified training of Islamist guerrillas in explosives and sabotage techniques, and targeted attacks on Soviet military officers designed to demoralize the Soviet high command. Among other consequences these changes pushed the CIA, along with its clients in the Afghan resistance and in Pakistani intelligence, closer to the gray fields of assassination and terrorism.

When the US walked away from Afghanistan in 1989, it left behind a seasoned group of jihadists, whose brand of radical Islam had found an enormously rich supporter in Osama bin Laden. The son of a Saudi billionaire, bin Laden had joined the jihad shortly after the Soviet invasion, using his financial resources to build military facilities and training camps for volunteer fighters. Bin Laden first began to turn his radical energies against the United States in 1990, when the Saudi royal family agreed to invite American troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia as part of its alliance against Iraq. Coll quotes Prince Turki, the Saudi intelligence chief, suggesting That this was the moment when bin Laden's extremism and hatred for American infidels began to assert itself: "He changed from a calm, peaceful, and gentle man interested in helping Muslims into a person who believed that he would be able to amass and command an army...."

After the Soviet Union withdrew its troops from that country, so did the CIA-not just from Afghanistan, but from virtually all of South and Central Asia, a region that had less and less importance for the post-cold war foreign policy of the two Clinton administrations. In 1996 the CIA was taken completely by surprise when the ragtag Taliban captured Kabul and put the famous Tajik-speaking resistance commander Ahmed Shah Massoud to flight. In 1998, the CIA failed to predict that India would explode a nuclear Device or that Pakistan would launch a military offensive in the Kargil district of Indian Kashmir the following year. And these are just some of the more publicly known failures of the agency that Coll has pointed out.

Coll writes that although the CIA had passed, through Pakistan, billions of dollars in military aid to the Afghan Mujahideen, it was not much interested in who was getting the weapons, nor was it concerned with what a post-Soviet Afghanistan would look like. In choosing the leaders and organization that would get arms and money, the CIA was dependent on the ISI and the Saudi Arabia General Intelligence Department (GID). Coll writes of the period, "There was no American policy on Afghan politics at the time, only the de facto promotion of Pakistani goals as carried out by Pakistani intelligence." Huge deliveries of arms and money intended for the Mujahideen passed first through the hands of the ISI, which predictably took a considerable cut for itself before allowing deliveries to the Mujahideen groups they had selected.

Pakistan's and Saudi Arabia's intelligence services first backed the Islamic extremist group Hezb-e-Islami-led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar-and then, finding Hekmatyar greedy and unpopular, they backed another group, the Taliban, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar. Both men are now on the US most-wanted list. When the Pakistanis were supporting

Hekmatyar, the Saudis were channeling their money to a motley collection of Afghan Wahhabis tutored or educated in Saudi Arabia, in part with the help of the Saudi billionaire Osama bin Laden.

In the mid-1990s the CIA allowed the ISI and the GID to dictate much of the course of the Afghan civil war, including the rise of the Taliban when the Mujahideen were weakened by incessant fighting with one another and by loss of public support. Coll writes that the Saudis, preferring to work from a distance, funded ISI activities in Afghanistan and even paid cash "bonuses" to the ISI officers who promoted Saudi interests.

Coll also found that by 1998, when the Taliban ruled over two thirds Of the country, the ISI maintained eight stations in Afghanistan, staffed by officers who gave assistance to the Taliban and helped train militants for the war in Kashmir. He repeatedly accuses former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto of "lying" when she told visiting US officials that Pakistan had nothing to do with the Taliban. He also debunks the widely held theory among conspiracy theorists that the CIA was directly supporting the Taliban. It did so essentially through its support of the ISI.

I spent the 1990s trying to decipher the failure of the US to have a clear policy toward Afghanistan. I worked largely from Islamabad, where the US embassy had a single mid-level State Department official monitoring events in Afghanistan and a consulate with a small staff in Peshawar, near the border. No doubt there were CIA agents in touch with them, if they were not agents themselves, but their sources of information were largely Afghan exiles living in Pakistan and newspaper reports from journalists who ventured inside the country.

In short, however energetically and enthusiastically, they collected much the same information that a competent journalist would have at the time. This left the US largely ignorant about the inner workings of the Taliban organization and its connections with bin Laden. Coll makes it clear that the CIA had no serious presence in Afghanistan or the capacity to monitor events there, let alone the ability to develop useful sources and allies inside the country.

