

**“Osama bin Laden:
The Man, the Myth, and the Mythmaking”**

In this chapter, we focus on how Osama bin Laden has been magnified into an Arch Enemy, especially how governments and the mass media have exploited both his actual messages and several bogus ones for maximum psychological impact.

From *Mounting Evidence*

By Dr. Paul W. Rea

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There's an old poster out West, I recall, that says, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.

— George W. Bush

In past chapters, Osama bin Laden has made cameo appearances; here he'll be the lead player. The chapters have tracked bin Laden's involvement with the CIA as a *jihadi* leader fighting against the Soviets, his founding of al Qaeda after the Soviet retreat, his increasingly prominent involvement in plots—some aborted, some successful—against the World Trade Center, New York landmarks, Khyber Towers in Saudi Arabia, two US embassies in Africa, and the *USS Cole*.

As we'll see, the US has never charged bin Laden with the 9/11 attacks, but this hasn't slowed an ongoing campaign, led by government and corporate media, to vilify him as Public Enemy #1. Reinforced by video and audio tapes, the specter of an Islamic Supervillain has resonated within popular culture, much like a bad guy in a James Bond movie or a video game.

Today, a decade or more into the war in Afghanistan, more and more Americans are asking questions about the leadup and the conduct of that ongoing agony.

- Why, if the main objective was to extradite, capture, or kill Osama bin Laden, didn't any of these happen?
- Did the US negotiate in good faith to bring the alleged architect of 9/11 to justice, or did it possibly fear having him tried in open court?
- Why was US air power so often not used, even when commanders received very current intelligence on high-ranking al Qaeda and Taliban leaders?
- Why, once the bombing had begun, did the Pentagon suddenly downplay bin Laden?
- Why were airlifts and convoys allowed to carry Islamist fighters back to Pakistan, where they could regroup and recruit more *jihadi* to fight the US?
- Were decisions for military “stand downs” made by the US command, by the White House, or

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in response to demands from American new ally in the War on Terror, Pakistan?

The Feds offered many excuses but few real answers. Instead, both government and media seemed most interested in magnifying and then maintaining the threat allegedly posed by bin Laden.

The strange failures to capture bin Laden or Taliban fighters extended a long-standing pattern. For years, Pakistan and the Taliban in Afghanistan had protected bin Laden. The US had not only tolerated this but, as we'll see in the next chapter, the CIA had become deeply involved in black-market trade for weapons and narcotics (P. D Scott *Oil, Drugs, and War* pp. 28-29, 32). In addition, during this time the US refused masses of intelligence on bin Laden and al Qaeda from Sudan, Saudi Arabia, France, Israel, and Russia. The priority of US policy was clearly power projection and economic expansion, epitomized by the oil and gas pipeline the US proposed to build across Afghanistan and Pakistan. Placating strategically situated foreign powers—especially Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Israel—have routinely taken precedence over protecting the American public. In a supreme irony, these three countries are among those most often cited as “state actors” bearing some responsibility for 9/11.

After examining these events, this chapter will look at how the bin Laden messages—audio and video tapes—have served to provide an ongoing arch enemy and how the corporate media have helped him to haunt the public psyche.

The Role of the Media in Fashioning an Enemy More than ever before, we're coming to understand the political role of the Public Enemy. Andrew Bacevich, author of *Washington Rules: America's Path to Permanent War*, has amply documented how “a permanent enemy” is required to maintain “a condition of permanent national-security crisis” (*NYT Book Rev.* 9/5/10). Orwell understood this when he made “the two-minute Hate” a feature of *1984*. Images of Emmanuel Goldstein, Public Enemy Number One, were broadcast on all TV screens each day (www.online-literature.com/orwell/1984/2). As fear anger build, a constant state of alarm produces the permanent “crisis” required for perpetual war. External threats must constantly be manufactured to justify the costs of a huge military and justify its interventions. Thus war industries and the national security state require new megathreats of almost mythic dimensions. Since *Mounting Evidence* examines 9/11 in the broader context of propaganda and political manipulation, it places Osama bin Laden within this pattern of using larger-than-life enemies to sustain the American

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military/industrial/intelligence complex and perpetuate the nation's imperial project.

During the Cold War, the enemies were mostly communists—Stalin, Mao, Castro, and Ho Chi Minh—and they were presented as mortal threats to “freedom and democracy.” In fact, though, the real threat was to American capitalist expansion. Since the 1980s, as the Cold War wound down and Soviet leaders became less menacing, Washington has cycled through a series of replacement archenemies: Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua, Manuel Ortega of Panama, Moammar Khadafy of Libya, Saddam Hussein, and one of the most enduring of the lot, Osama bin Laden.

In the US, there's been little need to hang huge portraits of designated enemies in public squares, for their faces, presented in the nightly news, have invaded living rooms on big-screen TVs. One purpose, it would surely seem, was to intimidate, since a frightened public is easier to influence and control. For governments to justify aggression abroad and oppression at home, they need to enlarge the threats. Placing bin Laden in this rogue's gallery of larger-than-life enemies helps us understand why the US squandered so many opportunities to kill or capture him: he was less useful dead than alive. In our more candid moments, many of us would agree that “If the Devil doesn't exist, those in power would have to invent him.”

US and Islamist Militants: Patterns of Rebuff, Protection, and Escape

With bin Laden, as with so many mythic facets of the Official Story, we encounter little-known surprises. Here we'll look at negotiations with the Taliban for bin Laden immediately after 9/11—at the missed opportunities to detain the bearded leader as well as thousands of other *jihadi*, and especially at the failure to seal off the border with Pakistan. Although these blunders and blockages may strike us as odd, they did have many precedents in the years just before 2001.

Let's survey this ongoing pattern.

US Refuses Vast Intelligence Databases on al Qaeda As we've seen, US intelligence had perceived Islamist militants as a threat for many years—certainly since the New York “landmarks” and Bojinka Plots were exposed in 1994. In 1995, Sudan offered the CIA its extensive files on bin Laden, who had lived in that country since 1991. Over this time Sudanese spies had collected a “vast intelligence database on . . . more than 200 leading members of his al Qaeda terrorist network . . .” Nevertheless, the US declined the Sudanese offer as well as Saudi intelligence on bin Laden (*Guardian* [UK] 9/30/01). At this same time, French intelligence had compiled

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a thick dossier on Zacharias Moussaoui, the al Qaeda operative who was apprehended just a month before 9/11. But this, too, the US declined (*LA Times* 3/21/06).

In addition to these offers of intelligence info, the US also rejected a treasure trove assembled by the Russians. In early 2001, when Moscow submitted a detailed report on al Qaeda's infrastructure in Afghanistan, again Washington declined an intelligence bonanza. The Russian report revealed that "the degree of Pakistani military and security [ISI espionage] in Afghanistan" was "breathtaking" (*Jane's Intelligence Digest* 10/91). Declining this package seems especially surprising, since Washington had so often complained about the ISI's training of *jihadis* in Afghanistan. But the Russian intelligence might have embarrassed Washington, for it likely revealed how the CIA had helped build the ISI into a formidable force that had also become involved in running heroin and funding Pakistan's illicit nuclear program (A. Rashid *Descent into Chaos* pp. 38, 41).

Why Decline New Information on Known Terrorists? Long before Bush declared the War on Terror, American and British intelligence had tracked bin Laden and al Qaeda: American espionage agencies were hardly uninformed. Twenty-two-year CIA veteran Michael Scheuer, a specialist on bin Laden, told the 9/11 Commission that "there's never been a lack of intelligence," and by 1997 the CIA was very well informed on bin Laden . . . (P. Shenon *The Commission* pp. 188-89). To get all this information, it was often expedient to infiltrate the target group. But since doing this requires recruiting native speakers of, say, Arabic or Pashtu, spy agencies themselves are easily infiltrated. It's tempting to collect two paychecks by spying for both sides.

So while one might have expected both the US and UK to take a tough line on Islamic fundamentalist groups, the record was much more mixed. It's fair to conclude, along with British researcher Nafiz Mosaddeq Ahmed, that to a surprising degree "US and Western interests have systematically melded with . . . international terrorism" (Ahmed *War on Truth* p. 87). This "melding" can produce politically embarrassing collusion, as we saw with Mohamed the American (MTA). Avoidance of exposure might help to explain why Washington refused several windfalls of information. In addition, if you have information, you can be expected to act on it.

