

Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management

Volume 2, Issue 4

2005

Article 6

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

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

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Abstract

Ghost Wars provides an historical review of and perspective on the the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan and the resulting resistance The author discusses how a favorable environment was created conducive to the rise of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban and how the U.S. handled the rising threat of terrorism.

KEYWORDS: Al Queda, CIA, Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden, Soviet-Afghani war, Taliban

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

Steve Coll

New York: Penguin Press HC, 2004, pp. 720

ISBN 1594200076 Hardcover \$29.95

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Four years later, people still wonder how the most devastating terrorist attack on U.S. soil could have happened or have been prevented. By now we have all heard the debates about information sharing (or lack of), faulty immigration policies, and the many missed red flags, for example, pilot training that did not include landing instruction. In a society that overcomes tragedies rather quickly and subsequently follows up with finger pointing, this book gives new light to historical decisions that have profound effects on current events.

Homeland security professionals, intelligence analysts, and policymakers should read this book from both a prevention-based outlook and, perhaps more importantly, an outlook that clearly demonstrates decisions and policies of “today” will undoubtedly affect “tomorrow.” We must understand how history and past decisions and policies are an important part of the analysts’ framework for determining the next threat and attack.

Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001 is an enticing look back on Afghan–American politics starting from the Soviet–Afghan war to September 10, 2001, and the beginnings of the war on terror. For the patient reader, *Ghost Wars* sifts out the most complex diplomatic and military involvement the U.S. has experienced in this century. The book goes over integral knowledge which explains the intricate relationship that formed between the United States and

Afghanistan prior to 9/11, knowledge which all policymakers and government employees working against terrorism should possess.

The book is split chronologically into three parts. The first part deals with the Soviet–Afghan war from November 1979 to February 1989. The second part, March 1989 to December 1997, explores the aftermath of the Soviet–Afghan war and the struggle to power by different factions within Afghanistan. The third and last part of the book, January 1998 to September 10, 2001, explores the CIA’s efforts to target bin Laden for capture and the events unfolding days prior to the devastating attack of September 11.

Coll begins the book with detailed and comprehensive accounts of the developments in Afghanistan during the Carter and Reagan presidencies. The section, which flows around the changing of guard at the CIA, goes into exhaustive detail of deals made between the U.S. intelligence community, Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Saudi Arabia’s General Intelligence Department, and a myriad of warlords in Afghanistan. The one goal that all these groups had in common was to rid Afghanistan of Soviet occupation and the Soviet-formed Afghani government. Coll puts particular emphasis on the fact that the U.S. intelligence community wished to remain an invisible player in Afghanistan at that time. The United States feared that their actions and words of support for the Afghan people would instigate further animosity with the Soviet Union, perhaps even causing the two superpowers to clash militarily instigating a World War III.

Because the United States wished to remain an invisible puppet master, much responsibility was put into Pakistan’s hands. The U.S. funneled most of its money, arms, and negotiations for the region through Pakistan’s ISI. This gave the ISI incredible capability to run the war as it wished and favor factions which in the long-run would support Pakistan’s best interests. By 1988, the Soviet Union decided that Afghanistan had turned into a liability and was not worth the effort, money, and forces to sustain the Afghani occupation. The role of the U.S.-supported freedom fighters played a key part in the Soviets’ decision to leave. As the Soviets withdrew, the United States felt the battle was won, and interest in Afghanistan waned in American politics. The Geneva Accords ratified the formal withdrawal of the Soviets, and a new formula of “positive symmetry” was created by the Soviets and Americans to retain a balance of power in the region. The U.S. government (CIA) would be allowed to supply guns and money to the mujahedin for as long as the Soviet Union provided assistance to its own communist allies within the country. So, in effect, even though the Soviet Union withdrew its troops out of Afghanistan, the country still had a communist-led government, the Soviets were still allowed to support communists inside Afghanistan, and the

United States was allowed to support freedom fighters. Little emphasis was put on nation-building for the war torn country of Afghanistan. Many in the Reagan administration and on Capitol Hill felt as though their jobs were done in Afghanistan and let much of the responsibility for cleaning up the country fall directly on Pakistan.

The section of the book devoted to the Soviet–Afghan war goes into depth describing the removal of a communist-dominated government in Afghanistan by the CIA and the ISI. Both intelligence organizations supported Afghan factions with weapons, cash, and training to fight the communist government. Coll points out throughout this section that many of the proxies used to fight the CIA-ISI battle in Afghanistan were Islamic fundamentalists who often used terrorist tactics to achieve their goals. Fundamentalists, headed by Hekmatyar and funded by bin Laden, did not have qualms about suicide attacks and turning volunteers into martyrs for their cause. They were the most determined and effective fighters that the CIA and ISI could find. Bin Laden first started his operations and opened a training camp for Arab volunteers outside Kabul during this time period. Coll points out that at one point Najibullah warned, "If fundamentalism comes to Afghanistan ... Afghanistan will be turned into a center for terrorism." Looking back from present day, it is simple to see that the roots of Islamic fundamentalism were sown the very moment the CIA and ISI started supporting militants with fundamentalist ideas to dismantle a communist government. Coll eloquently emphasizes that "Najibullah could see the future, but there was no one to listen."