Robert Baer, a former CIA official, has written that, in the 1990s, very few people in the entire agency could speak Pashto or Persian-the two main languages in Afghanistan. The writer Robin Moore, in his book *The Hunt for bin Laden*, 5 notes that when groups of US Special Forces and CIA agents were secretly airlifted into northern Afghanistan to start mobilizing the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance against the Taliban after September 11, most of them could speak Arabic and Russian, but not any of the languages used in Afghanistan. In my own reporting, I observed that the CIA had no competent interpreters and had to use sign language in their initial contacts with the Northern Alliance as well as in dealing with other groups.

After September 11, I was deluged with dozens of e-mails from US Recruiting agencies who asked my help in hiring Dari or Pashto speakers "for government work." For an outsider like myself, this lack of languages was the most obvious and glaring example of the lack of interest in Afghanistan by the US government and the CIA in particular. The CIA had by then a cell of agents and informants in the region to monitor al-Qaeda, but it suffered from the same ignorance.

For the preceding fifteen years, leading Afghans had been warning US officials of the dangers of ignoring the country. Coll quotes a prophetic statement by President Najibullah, the Communist leader who was ousted by the Mujahideen in 1992. He attempted to convince Washington to help put together a coalition government in Kabul that would keep out the most hard-line Islamic Mujahideen leaders such as Hekmatyar. "We have," he said, a common task-Afghanistan, the USA and the civilized world-to launch a joint struggle against fundamentalism. If fundamentalism comes to Afghanistan, war will continue for many years. Afghanistan will turn into a center of world smuggling for narcotic drugs. Afghanistan will be turned into a center for terrorism.

In 1992, Najibullah took refuge in a UN guest house in Kabul and was Then captured and hanged by the advancing Taliban. In the mid-1990s other leading Afghans, including Ahmed Shah Massoud, Abdul Haq, the Afghan rebel commander, and the current president, Hamid Karzai, criticized US officials for ignoring their country, but they could not get a hearing in Washington. Abdul Haq was wholly ignored by the CIA even after September 11 and he was killed by the Taliban soon after the US-led war began. Karzai, living in Quetta in Pakistan, was given an expulsion order by the ISI to leave the country just a few weeks before September 11, because he was trying to organize Afghan tribal chiefs to oppose the Taliban from Pakistani soil. Indeed, as I have learned, when Karzai went to the US and European embassies to try to get the expulsion order lifted, he received no support.

Coll makes it clear that when these men said they feared that their Country was being taken over by the Taliban and

al-Qaeda, they were considered no more than politicians with personal ambitions. Al-Qaeda took them far more seriously. Massoud, who continued to lead a fighting force against the Taliban, was killed by assassins linked to bin Laden just before September 11, and Karzai has survived several assassination attempts. To anyone who closely followed events in the region it was clear that before September 11, the threats posed by the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and bin Laden were of low priority for the Clinton and Bush administrations. After September 11, the US was suddenly faced with the problem of how to track down bin Laden and eliminate him, when he had for years successfully created close relations with the Taliban and many other Afghans and Pakistanis.

Coll gives a fresh account of those years. In January 1996, he writes, the CIA's Counterterrorist Center at its headquarters in Langley, Virginia, first opened a new office to track bin Laden, which became known as the "bin Laden Issue Station" with the code name "Alex." At the time the CIA thought bin Laden was merely funding terrorist groups, not directing them. A few months later bin Laden flew on a rented Afghan Airlines plane from Sudan, where he had organized al-Qaeda cells among Muslims in Africa, to Jalalabad in Afghanistan; he needed two other flights to take his wives, children, and bodyguards. The CIA officials were unable to monitor his arrival, Coll writes, because they had no agents in Jalalabad, one of Afghanistan's largest cities and just a few miles from the Pakistan border. Such, Coll found, was the state of knowledge about bin Laden when he arrived in Afghanistan, a country which he was to virtually take under his control within the next four to five years.