But the ongoing pattern didn't just involve turning down offers of information on al Qaeda; it also included turning down offers to get its *honcho*, bin Laden himself.

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Bin Laden Given Sanctuary in Sudan In 1995, bin Laden was named among the unindicted conspirators in the plots to blow up the World Trade Center and twelve New York “landmarks” (*Jane’s Intell. Rev.* 10/1/05). The following year bin Laden took up residence in Khartoum, Sudan. When the country’s security services offered to hand him over, Washington cavalierly advised Khartoum to “let him go” (*Wash. Post* 10/03/01). Many intelligence professionals in Africa were aghast. One commented in disgust that “we kidnap minor drug czars and bring them back in burlap bags. Somebody didn’t want this to happen.” The official added that “the State Department may have blocked bin Laden’s arrest to placate a part of the Saudi Arabian government that supported bin Laden” (*Village Voice* 10/31-11/6/01).

Protecting bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the Saudis In 1998, the CIA learned that the Saudis were harboring an al Qaeda cell. But when the CIA offered information on known Islamist militants in the country, the Saudis refused it. In another instance, the Saudi defense minister, Prince Sultan, refused to accept a list of operatives active throughout the Middle East (N. M. Ahmed *The War on Truth* p. 90). And when the FBI tried to arrest several Islamist operatives inside the US, the Saudi government issued them alias passports (*Financial Times* 1/12/02).

However, the CIA was involved in systematic obstructions of its own. In the late 1990s, the Agency turned down the Taliban’s repeated offers to deal with bin Laden. Leili Helms, the niece of former CIA director Richard Helms, served as a clandestine liaison between the Agency and the Taliban during negotiations for the much-discussed oil pipeline through Afghanistan. (Cheney’s Halliburton was poised to become a lead contractor). Ms. Helms later reported that the State Department declined the Taliban’s repeated offers to extradite or assassinate bin Laden (*Village Voice* 1/2-8/02). In addition to imperial power projection, commercial considerations had also driven US foreign policy over many decades, with the CIA often functioning as one prong on the imperial pitchfork.

Shielding al Qaeda and Saudis after Cole Bombing In October of 2000, al Qaeda struck the *USS Cole*, a Navy destroyer moored in Aden, Yemen. Seventeen sailors were killed (NPR 10/14/00). The Clinton administration tried to undertake a full investigation into the bombing. “A dedicated, relentless, and hard-charging investigator who was one of the FBI’s brightest stars” was assigned to lead the investigation: the legendary John O’Neill. However, the US

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ambassador blocked O'Neill's team of FBI "Rambos" from entering the country (*NYT* 8/19/01). Nor was this the first time that O'Neill had been kept at a distance: in 1998, he was also blocked from leading the investigation of the embassy bombings (L. Wright *Looming Tower* pp. 309-10).

Known for his Irish temper, O'Neill was outraged. His previous investigatory work had already led him to conclude that bin Laden was responsible for the hit on the *Cole*—and that "all the answers, everything needed to dismantle Osama bin Laden's organization, can be found in Saudi Arabia." The State Department, however, stymied the investigation, fearful of offending the Saudis (J.C. Brisard and G. Dasque *Forbidden Truth* p. xix). Later, as the Bush administration assumed power, pressures to protect the Kingdom intensified. The BBC's Greg Palast reported that "while there's always been constraints on investigating the Saudis, under George Bush it's gotten much worse" (BBC 11/7/01). Palast also cited a top-level CIA source who spoke about a major policy shift under Bush and investigators were ordered to "back off" the Saudis (Palast *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* p. 99).

Blockages May Reveal Shadow Government But the inhibitions went well beyond the Saudis; sometimes they came from the CIA. In late 2000, Chief of Counterterrorism Richard Clarke urged that Predator drone flights over Afghanistan be resumed in order to kill bin Laden. Clarke complained, however, that "every time we were ready to use it [the drone], the CIA would change its mind." In a cabinet meeting held just a week before 9/11, CIA Director George Tenet blustered that the Agency would operate Predators "over my dead body" (*New Yorker* 8/4/03). If one has any illusions that the CIA often functions as a "shadow government," beyond the control of policy makers and the public, this blunt refusal should dispel them.

Whoever was pulling the strings, we're now ready to see how the attack on Afghanistan extended a long history of rejecting intelligence about Islamists, letting them escape, and coddling the countries that harbored, trained, and financed them.

The Attack on Afghanistan, 2001: A Pattern of Delays and Blockages

In the weeks following the attacks, Bush officials and conservative pundits vilified bin Laden as a near-satanic nemesis. Bush himself proclaimed that "the most important thing is for us to find Osama bin Laden. It is our No. 1 priority" (UPI 9/13/01). All but thumping his chest, the

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president famously bellowed that he wanted bin Laden “dead or alive” (CNN 9/17/01). Yet despite the tough talk, effective action didn’t follow. Time after time the US failed to strike the al Qaeda leader, even when the timing was opportune. One little-publicized opportunity to kill bin Laden came before the bombardment of Afghanistan began, when US intelligence had pinpointed bin Laden but the Pentagon wouldn’t approve a missile strike (J. Risen *State of War* p. 185).

The CIA showed surprisingly little interest. Despite the trauma of 9/11 and Washington’s declarations that al Qaeda and the Taliban were involved in the attacks, US intelligence showed little interest in locating either al Qaeda leaders or Mullah Mohammed Omar, leader of the Taliban in Afghanistan. The problem was hardly a lack of information. The CIA was well connected to Mullah Mohammed Khaksar, a high-ranking Taliban official who’d for years served as an asset (*Wash. Post* 11/30/01). In the weeks after 9/11, however, the CIA rebuffed Khaksar—even when he offered information which might have led to the capture of Mullah Omar (*Time* 2/25/02).

Negotiations for bin Laden Go Nowhere In the weeks after 9/11 the US publicized its “negotiations” with the Taliban, but these too were oddly unproductive. During the last two weeks of September, ostensibly hoping to get custody of bin Laden, CIA officials held secret talks with the Taliban. Their demand was simple: “if America has evidence and proof, they should produce it” (CNN 9/21/01).

The Kabul/Washington dance included several steps, but none of them went anywhere. First the CIA demanded that if the Taliban wanted to avoid an attack by the US, they had to either turn bin Laden over for prosecution or stand aside and let the US hunt him down (G. Tenet *At the Center of the Storm* pp. 182-183). In response, the Taliban agreed to hand over bin Laden, but only if the US provided proof of his complicity in 9/11. Then, just a week after the attacks, the Taliban offered to extradite bin Laden “to a neutral Islamic country for trial if the US presented them with evidence that he was responsible The US rejected the offer” (*Guardian* [UK] 11/11/03).

More Negotiations Take Place in Pakistan The US also met with Islamic parties in Pakistan, which also attempted to negotiate bin Laden’s extradition. Under their proposal, bin Laden would face an international tribunal which would decide whether to try him or hand him over to the US. Surprisingly, this proposal was approved by both bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Omar (*Mirror* [UK] 7/8/02). Since Bush had just cited bin Laden as a primary focus for his

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War on Terror, many observers expected the president to welcome this proposal. But Pervez Musharraf, Pakistan's president and Bush's newly favored ally, rejected the plan, claiming he "could not guarantee bin Laden's safety." The subtext was that Washington wanted to avoid risking "a premature collapse of the international effort" [to overthrow the Taliban] (*Mirror* [UK] 7/8/02). Much more than it wanted bin Laden, Washington wanted support for its war—especially Pakistan's.

Secrets to Hide Negotiations never had a chance. If the tribunal found that the US lacked solid evidence of bin Laden's complicity, Washington could have faced acute embarrassment. The snows were coming, America's war machine was gearing up, and the juggernaut couldn't wait. But other factors were at play, too. Always wary of terrorism trials in open courts, Washington refused the offers to extradite bin Laden not only because it wanted to use bin Laden as a pretext for an invasion; refusal also offered the advantage of avoiding the exposure of "sensitive" information in a court of law—especially when a trial could shine the light on American involvement with the *mujahedeen* in the 1980s or in nuclear and drug trafficking by its lead ally, Pakistan (P. D. Scott *Drugs, Oil, War* pp. 27-29). This aversion to open courtrooms has also driven the use of military tribunals at Guantánamo and led the Feds to deny civil trials to nearly all terrorism suspects.