An ensuing battle for power over who would control resistance forces against Najibullah's communist government began between Shah Ahmed Massoud, a charismatic freedom fighter and military strategist from the Panjshar Valley of Afghanistan, and Hekmatyar, a warlord with more fundamentalist ideas. Both the CIA and ISI believed that Hekmatyar was more capable of ridding Afghanistan of communist rule than Massoud. Therefore they placed more money and supplies in Hekmatyar's hands.

After the cold war ended, the U.S. intelligence community, while still supplying money to the region, labeled the situation in Afghanistan as a "civil war," maintaining a prudent distance from the conflict and, in the words of Douglas MacArthur, from "the internal purification problems of others" (p. 265). Coll states that "Afghanistan was indeed about to purify itself . . . it was about to disgorge a radical Islamic militia as pure and unbending in its belief system as any in the Muslim world" (p. 265).

A global terrorist network began to emerge in the early 1990s. Both the FBI and the CIA produced ambitious classified intelligence reports emphasizing that

Afghanistan was now a safe haven for extremists where there was ample funding, training, and wide support for jihadists. Osama bin Laden was also mentioned in the reports as a major funder for the jihadists. The National Intelligence Estimate made no mention of bin Laden but did point out that a terrorist attack on U.S. assets was impending. The report also pointed out that terrorists “will identify serious vulnerabilities in the security system for domestic flights.”

By 1995, the Taliban had evolved into a political-military movement with national goals (p. 328). With the CIA now dedicating a small tracking unit in the Counterterrorism Center to follow bin Laden’s activities, bin Laden set up permanent residence in the safe haven of Afghanistan and threw full-fledged support to the Taliban. Kabul fell to the Taliban forces in April 1992, and Sharia (Islamic law) became the law of the land. The Taliban forces were armed with CIA weapons. The CIA had supplied Stinger surface-to-air missiles and antiaircraft cannons, as well as other weapons, to feuding warlords in Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and Najbullah. Now many of these weapons were in the hands of the Taliban or perhaps even floating in the international weapons market ready for sale.

The final section of the book covers the time period of January 1998 to September 10, 2001. Bin Laden had foiled many attempts by the CIA to capture and indict him. On February 28, 1998, he unveiled the “International Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders.” The manifesto had within it a litany of anti-American grievances and threats and was signed by military leaders from Egypt, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Kashmir. It was at this point the U.S. intelligence community clearly viewed that bin Laden’s and his war-fighting organization’s (Al Qaeda) main agenda was an Islamic jihad against the United States and its allies. A blueprint was made to capture bin Laden at Tarnak Farms, one of his training grounds in Afghanistan. The plan was almost fail-proof, but at the time, CIA Director George Tenet decided against proposing the raid to President Clinton.

The first acts of terrorism after the manifesto were the United States embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya on August 7, 1998. In the aftermath of the bombings, evidence collected revealed that bin Laden had planned, funded, and ordered the bombings. Bin Laden had now launched his terrorist war on the United States. Al Qaeda now posed a credible threat to the U.S., and CIA Director Tenet stated, “We are at war. I want no resources or people spared in this effort.” (p. 436). Although a credible adversary was present, Tenet could only pull so much money away from the other bureaus of the CIA for the campaign against Al Qaeda. The amount of money needed to effectively fight

terrorism and to fund the Counterterrorism Center remained a pipe dream, and the CIA continued to rely on Pakistan's ISI and other intelligence agencies to do the bulk of the work inside Afghanistan. Massoud, an adamant proposer of a moderate regime in Afghanistan, became an ally of the CIA in its war against the Taliban and bin Laden.

The attack on the USS Cole, docked in Aden, Yemen, was the next act of terrorism with which Al Qaeda was linked. On October 12, 2000, three suicide bombers cruised next to the USS Cole in a thousand dollar skiff. The attackers blew a hole twenty feet high and forty feet wide in the hull of the command and attack ship, killing seventeen American sailors and injuring thirty more. CIA analysts predicted that if the execution of the bombing had been more skilled, more than 300 individuals could have been killed and the USS Cole destroyed completely. In the aftermath of the attack, there was widespread agreement within the CIA's Counterterrorism Center that Al Qaeda's safe haven, Afghanistan, must be attacked. The 2000 election was merely three months away, and the first option of any direct move by the United States against Afghanistan would be sure to play a large role in the outcome of the election. Another option would be to throw massive support, militarily and monetarily, to Massoud's anti-Taliban forces. Clinton's cabinet decided on neither option. They would instead continue to rely on and support Pakistan's antiterrorism efforts inside Afghanistan.