Coll outlines the various plans that the CIA's specialists on bin Laden drew up to try to kidnap him. They wanted to fund a commando SWAT team from Uzbekistan which had no experience in such matters. They tried to find such a team in Pakistan, whose government had little interest because it was backing the Taliban. The CIA started financing an Afghan squad to try to kidnap him; it restarted a relationship with the anti-Taliban commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, paying him a monthly retainer and providing him equipment so his forces could keep track of bin Laden's movements. As Coll points out, the enthusiasm and dedication of the members of the CIA's special unit concerned with bin Laden were of no help, since they were supposed to carry out the foolish plans of the CIA management.

One problem was simply that the CIA had few people they could count on- "assets"-in Afghanistan itself. The Clinton administration had no coherent policy toward the three main political forces-the Taliban, the anti-Taliban resistance, and Pakistan. Condoleezza Rice almost inadvertently summed up the dilemma of both the Clinton and the Bush administrations when she testified before the September 11 commission on April 8: America's al-Qaeda policy wasn't working because our Afghanistan policy wasn't working. And our Afghanistan policy wasn't working because our Pakistan policy wasn't working. We recognized that America's counterterrorism policy had to be connected to our regional strategies and to our overall foreign policy.

But Rice also claimed in her testimony that the Bush administration had been moving toward a decisive new policy in the region that would have increased the chances of catching bin Laden just a week before September 11. In fact, nothing she proposed showed any promise of accomplishing that aim. Once again, it was a case of too little too late.

In fact, as Coll makes clear, since 1996 the CIA and the US government have been working in a region where both governments and inhabitants are largely opposed to the US catching bin Laden. The US made no serious attempt to change this situation. Yet nowhere in the testimony and documents made public so far does George Tenet even acknowledge these obvious contradictions. Nor did he push for the strategic shift in regional policy -particularly toward Pakistan-that should have been dictated to the US by the threat that al-Qaeda posed.

In his testimony to the September 11 commission on April 14, Tenet admitted that the CIA made mistakes and he concentrated on the technical failings, lack of manpower, and coordination with the FBI and other agencies that hampered the CIA before September 11. He stated that "between 1999 and 2001, our human agent base against the terrorist target grew by over 50 percent. We ran over seventy sources and sub-sources, twenty-five of whom operated inside Afghanistan." Even for those who know little about intelligence matters, it should be clear that this very small number of sources inside Afghanistan was insufficient. And Tenet gave us no idea of the quality of these sources-were they cooks and drivers or commanders and mullahs?

Coll's book is deeply satisfying because it is much more than a Treatise on the CIA's performance. It covers the entire region from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan; shows where al-Qaeda and bin Laden were getting support, discussing in detail bin Laden's complicated relationship with the Saudis, who had expelled him in 1991 but remained ambivalent about bringing him to justice; and it clarifies the battles over policy among the CIA, the White House, and the US's principal allies. It's an inside account written by an outsider, the most objective history I have read of the many failures of the CIA and the US government in the region.

Two minor criticisms can be made. First, the CIA's relationships with China and Iran could have had considerably greater emphasis. In the 1980s China had developed a close relationship with the CIA by providing the Mujahideen with weapons during their war with the Soviets. In the 1990s with the advent of the Taliban, China became increasingly concerned that some militant Muslim Uighurs from Xinjiang province were joining the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Although China was Pakistan's closest ally, Beijing was never in favor of Pakistan's support of the Taliban. But China disappears from Coll's account after the 1980s.

Similarly, Iran was vehemently opposed to the Taliban and nearly went to war with it in 1998 when Iranian diplomats were killed in the Afghanistan town of Mazar-e-Sharif, near the Uzbekistan border. Here the lack of official contacts between the US and Iran was a disadvantage for the US. But it is still unclear to what extent the CIA tried to take advantage of Iran's anti-Taliban sentiments. If they did not, they surely should have done so through British or German or other intelligence agencies. What we know is that Iran quietly acquiesced to the American war in Afghanistan and that a low-level dialogue between the two countries finally began, which culminated in Iran giving the US and the UN its full support at the Bonn peace talks in December 2001, when the new Afghan government was formed. This could have led to an opening with Iran, but within weeks Bush had foreclosed that possibility by including the country in "the axis of evil."