US Already Planning to Attack Afghanistan and Iraq

What if the campaign in Afghanistan, like so many others, was about something quite different? What if the negotiations with the Taliban were just polite formalities to make it appear that the US was seeking peaceful resolution while it was actually forging ahead with plans for violent "regime change"?

Attack plans were in place. Frustrated by the Taliban's resistance to the oil pipeline, two months before 9/11 the Bush administration had issued a blunt ultimatum: "either you accept our offer for a carpet of gold, or we bury you under a carpet of bombs" (Inter Press Service 11/16/01). When neither the carrot nor the stick moved the Taliban, Washington decided that "military action against Afghanistan would go ahead . . . before the snows started falling, by the middle of October at the latest" (BBC 9/18/01). This statement of intent, one of several made by Bush officials in the months before 9/11, raised a troubling question: Was national trauma deemed necessary to

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galvanize public opinion for the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq? (R. Baker *Family of Secrets* pp. 423-25). As we've seen, several top policy makers thought so.

The challenges were to somehow find pretexts for attacking both Afghanistan and Iraq. The 9/11 attacks not only solved the first problem; they helped to deal with the second: they offered opportunities for fabricating connections between Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein. As part of an attempt to gather evidence that could somehow link 9/11 to Saddam, former CIA Director James Woolsey had contacted the Taliban. Always hawkish, even for a neocon, Woolsey sought out Mansoor Ijaz, a multimillionaire Pakistani businessman, a lobbyist for Pakistan in the US and a Fox News commentator well connected to the national security apparatus. Ijaz and Woolsey, who also sat on the board of Ijaz's company, worked with a friend of bin Laden who also served as an Pakistani intelligence operative. The extensive and ongoing links between al Qaeda and Pakistan's military intelligence (ISI) will be developed fully in the next chapter.

Together with an unnamed American reporter, the three met with Taliban leader Mullah Omar in Kandahar, Afghanistan. The Taliban had promised to provide Woolsey with details about an alleged meeting between al Qaeda leaders and Iraqi officials back years before. Set for October 8, the appointment with Woolsey was canceled when the US bombing began the previous day (*Financial Times* 3/6/03). Even before it attacked Afghanistan, then, the US was trying to link bin Laden to Saddam Hussein so it could "justify" an invasion of Iraq. Woolsey soon became a prime proponent of such bogus "intelligence," contributing to an influential article that echoed claims of a connection made by Cheney, Rice, and Rumsfeld (*New Yorker* 3/25/02).

Massive Bombing Begins: Strange Reversals Soon Follow

On October 7, 2001, the bombardment began. Flying at night to maximize "shock-and-awe," waves of USAF bombers pounded a country already ravaged by two decades of war. As the dark, acrid smoke lifted, British special forces moved against Taliban fighters (*NYT* 10/8/01) and the CIA launched commando attacks. Cofer Black, former head of its Counter Terrorism Center, described Operation Jawbreaker, the Agency's commando mission: "to put their heads on pikes with flies crawling over their eyes . . . we went in to kick ass and we did " (PBS "Frontline" 3/24/08). Well, sort of. From the outset, it wasn't clear whether this operation was mainly about tracking

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down bin Laden, ousting the Taliban, satisfying desires for revenge, increasing American power in south-central Asia, accessing Khazak and Caspian Basin oil, building that trans-Afghan pipeline, or restoring the opium trade, which the Taliban had quashed. Perhaps they all were factors.

Another surprising reversal soon followed. Once the bombing had begun, the Pentagon suddenly downplayed bin Laden. At Central Command, Gen. Tommy Franks reconfigured the war's objectives: "we have not said that Osama bin Laden is a target of this effort. What we are about is the destruction of the al Qaeda network, as well as the . . . Taliban that provide harbor to bin Laden and al Qaeda" (*USA Today* 10/8/01). Later that month, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld released similar qualifiers about the US commitment to getting bin Laden (*USA Today* 10/24/01). One military expert remarked on the "disconnect between what the US military was engaged in trying to do—which was to destroy al Qaeda and the Taliban—and the earlier rhetoric of President Bush, which had focused on getting bin Laden" (*Christian Sci. Mon.* 3/4/02).

A Pattern of Refusing to Act, and Aiding the Escape (of Enemies)

From the outset, the campaign wasn't focused on top Taliban leaders. The morning after the bombing began, a CIA Predator drone spotted a convoy fleeing Kabul. When the CIA determined that one of the trucks carried Taliban leader Mullah Omar, it insisted that its unmanned plane attack the vehicles. When the CIA sought clearance from commanders in Florida, however, Gen. Tommy Franks decided not to strike either the convoy or the building where Omar had taken shelter. Baffled by this failure to act, one senior official later bellowed "it's not a fuckup, it's an outrage" (*New Yorker* 10/16/01).

This was hardly the only such instance. In October and November, the Air Force was denied permission to bomb al Qaeda and Taliban leaders. On several occasions Air Force commanders had top al Qaeda and Taliban leaders in their bombsights but had to seek permission from Gen. Franks or even Secretary Rumsfeld. When the commanders complained, they never received a response (*Wash. Post* 11/18/01). Throughout the whole campaign in Afghanistan, only *one* al Qaeda leader, Mohammed Atef, was killed by a bomb—and *no* major Taliban leaders were killed. Given all the rockets, cruise missiles, "smart" bombs, cluster bombs, "daisy cutters," and two-ton bunker busters the US dropped extensively (*Knight Ridder* 10/11/01), this was an astonishing shortfall.

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US Decision Not to Seal the Border Less than a week into the campaign against the Taliban, the White House and Pentagon decided against attempting to seal the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. At a National Security Council (NSC) meeting attended by Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld, Rice, and CIA Director Tenet, closing the border was dismissed “given the hundreds of miles of mountainous and rough terrain . . .” (B. Woodward *Bush at War* p. 205).

The implications of this decision, so insufficiently discussed in the US corporate media, extend well beyond the failure to find one enemy leader. Declined by the Americans, the task of sealing the border fell to the Pakistanis. Ex-CIA administrator Michael Scheuer remarked that “if the NSC did not believe that the best military in the world could close the border and trap bin Laden, why did it decide that this task could be safely allotted to the poorly armed and trained and generally anti-US Pakistani forces?” (Scheuer *Marching Toward Hell* p. 177). Instead of putting boots on the border, the Americans offered the Pakistanis big money. In exchange for a billion dollars in new aid, Pakistan agreed to seal off routes from the Tora Bora Mountains in Afghanistan, where Taliban and al Qaeda *jihadi* were expected to gather. CNN terrorism expert Peter Bergen has affirmed that not only did the US fail to deploy enough troops to seal the border, but the Pakistani military and ISI made little effort to capture fleeing al Qaeda terrorists (NPR 5/2-3/05). When Pakistan, whether by intention or ineptitude, failed to seal the border, most of al Qaeda’s leaders and fighters escaped (R. Suskind *One Percent Solution* p. 58). If bin Laden wasn’t killed in the mountains, he was almost certainly among those who slipped across the border.

US Authorizes Secret Airlifts of *Jihadi* If bin Laden was allowed to escape, he’d have been only one among thousands who’d been fighting US forces. After a deal was struck between the US and Pakistan, the US secretly allowed cargo planes to fly through a designated corridor to reach the besieged Taliban stronghold of Kunduz (BBC 11/25/01). The mission was to rescue elite al Qaeda *jihadi* and Pakistanis fighting with the Taliban and airlift them to Pakistan. Dozens of senior officers, including two generals, were given safe passage home (P. Thompson *Terror Timeline* p. 476). Of the 8,000 Pakistani, Taliban, and al Qaeda fighters trapped at Kunduz, 5,000 were airlifted out and 3,000 surrendered (*New Yorker* 1/21/02). Even more amazingly, “even some of bin Laden’s immediate family were flown out” (PBS “NOW” with Bill Moyers 2/21/03). In addition to these flights, which had received permission to fly both in and out, 50 trucks packed with *jihadi*

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were allowed to escape from Kunduz (*NYT* 11/24/01).

Since this was wartime and the US Air Force completely ruled the skies, someone must have ordered a standdown. Was this lenient arrangement part of the billion-dollar deal to close the border? It's true Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf had extorted US support by warning that to do otherwise would "jeopardize his political survival" ("NOW" with Bill Moyers 2/21/03). What Musharraf *didn't* acknowledge was that powerful elements within his own government had long supported Islamist extremism, and weren't about to abandon their pet project next door. In effect, Musharraf apparently got the Bush administration not just to leave open an escape route for Islamists, but to help air lift them out of Afghanistan.