Terrorism barely registered as an issue during the 2000 election contest. George W. Bush never spoke about Osama bin Laden during his campaign for the presidency (p. 543), even after the U.S. embassy bombings and USS Cole bombing proved that Bin Laden was a formidable adversary. The outgoing Clinton administration set up a briefing for the new administration on national security issues. The number one issue on the agenda was "terrorism and al Qaeda". After the briefing Sandy Berger, the outgoing National Security Advisor, told his successor, Condoleezza Rice, "You're going to spend more time during your four years on terrorism generally and bin Laden specifically than any issue." (p. 546)

In spring 2001, the CIA's threat reporting about bin Laden was at an all time high. All nineteen of the 9/11 hijackers had entered the country by July 2001. Many inside the Agency were convinced that Al Qaeda was about to make another attack. The CIA also reported that key operatives of Al Qaeda had begun to disappear and could not be tracked. The CIA prepared a briefing paper for the Bush administration in July of 2001. The report stated that all source reporting on Al Qaeda was at an all time high, an attack was imminent, and the attacks

would occur with little or no warning (p. 568). On August 6, 2001, the headline on the president's daily brief was "Bin Laden Determined To Strike In US." The threat that terrorists might use hijacking as a means of an attack was mentioned twice in the brief. People in the U.S. intelligence community were getting frustrated with the Bush administration dragging its feet on a matter of such urgency. Clark unloaded his frustration on Condoleezza Rice saying, "Decision makers should imagine themselves on a future day when CSG has not succeeded in stopping al Qaeda attacks and hundreds of Americans lay dead in several countries, including the US." (p. 580)

Massoud also continued to emphasize that attacks by Al Qaeda were imminent. For his long-standing efforts, especially for women's rights, the president of the European Parliament, Nicole Fontaine, called Massoud the "pole of freedom". Massoud appealed to all nations not to leave Afghanistan alone to perish and lose its war against terrorism. A lost war against the Taliban would not only be a great loss for Afghanistan but for the whole world. Massoud was one of the most prominent freedom fighters against the Taliban, bin Laden, and al Qaeda.

Two foreign suicide assassins who had disguised themselves as journalists murdered Ahmad Shah Masoud on September 9, 2001 in Khoaja Bahauddin, the Takhar province. The attackers were two Arabs who claimed to be Belgians originally from Morocco. However, their passports turned out to be stolen. The two set off a bomb in either a video camera or a belt worn by one of the attackers. Ahmed Shah Massoud was undoubtedly killed by Al Qaeda. Massoud would be the front runner in a war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda, so Al Qaeda needed to kill him before September 11 and the U.S. retaliation.

On September 10, 2001, the day after Massoud's death, a meeting was held at the White House chaired by Stephen Hadley. A plan was made to counter the Taliban and bin Laden. The first step they agreed on was to pursue a track of diplomatic persuasion with the Taliban to expel bin Laden while supporting the Northern Alliance. The Clinton administration had been doing this for several years and was unsuccessful, but the Bush administration wished to continue the endless track of diplomacy even after the bombings of the U.S. embassies, USS Cole, and the assassination of Massoud. According to the plan agreed to by the Bush administration, if diplomacy failed, then anti-Taliban forces inside Afghanistan would be encouraged to attack Al Qaeda. If that limited war failed, then the Bush administration would move to directly remove the Taliban itself. The deputies estimated on September 10 that the full project, if all steps needed to be taken, would take an estimated three years to accomplish.

Okay, that was then, this is now. What should readers remember or take from *Ghost Wars*?

- When choosing the perceived or actual lesser of two evils, war-game and plan for the long-term effects.
- Insist on weapons accountability – even among allies (ex. Stingers).
- Maintain and continue to cultivate relationships with allies beyond today's battles and problems.
- Ignoring a problem does not make the problem go away.
- The credible threat of terrorism requires decisive action – not just detailed written strategies and white papers.
- Today's homeland security professionals, intelligence analysts, and policymakers must have a profound understanding of history.
- Money talks – so does misdirected or lost accountable funding.

The newest printing of this book ends with an afterword and comments on the 9/11 Commission Report. Coll points out that documents and testimony obtained by the 9/11 Commission confirmed rather than contradicted the information he has presented in his book. We can only hope that Coll publishes another historical narrative as objective, detailed, and thought-provoking as *Ghost Wars* about the events preceding September 10, 2001.