Meanwhile what of bin Laden himself? There can be no doubt that he is alive and active. On April 15, he issued a new tape recording, which was interpreted by analysts as suggesting that al-Qaeda was taking a new strategic direction by trying to exploit the differences between the US and Europe. He offered European nations "a truce" if they would pull out their forces from Muslim countries. "The door to a truce is open for three months.... The truce will begin when the last soldier leaves our countries," bin Laden said. "Stop spilling our blood so we can stop spilling your blood...this is a difficult but easy equation," he added. Previous tapes issued by bin Laden have almost invariably been followed by further terrorist attacks. His reference to the March 11 attacks in Madrid as "your goods delivered back to you" intensified fears that an al-Qaeda cell may be organizing another major terrorist attack in Europe.

The next day almost every European leader replied to the tape saying they would not negotiate with terrorists, showing that bin Laden can now expect comment on his proposals from heads of government. The tape is also a major embarrassment to US and Pakistani forces, who since February have assigned thousands of soldiers to renewed offensive sweeps in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region in order to hunt down bin Laden. It is no secret that the Bush administration is desperately anxious to catch him before the November elections, a goal that has become all the more urgent in view of the difficulties facing the US forces in Iraq.

Ultimately, it has been the war in Iraq that has been mainly responsible for the failure of US attempts to capture bin Laden. Despite the horrific killings in New York and Washington on September 11, there is now (especially in view of the information in Woodward's recent *Plan of Attack*) more than enough evidence to prove that the Bush administration began planning the invasion of Iraq even before the war in Afghanistan ended in December 2001. Afghanistan badly needed peacekeeping troops, adequate security for both leaders and local populations, and funding for rebuilding the country. All were neglected by the US. Similarly neglected was the hunt for bin Laden. That many of his top leaders were arrested created the false impression that he and the cells of jihadists linked to him have fatally lost power. As events in Madrid and in Iraq have shown, this was an illusion.

The good will for the US and its allies arising from the defeat of the Taliban in 2001 should have been followed up by extensive local reconstruction projects, providing not only schools but, among much else, security forces, a basic welfare system, and jobs. If this had been done, local sources of reliable intelligence would also have been found. Instead, small US army garrisons were scattered along the border hundreds of miles apart. They were never provided with the funds, equipment, personnel, and other support they would have needed to gather information, follow up leads, concentrate on suspicious groups and activities, and take the other measures that are necessary if bin Laden is to be caught.

The hearings on September 11 have so far barely touched on the fact that the moment the Afghan war was over the US started moving much of its counterterrorism resources and activities from Afghanistan to Iraq—including soldiers, civilian experts, intelligence units, satellite surveillance, drones, and other high-tech devices. The hunt for Saddam Hussein took on more importance than the hunt for bin Laden, even though there is still no conclusive evidence that Hussein supported al-Qaeda or needed its backing.

Now the US military and the CIA, in a great hurry to catch bin Laden, are trying to make up for lost time in Afghanistan, sending in some two thousand Marines and moving large numbers of troops from Kabul and Kandahar to the border. But additional US troops will not make up for months that were lost both in gathering intelligence and

gaining local tribal support as Washington pursued the war in Iraq.

Hiding out in the rugged and mountainous terrain between Afghanistan and Pakistan where some Pashtun tribesmen have proved to be excellent hosts, generously financed by cash from al-Qaeda, bin Laden seems far from being caught. The lack of attention from the US during 2002 and 2003 has probably allowed him to establish even closer links to the local population and to find more hiding places if he is threatened. Some 70 percent of the original al-Qaeda leadership is now captured or dead, and bin Laden, unable to use the electronic communications that would reveal his location, is in no position to run day-to-day operations or direct the many organizations linked to al-Qaeda throughout the world-in sixty-eight countries, according to Tenet's testimony to the September 11 commission. However, bin Laden remains the spiritual guru and strategic guide for many thousands of Muslim militants around the world; every time he demonstrates that he is alive and can still make a forceful presentation on tape, he can be assured of more recruits to his cause of global jihad.

In hindsight, September 11 was the result both of a chronic failure of Intelligence gathering and coordination among agencies working in Washington and of a failure to conceive of a strategy for the region including Afghanistan, Pakistan, and neighboring countries. But since September 11 there has been a far bigger blunder by the Bush administration: its failure to sustain momentum in the efforts to make Afghanistan more secure and more stable and to catch bin Laden. No hindsight is required in order to make this judgment. What needed to be done after the defeat of the Taliban should have been obvious.