As part of the deal, the Taliban in that country had received word from their longtime sponsors in Pakistan not to resist the Americans, but to fall back and fight another day. It's still not well understood that "the Taliban had been organized and controlled by the Pakistani intelligence service, [the] ISI, since the very beginning. . . . Thus the ISI effectively controlled Afghanistan (A. Cockburn *Rumsfeld* p. 126-27). The ISI loyalties to Islamists shouldn't come as a surprise for, as we've seen, it was the head of Pakistan's ISI who sent \$100,000 to alleged "9/11 ringleader" Mohamed Atta (*Times of India* 10/9/01).

Newsworthy as the failures to intercept convoys and the tacit sponsorship of airlifts would surely have seemed, the US media enforced a blackout. Although some news outlets reported that airlifts were occurring, very few disclosed Washington's secret cooperation with them. Later, when the US and Pakistani governments denied the airlifts ever occurred, celebrated investigative reporter Seymour Hersh presented evidence demonstrating that Rumsfeld must have approved them ("NOW" with Bill Moyers 2/21/03).

US Also Fails to Attack al Qaeda Convoys In late October, US intelligence tracked bin Laden and al Qaeda fighters heading for Tora Bora and the border (Knight Ridder 10/20/02). In early November, locals in Afghanistan witnessed al Qaeda *jihadi* fleeing from Kabul to Jalalabad, the largest city in eastern Afghanistan. Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters fled in long convoys, some of which transported top leaders. From eight in the evening until three in the morning, their convoys jammed the main road. One shopkeeper remarked that "we don't understand how they weren't all

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killed the night before because they came in a convoy of at least 1,000 cars and trucks. It must have been easy for American pilots to see the headlights” (*London Times* 7/22/02). Then in November, hundreds of bedraggled al Qaeda and Taliban fighters escaped from Jalalabad and, after hours of driving and walking, finally reached the mountain village of Tora Bora. Bin Laden was riding in one of the several hundred vehicles. US bombers passed right over the convoy and struck the Jalalabad airport instead (*Christian Sci. Mon.* 3/4/02).

Tora Bora: More Signs of a Standdown?

Counterterrorism expert Richard Clarke recalled that “we knew from day one . . . [that] Tora Bora was the place where he would be likely to go. . . .” (PBS “Frontline” 6/20/06). “All of this was known,” remarked one intelligence official, “and frankly we were amazed that nothing was done . . .” (*Knight Ridder* 10/20/02). Nevertheless, the US Central Command failed to act on ample intelligence to block escape routes. It tracked bin Laden to Tora Bora but bombed only one trail out of the village, leaving another wide open (*Newsweek* 8/18/02).

In late November, the CIA intercepted bin Laden’s radio transmissions to his *jihadis*. An Arabic-speaking agent, the foremost expert on bin Laden’s voice, overheard the leader’s attempts to rally his troops. To Gary Bernstein, the CIA agent heading an undercover team charged with tracking bin Laden, “it was very clear that bin Laden was there on the mountain.” The US command enlisted villagers familiar with the terrain, gave them GPS devices, and told them to push a button wherever they saw Islamist fighters. “The coordinates were then sent to American military spotters to call in air strikes” (*NYT* 11/28/09). The bombing was hugely destructive but largely ineffective. For no discernible military purpose, the US dropped massive amounts of depleted-uranium ordinance that would irradiate the area for decades, even centuries (DVD “War Promises”).

Direct and Indirect Standdowns at Tora Bora? While the mountains towering above Tora Bora shook beneath the B-52s, few feet crunched the snowy ground. Lead agent Bernstein joined those urging Gen. Franks to seal the border but Franks refused, even though thousands of US troops were available and British marines were aching for action. Only 1300 American troops were on the ground throughout Afghanistan, and only 1000 were deployed in the climactic battle

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of the campaign (A. Rashid *Descent Into Chaos* p. 99). In fact, only 36 US soldiers assembled at Tora Bora, along with 100 journalists (*NYT* 9/11/05). Coupled with everything else, this does seem strange.

When US forces took another shot at bin Laden, it too was oddly ineffectual. Task Force Sword, comprised of more than 2,000 special forces, was ordered to “cut off al Qaeda troops attempting to flee into Pakistan.” British signals intelligence pinpointed bin Laden near a labyrinth of caves. A team of British commandos was just 20 minutes behind him, but they were pulled off the trail to allow US troops to move in for the kill. However, “it took several hours for the Americans to get there, by which time he had escaped” (*Sunday Times* [UK] 2/12/06). To this day, this delay hasn’t been satisfactorily explained.

Viable Plans Are Rejected, Delta Force Is Held at Gunpoint Using a colorful pseudonym, “Dalton Fury” told CBS of leading a secret Delta Force unit that “had hoped to come in over the mountain with oxygen, coming from the Pakistan side . . . to get a drop on bin Laden from behind.” But Delta Force didn’t execute the mission because it couldn’t get approval. “Whether that was Central Command all the way up to the president, I’m not sure,” remarked Fury. A second plan was to drop hundreds of land mines in the mountain passes leading to Pakistan but, he claimed, that plan was also disapproved. When Scott Pelley of CBS asked how often such tactical plans get rejected, Fury replied “in my five years at Delta, never before” (CBS “60 Minutes” 10/2/08).

But this wasn’t the most bizarre of the delays to beset the elite force. As Fury’s team located bin Laden on a ridge top, Delta Force’s supposed Afghan allies announced that they’d negotiated a cease fire with al Qaeda, a deal that astounded the Americans. When Fury’s team tried to push on and pursue the *jihadi*, the Afghans drew their weapons on the Americans, holding them at gunpoint. It took twelve hours to end the bogus cease fire, time enough for the al Qaeda fighters to slip away (CBS “60 Minutes” 10/2/08). Should this betrayal have come as a surprise? Hardly. On December 3 a *Christian Science Monitor* reporter overheard one of the warlords making a deal for safe passage for three al Qaeda (*Christian Sci. Mon.* 3/4/02).

What Was the CIA Director Tenet Thinking? When the CIA hired Pashtun warlords to direct the Afghan effort to contain al Qaeda in Tora Bora, Gen. Franks was warned that warlords

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could not be trusted. Michael Scheuer, the CIA's expert on bin Laden, recalled that "Everyone who was cognizant of how Afghan operations worked would have told Mr. [George] Tenet that [his plan to rely on Afghan warlords] was nuts. . . . The people we bought, the people Mr. Tenet said we would own, let Osama bin Laden escape . . ." (PBS "Frontline" 6/20/06). If anyone should have known how unreliable tribal warlords would be, it was Tenet. For years, the CIA had been paying local tribesmen to kill or capture bin Laden, but the tribesmen never quite got around to it. A *Time* news story concluded "the agency attempted to recruit tribal leaders in Afghanistan who might be persuaded to take on bin Laden But the tribal groups' loyalty was always in doubt. Despite the occasional abortive raid, they never seemed to get close to bin Laden" (*Time* 8/12/02).

Although the Americans bombed the mountains, it's likely that bin Laden escaped—or was allowed to escape—across the border. Many in the CIA who were on his trail have drawn such conclusions (G. Bernsten and R. Pezzullo *Jawbreaker* pp. 43-64). However, escape on horseback or on foot would have required stamina that bin Laden, weakened by his kidney disease, may not have possessed. Given the carpet bombing, the mountainous and sometimes snowy terrain, and bin Laden's seemingly worsening medical condition, it also seems possible or even probably that he died before he could escape into Pakistan (D. R. Griffin *Osama bin Laden* pp. 1-17). A summary of the debate over whether bin Laden died or escaped appears in Appendix VII.

Whether or not bin Laden slipped out the back door, it does seem clear that the door was left open. Given the puzzlingly paltry numbers of troops in the field, the many missed opportunities to strike al Qaeda from the air and on the ground, the many orders the US command failed to approve, and the active enabling of airlifts for *jihadi*, and the failure to control key mountain passes, it's hard not to wonder if the US really intended to destroy al Qaeda, the group it claimed had committed acts of terrorism, and to kill or capture bin Laden.

Among the multitude of unanswered questions, one seems paramount: Why would the US announce a campaign to get bin Laden and then conduct it so ineffectively? To answer this question, let's begin with stated war objectives and strategy decisions.

Conduct of Campaign Raises Huge Credibility Issues

Whether or not bin Laden escaped from Tora Bora, thousands of other Islamist fighters were allowed to do so. Summing up the campaign, one military expert remarked that "there

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appears to be a real disconnect between what the US military was engaged in . . . and the earlier rhetoric of President Bush, which had focused on getting bin Laden” (*Christian Sci. Mon.* 3/4/02).

Some Big Flip Flops Spin machines shifted into high gear, and several top officials did complete reversals on bin Laden’s relation to the bombing and the invasion.

- After US forces had failed to achieve one of their primary objectives, the Pentagon also intensified its change-of-mission statements. Gen. Franks, the ranking combat commander, suddenly claimed that capturing bin Laden wasn’t one of the missions of the campaign (*USA Today* 11/8/01). If bin Laden was never its goal, why did Washington issue an ultimatum to the Taliban government demanding, in effect, “hand him over or we invade your country” (*Mirror* [UK] 7/8/02).
- While Bush initially thundered about “moving heaven and earth” to find the al Qaeda leader, only six months later he’d quieted down: “I don’t know where bin Laden is It’s not that important” (White House 3/13/02).
- Rumsfeld also threw up his hands, joking evasively: “we are pretty sure he’s either dead or alive” (DoD 4/26/02). Rumsfeld’s subtext seemed to be, “So we didn’t get our man; hey, it never mattered anyway.” Unwilling to admit failure, equally unwilling to bury the personified threat needed to justify another war, the defense secretary contrived to create *uncertainty*—much as those who dispute that climate change is human induced have endeavored to foster public doubts (*SF Chron.* 7/27/10).

The Political Uses of Confusion Bush, Rumsfeld and others apparently wanted to have it both ways. On the one hand, they wanted to shrug off an embarrassing failure of stated mission; on the other, they apparently wanted keep bin Laden around as a threat, whether or not he actually was. The ambiguity of the dead-or-alive question also served as a distraction from much more relevant issues—most notably, Is it credible that bin Laden and al Qaeda were solely responsible for the 9/11 attacks?

Promoting contradiction, confusion and ambiguity is central to almost any “psychological operation” (PSYOP). The technique is to so muddy the waters that researchers and intellectuals can’t get clarity and the general public gets so confused and frustrated that they don’t want to think about the issue. Incomplete or contradictory information also encourages speculation within “the chattering class” and especially on the internet. Soon the public suffers from “speculation

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fatigue.” We’ve already seen this tactic in the “debate” over whether humans caused climate change, but it has a much longer history: Were one, two, or three shots fired at Daly Plaza? Did Kennedy’s head jerk forward or backward? Is the Federal Bank a government entity or a private institution?

9/11 has provided a host of additional examples of induced confusion. Did a plane hit the Pentagon? Was the WTC defectively designed, or was it competently engineered, even over-engineered? Same thing with Flight 93: government spokespersons wanted the public to think that fighter jets did their job and were about to shoot the plane down, yet at the same time to celebrate the courageous passengers whose revolt prevented another attack on Washington.

In several of these cases, government has stubbornly withheld information from the public, quite possibly to intensify the confusion—and the public turnoff that often follows it. The evidence available to the Warren Commission remains unavailable to us. Surveillance camera footage seized immediately after the impact would probably reveal what hit the Pentagon, but the Feds won’t release it. Confused and frustrated, thoughtful citizens may conclude, “we’ll probably never know, they’ve locked up the evidence and when they finally release it we’ll have no way of knowing if it’s real or faked. Who cares, anyway? Let’s move on.”

Explanations and Excuses for Not Finding bin Laden

Within just a few months, a Superpower’s vast national security apparatus had suffered two remarkable setbacks: first it had failed to stop nineteen hijackers; then it had failed to kill or capture the enemy fugitive touted as the reason for invading Afghanistan. 9/11 was seen as the biggest “intelligence failure” in American history, and Tora Bora looked like the anticlimax to an inconclusive campaign. Whereas 9/11 had been “explained” in an evolving Official Story, the escape of bin Laden required additional “explanations”:

- ***“That Impregnable Mountain Hideout”*** Thanks to politicians and the press, the idea that bin Laden and his followers had holed up in an unassailable fortress under a mountain immediately embedded itself into the American imagination. The story reached millions on NBC’s “Meet The Press,” when host Tim Russert provided Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld with an artist’s rendering of the Tora Bora cave complex:

Russert: “It’s a very sophisticated operation.”

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Rumsfeld: “Oh, you bet. This is serious business. And there’s not [just] one of those”

(NBC 12/2/01).

Exaggerating both the technology and the extent of the caves, Rumsfeld demonstrated a gift for getting his excuses lined up. A few weeks later, US and Afghan forces occupied Tora Bora. When they searched the mountains, they found caves, yes, but no impregnable steel doors, no internal power supply, no ventilators—in fact, no vast underground fortress at all (www.edwardjayeinstein.com/nether_fictoid3.htm). Yet the “vast and sophisticated cave complex” remained in the mind of millions, nevertheless.

- **“CIA Operatives Moved On Too Soon”** Other commentators blamed Washington’s premature transfer of CIA resources to Iraq. Former CIA agent Gary Schroen provided two explanations: that the US “dropped the ball” when it pulled hundreds of CIA operations officers off the hunt and sent them to Iraq, and that Pakistan didn’t want to help catch bin Laden because it feared that doing so could ignite an Islamic insurgency (NPR 5/2-3/05). Schroen didn’t mention that, along with thousands of other *jihadi*, the al Qaeda leader was deliberately allowed to escape (NYT 11/29/09).
- **“Forces Were Prematurely Diverted to Iraq”** In 2002 Gen. Franks offered what would become the standard excuse: that following the invasion of Afghanistan by American troops, Predator drones, and other resources were repositioned for the invasion of Iraq (SF Chron. 9/5/04). While there’s truth to the claim of prematurely diverted resources, the time frame is false. In making the claim, Franks ignored several key facts: that the Afghan campaign was over several months before the final buildup for Iraq began—and that bin Laden, if alive, had slipped away long *before* the diversions to Iraq began. Here we see a perfect example of the half truth that becomes a lie.
- **“We Know Where He Is, But We Won’t Go After Him”** In 2005, CIA Director Porter Goss said he has an “excellent idea” where bin Laden was hiding, but that the al Qaeda chief won’t be caught until “weak links” in the War on Terrorism are strengthened. Goss referred to “sanctuaries in sovereign nations,” by which he clearly meant Pakistan. Goss implied bin Laden wouldn’t be “brought to justice” until Pakistan stopped harboring Taliban and al Qaeda leaders—which was to say “no time in the foreseeable future” (CNN 6/22/05).

Osama bin Laden: The Man Becomes the Myth

Beyond the actual threat he posed, Osama bin Laden was transformed into a mythic Public

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Enemy Number One. This overblown stature was ironic, since many of the tapes attributed to bin Laden are obvious fakes. The tapes illustrate broader patterns of propaganda and mass-media manipulation.

The Impact of the “Bin Laden” Messages Still unsure whether bin Laden is dead, many of us recall the dozens of audio and video messages that have appeared over nearly a decade. While some of these tapes could be authentic, many are highly, even comically suspect—and not only because of what they present but because of when they appeared.

The national security people were quick to grasp the political potential of recordings attributed to bin Laden. Right after 9/11, fearing “coded messages,” the White House leaned hard on TV networks to self-censor themselves before running bin Laden’s tapes. National Security Advisor Rice scolded the networks, telling them that they shouldn’t provide an archenemy with “opportunities to air propaganda intended to incite hatred and potentially kill more Americans” (*NYT* 10/11/01). However, as media critic Norman Solomon has pointed out, Rice saw no comparable “need to curtail the broadcasting of propaganda that might incite hatred [toward Muslims] and potentially kill more Afghans” (Solomon *War Made Easy* p. 127). Or, one might add, propaganda conducive to constant warfare. And how was it that, after the first alarm, “bin Laden” tapes were aired immediately, without being certified as free of coded messages? Within a month, the corporate media were freed from any such constraints, ready to roll new “bin Laden” recordings.

Why the Fabrication—and Why Just Then? The absence of proof influenced the portrayals of bin Laden. When the BBC concluded that there was no direct evidence in the public domain linking Osama bin Laden to the 11 September attacks” (BBC 10/5/01), the absence of proof posed a challenge. The US and UK were trying to assemble a “coalition of the willing” to attack Afghanistan, supposedly to kill or capture bin Laden. Their failure to provide proof of his involvement had become a political problem. Media involvement with “bin Laden” tapes seemed to offer a solution. Managers of media outlets likely felt increased pressure to sway public opinion—so if they couldn’t come up with a “smoking gun,” at least they could spin the scripts and paint scary pictures.

As Noam Chomsky was among the first to point out, centers of power have been increasingly able to script the news and control the narrative. And Nick Davies, author of *Flat Earth*

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News, has exposed “a new machinery of propaganda which has been created by the United States and its allies since the terrorist attacks of September 2001.” Davies pointed to “a concerted strategy to manipulate global perception. And the mass media are operating as its compliant assistants, failing both to resist it and to expose it” (*Independent* [UK] 2/11/08).

The Blurry “Confession Video” of 2001: An Amateurish Fake This tape, also known as “fatty bin Laden,” was ostensibly found by US troops in Afghanistan. It showed bin Laden gloating over the success of the 9/11 attacks before followers. Exploiting the moment, Bush blustered—seeming to project his own shadow stuff—that “not only is [bin Laden] guilty of incredible murder, but he has no conscience and no soul” (CNN 12/10/01). The irony wasn’t lost on this president; it just ran away.

The discrepancies between the tape released by the Pentagon and previous authenticated tapes of bin Laden were indeed striking:

- the bearded man wearing a turban in this video was much heavier and darker than the bin Laden appearing in other tapes.
- the speaker looked much healthier than he did in a tape he made only six days earlier (*Telegraph* [UK] 12/27/01).
- this man had fatter hands and shorter fingers plus a shorter, fatter nose.
- this man was shown writing with his right hand, whereas bin Laden was left handed .

To conclude their analysis, researchers Victoria Ashley and Jim Hoffman remarked that “in fairness, the producers of the confession video are due some credit for doing a good job with the beard and turban” (<http://911research.wtc7.net/disinfo/deceptions/binladinvideo.html>).

On this “confession” tape, the speaker indicated surprise at the complete destruction of the WTC: “due to my experience in this field, I was thinking that the fire from the gas would melt the iron structure of the building and collapse [only] the area where the plane hit ” (NPR 12/13/01). Recall, though, that bin Laden’s business constructed *roads*, not high-rise buildings. From his road-building experience, the real bin Laden would likely have known that skyscrapers are reinforced with *steel*, not “iron.”

How could intelligent Brits and Americans accept such an obvious hoax? The answers lay mainly with a wartime psychology of conformity and obedience and endorsement by a prestigious

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media outlet. Exploiting shocking images, the corporate media had already tried and convicted Osama right after September 11th. In addition, this time the BBC seemed more cooperative. It swiftly produced a completely uncritical, now infamous story, “Tape Proves Bin Laden’s Guilt”: “The tape is being seen by America’s allies as vindicating the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan. The White House hopes the video will bolster international support for the war on terrorism” (BBC 12/14/01).

In America, the commercial media intensified the trauma, anxiety, and paranoia, noted Steve Coll, staff reporter for the *New Yorker*: “The televised imagery of the attacks and their aftermath—the helpless office workers leaping to their deaths from the Twin Towers, the tear-streaked, dust-covered faces of the wounded; the shards of paper and debris; the impromptu bulletin boards covered by photos of the missing—still pulsed through the country like a crackling current” (S. Coll *Bin Ladens* p. 519). It’s not clear whether the news media were consciously contributing to a PSYOP or whether they simply furthered one while pursuing their everyday agenda of sensationalism. In any event, a shaken population shut down its already-limited critical acumen. With troops in the field, expressing doubts would have seemed disloyal, even treasonous. A week after the attacks, comedian/commentator Bill Maher had been pulled off the air for joking about 9/11 on “Politically Incorrect” (Salon 12/11/02). Even more than most, this was a tough time to be a critical thinker or a peace activist.

The bin-Laden fakery and fear mongering apparently continued with a message delivered to al Jazeera in the fall of 2002; this one mentioned recent attacks on Western targets, so it seemed to prove bin Laden was still alive. Yet when this tape received close acoustic scrutiny from researchers at the Swiss Institute for Perceptual Artificial Intelligence, they concluded the message was recorded by an impostor, deeming their findings to be “95% certain” (*Guardian* [UK] 11/30/02).

The Fake “October Surprise” Video of 2004 Obviously fabricated, too, was the “October Surprise” video which first appeared on October 29, 2004, just four days before the presidential election. It was timed perfectly to keep Bush and Cheney in office. In this video, the bin Laden figure addressed the American public directly. Oddly, though, he did so in Arabic, even though the real bin Laden was fluent in English (N. bin Laden *Growing Up bin Laden* p. 19). The strange-sounding language and ominous image thrust the threat home, further heightening the discomfort of

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many viewers. Going beyond the earlier “confession,” this tape had “bin Laden” reveal “for the first time” that he’d *ordered* the attacks (AP 10/29/04).

Once again, the new message received wide acceptance but almost no critique or analysis, forensic or otherwise. Corporate outlets hastened to run it before the election, giving it the widest possible exposure (CBS 10/29/04). When bin Laden suddenly reappeared, he embodied a danger that a president who’d waged a War on Terror was best qualified to combat. When Deputy CIA Director John McLaughlin remarked that bin Laden did a nice favor today for the President,” he “got nods from CIA officers around the table” (R. Susskind *One Percent Doctrine* p. 336). McLaughlin didn’t say whether any winks accompanied the nods.

How many voters did this last-minute injection of anxiety drive toward Bush/Cheney, whose campaign was explicitly based around offering protection from terrorism? Could this late “October surprise” have influenced just enough voters in key swing states to affect the outcome? Or could its impact, coming as it did just before the election, have pre-scripted a “frightened-voter” story which provided cover or what Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. called a “stolen election”? (*Rolling Stone* 6/1/06). Whether by illegally disenfranchising voters, long lines at the polls, rigged electric voting machines, or well timed fear mongering, it’s much easier to steal a *close* election.

Incongruence with Earlier Tapes Aside from its timing, other clues that this video was a fraud included the speaker’s implausible mode of thinking. Even government sources observed that bin Laden’s earlier authentic talks had made frequent references to Allah and the Prophet Mohammed. But in the “October Surprise” video, Griffin has pointed out, Allah was mentioned infrequently, the Prophet not all. And whereas the undoubtedly authentic messages had portrayed events as caused by Allah, here the speaker attributed them to secular causes (Griffin *Osama bin Laden* pp. 49-50). Other incongruities struck many around the world, including one former Indian official: “How come OBL seems to be growing younger and healthier when . . . he should be growing older and weaker, particularly when he is being relentlessly hunted, as we are told . . .” (South Asia Analysis Group 11/1/04).

The “October Surprise” video, then, seemed to lay bare the ongoing government/media use of the “bin Laden” tapes. As PSYOPs, or psychological operations, these tapes insured that Big Bad bin Laden continued to haunt the public psyche, justifying both militarism abroad and

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repression at home.

The 2007 Video: From Bogeyman to Blackbeard Perhaps the most obviously faked video, however, was one that appeared in 2007, almost three years after the release of the “October Surprise.” For three years there were no new videos, only three audio tapes. In this video, the bin Laden figure looked much as he had in 2004, except that he now sported a completely black beard (ABC 11/7/07). Again it’s impossible to ignore the similarities to the Government’s daily presentation of Public Enemy Number One in *1984* (www.online-literature.com/orwell/1984/2).

Media Outlets Quickly Dismiss Questions about Tape The fake or dyed beard was hardly the only peculiarity, though. Computer expert Dr. Neal Krawetz has pointed out that bin Laden was filmed “in the same clothing, [the] same studio, [with the] same studio setup and [the] same desk three years later.” The papers he reads “are moved between the exact same stacks.” The clincher, though, was that less than four of the tape’s 25 minutes were moving footage and allusions to current events were “ONLY made during the frozen-frame portions and only after splices in the audio track.” Although the tape seemed barely “good enough for government work,” the networks treated it as genuine, as validated by “a senior US intelligence official” (MSNBC 10/29/07).

Nearly all of the validations for the tapes came from *unnamed* authorities, many of them within the natural security establishment, yet validity was never an issue. ABC heavies weighed in on lightweight issues. Celebrity reporter Brian Ross reminded anchor Charles Gibson that “in his [bin Laden’s] last appearance, in October 2004, he had a very gray beard.” What explained these peculiarities, they didn’t say. Despite these anomalies, corporate media headlines were quick to trumpet “Al Qaeda’s No. 1 Still Alive” (ABC 9/7/07) and “Bin Laden Slams Global Capitalism in New Video” (AP 9/6/07).

Bogus Tape Satirized on YouTube While talking heads speculated on why bin Laden might have dyed his beard or an actor might have worn a false one, YouTube hosted a video featuring a slumped actor wearing a beard as big as a *burqa* who greeted viewers with breezy familiarity: “Hello, long time no see. It’s me, Osama bin Laden . . . I make this video to prove to world that me still alive and kicking” (www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZEW8pdFuoag). This video was stingingly satiric, but there was nothing funny about using fake bin Laden videos to justify wars that destroy huge numbers of human lives, waste vast amounts of precious resources, and devastate

our shared environment.

Drawing on both their expertise and a healthy skepticism, retired intelligence professionals have also questioned the validity of the tapes. Former CIA officer Robert Baer pointed out that “experts will tell you that off-the-shelf digital-editing software could manipulate old bin Laden voice recording to make it sound if he were discussing current events” (*Time* 11/18/08). A forensic specialist confirmed that today “it’s possible to edit or fabricate in ways that completely defy forensic detections (BBC 12/14/01). Former CIA officer Angelo Codevilla also wondered about manipulation of the tapes: “the words on the Osama tapes differ substantively from what the real Osama used to say” (*American Spectator* 3/13/09). Although major media outlets typically told the public that intelligence agencies had authenticated the latest bin Laden item, they didn’t mention that it’s virtually impossible for anybody to authenticate tapes.

The bogus tapes seemed to reveal a larger pattern of mind manipulation. Griffin reminds us that “. . . these fake bin Laden tapes appear to be simply one part of an extensive propaganda operation, in which the US military intelligence is using tax dollars—illegally—to propagandize the American public, with the aim of furthering the militarization of America and its foreign policy” (<http://globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=15601>). A lurking Superenemy can “justify” both aggression abroad and repression at home.

FBI Produces No Evidence of bin Laden’s Involvement in 9/11

In the weeks immediately after 9/11, many Americans wanted the villain’s head, but the FBI had to inform the populace that it would take time for criminal proceedings to commence against al Qaeda (*Wired News* 9/27/01). In early 2002, FBI Director Robert Mueller delivered a zinger: “In our investigation, we have not uncovered a single piece of paper either here in the United States or in the treasure trove of information that has turned up in Afghanistan and elsewhere that mentioned any aspect of the September 11 plot” (*SF Commonwealth Club* 4/19/02). Nearly five years later, the FBI admitted it still had “no hard evidence” connecting bin Laden to the attacks. So if the FBI concluded that bin Laden and al Qaeda didn’t do it, then who did? This question didn’t get asked very often because, aside from indy media, Mueller’s shocker was blipped from radar.

The Bureau explained that its Wanted Posting cites bin Laden’s alleged involvement in the

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1988 embassy bombings, but not 9/11 (*Wash. Post* 8/28/06). Had the FBI considered just the 2001 “confession video” or “the October surprise” to be genuine, it wouldn’t have lacked evidence against bin Laden. Evidently the FBI didn’t want to present the tapes as evidence in court (Griffin *Osama bin Laden* pp. 35-36). Apparently counting on a short collective memory, Dick Cheney even denied that bin Laden had *ever* been a suspect (*Fox* 4/15/09), contradicting an Official Story he’d helped the Commission to present—one that insists that *al Qaeda alone* was behind the attacks.

Nor did many Americans stop to ask, If there’s never been a case against the guy, why did Washington put out a \$25 million reward? Why did the US invade Afghanistan? If the FBI lacked “hard evidence” against bin Laden, why was the Justice Department continuing to prosecute his driver, cook, and media specialist (*AP* 8/10/10)? Above all, how could the FBI fail to muster evidence when its files—as well as the CIA’s—were bursting with it?

Was the FBI Covering Its Own Past Involvement with al Qaeda? Moreover, how could the FBI claim it had no proof of bin Laden’s involvement when, as we saw in the last chapter, it knew so much about him and several of his personally chosen lieutenants, notably Khalid Sheikh Mohamed (KSM) and Mohamed Atta? Not only had the FBI itself only tracked, tapped or collaborated with every top al Qaeda leader, but additional evidence was available from other sources, such as the NSA intercepts of bin Laden’s satellite phone calls and from the Yemeni “safe house” switchboard (Wright *Looming Tower* pp. 387-88). Yet the FBI seemingly didn’t want to reveal either the extent of its information or how it was collected. To acknowledge that it had lots of information—some of it from informants—would have raised vexing questions: How was it that you were so close to important al Qaeda operatives? Why didn’t you *act* on the information, thereby saving thousands of lives?

Again, the Big Story Receives Little Press The FBI’s decision to remove bin Laden from its List was a big story, but it wasn’t treated that way. Coverage was minimal, and the journalists didn’t raise questions. One of the few mainstream stories to appear attempted to claim that the FBI’s deletion had only occurred “because the connection to al Qaeda is uncertain.” It expressed concern about what “conspiracy theorists” might conclude from the disclosure (*Wash. Post* 9/28/06).

An extended media blackout has allowed political leaders, including a new President Obama,

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to treat bin Laden as though he is alive, remains active, and poses a serious danger. If he does, how does that square with the FBI's failure to find evidence of his involvement in 9/11? According to Project Censored, the fact that Osama bin Laden hadn't been formally charged has long ranked among the top 25 censored news stories (P. Phillips & A. Roth *Censored 2008* pp. 93-96). While the FBI's delayed dropping of allegations didn't prove that bin Laden wasn't involved, it does prompt us to wonder, If Osama bin Laden was such a prominent player, why isn't the evidence forthcoming? (*Independent* [UK] 2/7/10).

Reversing the Rhetoric, Re-Sounding the Alarm

The trajectory of American depictions of bin Laden conform to a common pattern which includes the creation, reinforcement, and eventual replacement of designated enemies. During the first years of national mourning and trauma, release of a new tape practically guaranteed a jump in the threat level to Code Orange. Over time, though, bin Laden's impact began to wane. In response, the supposed threat shifted from suicide flights to nuclear weapons (CBS 11/14/04). Since the current messages were solely audio, Americans didn't see fresh moving images of bin Laden on TV—and the old still shots they included looked faded, years out of date. Thoughtful viewers increasingly harbored doubts that he was even alive. His potential to frighten exhausted, bin Laden eventually had to be phased out and replaced. As we'll soon see, his heir apparent, Anwar al Awlaki (al Aulaqi) has been receiving more and more publicity (*USA TODAY* 8/25/10).

Reinforcement and Even Intensification While military and political officials have overwhelmingly supported the belief that bin Laden is still alive and dangerous, intelligence personnel have also helped to reinforce this master narrative. CIA Director Michael Hayden stated that “a big and continual push” to capture or kill the leader continues, and that “taking out bin Laden would be a psychological blow to the [al Qaeda] organization” (*SF Chron.* 5/28/06).

One of the CIA's foremost experts on bin Laden emerged from the shadows to discuss past mistakes, future strategies, and the dangers he and al Qaeda still posed. Former CIA employee Michael Scheuer had helped establish Alec Station, the Agency's secret unit charged with tracking and “neutralizing” bin Laden. Initially, Scheuer challenged the premises underlying the War on Terror. He argued that, ironically enough, America's military interventions were insuring “the radicalization of the Islamic world” (M. Scheuer (Anonymous) *Imperial Hubris* p. xv).

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Amplifying this analysis, Scheuer pointed out that wars like Iraq and Afghanistan, plus continued lavish support for Israel, were advancing the agendas not just of military contractors and neocons but also of Islamists. While these statements inflamed the powerful pro-Israel lobby, the former intelligence analyst has also stated that the US needs to pay more attention to “the Saudi lobby, which is probably more dangerous to the United States than the Israeli lobby” (NPR 4/21/06). Scheuer implied that the US shouldn’t treat bin Laden as a Threat Incarnate—that its own policies were breeding new and unknown enemies every day. Given Scheuer’s credentials and ongoing CIA connections, such statements initially endeared him to many in the peace movement. Within a few months, though, Scheuer moved from thoughtful analysis toward threats that seemed improbable at the time.

That Mushroom Cloud Coming Our Way Having emphasized the rising anger among many Muslims, Scheuer dropped a shocker: bin Laden’s alleged interest in nuclear weapons. “That growing hatred is going to yield growing violence,” claimed the CIA’s former bin Laden specialist. “Yes,” Scheuer told “60 Minutes,” “. . . it’s probably a near thing” (CBS 11/14/04). It’s true that back in the fall of 2001, bin Laden had threatened to obtain weapons of mass destruction for self-defense. While he didn’t claim responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, he did threaten that “if America used chemical or nuclear weapons against us, then we may retort with chemical and nuclear weapons” (Reuters 11/10/01). While the threat of terrorists obtaining a nuclear weapon is real, the chance of bin Laden getting hold of one in 2004 had to seem remote—especially since he was probably in poor health, if he was still alive. Even more irresponsibly, the ex-CIA operative contended that a “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West was inevitable. In a broadcast reaching millions of viewers, Scheuer implied that bin Laden was more threatening than ever and that all Muslims support Islam’s most virulent fundamentalist strains (CBS 11/14/04).

Further upping the ante, Scheuer dropped a bomb himself: “The only chance we have as a country right now is for Osama bin Laden to deploy and detonate a major weapon in the United States. . . . only Osama bin Laden can execute an attack which will force Americans to demand that their government protect them effectively, consistently and with as much violence as necessary” (*Extra!* 9/09). Assuming that bin Laden was responsible for 9/11 and that he posed a mortal threat, the

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former CIA officer invoked the Shock Doctrine: he all but called for a nuclear explosion to escalate the War on Terror. In so doing, he echoed the neocons' longing for a "new Pearl Harbor" to jolt the public into accepting their plans for Iraq (PNAC *Rebuilding America's Defenses* p. 51).

New Tapes, Old Patterns in the Media Years after 9/11, both politicians and the press also continued to promote fears that bin Laden was not only alive but still posed a serious threat. The glib dismissals by Bush, Rumsfeld, and Gen. Franks made in 2002 were reversed when bin Laden was needed to help justify an increasingly unpopular war. In late 2010, for instance, Gen. David Petraeus, the top commander in Afghanistan, reaffirmed that "capturing or killing Osama bin Laden is still a very important task . . ." (*NYT* 10/3/10).

Although bin Laden had neither been charged for 9/11 nor implicated in subsequent attacks, messages attributed to him were guaranteed air time. With each release of an audio tape, journalists uncritically amplified the alarm. Seldom, however, did press reports wonder, Are all of these tapes authentic? Why would a guy who'd seemed so media savvy, and who surely must be aware of rumors about his death, release only *audio* tapes? If, on the other hand, we assume that the national security establishment fabricated some of the tapes, we get a more rational answer: yes, audio tapes are less effective in affirming a Public Enemy's continued existence, but they're also, as we've seen, less vulnerable to debunking.

When it's just audio, the Western mass media don't even bother to air it. They just tell viewers what they allege it says, assure them that "government authorities pronounced the tape authentic," and run stock clips of bin Laden firing a Kalashnikov or *jihadi* riding around in Toyota pickups. Because such images often evoke fears and associations from the past, they make for far more effective a commercial than talking-head footage could deliver.

The emotional power of voice and image didn't mean that print couldn't also be used, though.

More Media Involvement in Psychological Operations To illustrate how press and power collude on both media manipulation and PSYOPs, let's look at a 2004 letter supposedly sent by al Qaeda leader Abu al Zarqawi to Islamist comrades in Iraq. A few months later another letter surfaced, allegedly from bin Laden, which explicitly designated Zarqawi as the "emir" of al Qaeda in Iraq (Griffin *Osama bin Laden* pp. 59-60). This seventeen-page document, whose origin remained

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highly suspect, seemed to advance a long-standing goal of the Bush administration: linking bin Laden and al Qaeda to the insurgency in occupied Iraq.

The press, though, came nowhere near critical analysis, let alone incisive critique. Instead, journalistic responses to the undated document (and the later message) illustrate the workings of the media echo chamber. The news media enabled Secretary of State Colin Powell to make the false claim that the insurgents represented “a deadly terrorist network” headed by Zarqawi, “collaborator of bin Laden.” They also enabled war correspondent Dexter Filkins to “validate” the document without subjecting it to close scrutiny. Filkins basically asked the public to accept the tape on high authority: “[a] senior United State intelligence official had said, ‘I know of no reason to believe the letter is bogus in any way’” (*NYT* 2/9/07). When experts are unable to determine the authenticity of tapes, journalists may rely even more heavily on unnamed government sources.

Finally Asking the Right Questions Corporate journalists’ favorite mantras—“according to senior officials,” “ranking intelligence analysts say,” and the like—have long deafened the public’s critical ear. Individual skeptics, however, have asked questions. Even before the Zarqawi letter appeared, military analyst Tom Ricks had exposed its real purpose: “the US military is conducting a propaganda campaign to magnify the role of the leader of al Qaeda” (*Wash. Post* 4/10/06). Characterizing bin Laden as “less man than myth,” Ricks’s book *Fiasco* observed that the White House sought support for its “surge” by invoking the prospect of Iraq becoming another haven for al Qaeda. Placing the fraudulent document in this context, Griffin drew the logical inference: “the ‘al Zarqawi document’ was fabricated as part of a PSYOPS campaign directed in part at the American public” (Griffin *Osama bin Laden* p. 75).

While the complex cross currents of any given moment don’t tell us everything, they can prompt the right questions. Among these is the classic *cui bono?*: Who stood to benefit from release of this information, misinformation, or disinformation?

Signs of Retirement and Replacement Under President Obama, it’s been more of the same. “This is our enemy,” stated one adviser, and bin Laden “should be our principal target” (*Wash. Post* 11/12/08). Leon Panetta, Obama’s new CIA Director, acknowledged that there’d been no new intelligence on bin Laden for years. Nevertheless, Panetta insisted that the arch enemy was alive, “in very deep hiding . . . in the tribal areas of Pakistan” (Reuters 6/27/10). But during these

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Obama years, we've also watched the emergence a *new* bin Laden, a fresh personification of Islamist terrorism: Anwar al Awlaki (al Aulaqi). This new threat has started to receive the requisite mass visibility. In 2010 the Fox series "The American Terrorist" uncovered new details about the FBI's efforts to recruit the American cleric for espionage purposes and especially to connect him with the attempted Christmas Day bombing, which had occurred a few months earlier (Fox 10/4/10).

But it wasn't just Fox that helped to promote "the new bin Laden." Framed within a wanted poster, just like Laden once was, the face of the *imam* appeared front and center to kick off a lead story informing readers that al Awlaki is "perhaps the most dangerous enemy of the US because of his ability to recruit followers and inspire attacks through emails and websites." The *USA TODAY* story went on to indicate that Awlaki is the first *US citizen* to be publicly targeted for assassination. According to an ACLU spokesperson, the Obama administration is essentially claiming "the power to effectively invoke the death penalty without [a] charge, without [a] trial" (*USA TODAY* 8/25/10).

To reinforce the seriousness of the Awlaki threat—but also to violate Constitutional rights—the Obama administration even urged a federal judge "to dismiss a lawsuit over its targeting of a US citizen for killing overseas." The suit was brought by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Center for Constitutional Rights (*Wash. Post* 9/26/10). Whatever happened to the Founders' idea of "check and balances," of a judiciary independent of the executive branch? This epitomizes the War on Terror: an outside threat is used not only to expand the War into Yemen, where the new nemesis is believed to reside, but also to justify violations of legal process and Constitutional protections.

While we aren't sure to what degree bin Laden was involved in 9/11 or whether he's still alive, we do know that he remains a vivid presence in the American psyche. In bin Laden, then, the national security establishment has found a scary name and a iconic face, an embodiment of the Terrorist Enemy. The bogeyman was tall, but mythmakers soon made him larger than life. Coming to the fore in the years after the Soviet Union had disintegrated and as China was becoming part of capitalist economy, bin Laden filled a void. Neocons yearned for a new Enemy, preferably one who personified the clash of Islamic and Christian civilizations. For the national security establishment, too, bin Laden was a godsend. Since 9/11, military spending has more than doubled and the

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Pentagon bureaucracy has burgeoned (*Newsweek* 9/20/10).

As Osama bin Laden became an arch-terrorist, a potent recruiter of *jihadi*, even a global menace, he'd had help, over many years, from American politicians, journalists, and espionage agencies—plus the policies they'd pursued.