The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 Study Guide

The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 by Lawrence Wright

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Summary

The Looming Tower: al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 by Lawrence Wright describes the events leading to the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States. The book traces two major narratives, the development of Islamist extremist ideology culminating in the creation of al-Qaeda and the failed efforts of U.S. national security officials to prevent the 9/11 attacks.

The main portion of the book begins with Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian from whom the radical Islamist movement originated. Qutb develops intensely anti-American views while living in the United States and influences later generations of extremist thinkers. The narrative then shifts to Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor, and Osama bin Laden, a Saudi businessman. These two men were born into conservative but non-radical families and communities and eventually develop into the leaders of al-Qaeda, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks. Wright explains how each man separately became involved in the resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, then shifted to targeting Middle Eastern governments and eventually the United States with terrorist attacks. Simultaneously, thousands of young men are drawn to these leaders and their extreme views, training to become terrorist operatives. Throughout this section, Wright advances his argument that extremism is a combination of religious and anti-Western ideology and frustration with one’s individual circumstances.

In the United States, Wright describes a country that is overconfident and blinded by its victory in the Cold War and thus ignorant of the threat al-Qaeda poses. Despite numerous smaller attacks on American interests and information that the group is planning a larger attack on the United States itself, only a few agents at the FBI and CIA recognize this danger and work to respond to it. In particular, Wright follows the experiences of John O’Neill, the FBI counterterrorism chief, whose efforts are hampered by bureaucratic hurdles and infighting exacerbated by O’Neill’s abrasive personality. Overall, the author demonstrates that the FBI and CIA could have prevented the 9/11 attacks but refused to adequately share information between themselves.

The book ends with the 9/11 attacks, which killed thousands of Americans, and the subsequent U.S. invasion of Afghanistan that largely destroyed al-Qaeda. Bin Laden remained at large until 2011 when he was killed by U.S. special forces.

Prologue-Chapter 1

Summary

The prologue presents events in 1996 that foreshadow the eventual failure of U.S. intelligence agencies to stop the 9/11 attacks. Daniel Coleman was a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agent charged with foreign intelligence cases. Coleman reviewed evidence, both from wiretaps and interviews of an informant, related to Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Islamist. With that information, Coleman discovered al-Qaeda, a group founded by bin Laden with an intense desire to commit violence against the United States. Though Coleman was alarmed by this possible threat, his superiors refused to investigate further. They, like many Americans in the post-Cold War era, were convinced that the country's superior technology and ideals would protect it from such a bizarre and exotic menace.

Chapter 1 shifts to 1948 and the experiences of Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian teacher and bureaucrat who travelled to the United States to attend college. Although he was optimistic about the United States, he was clearly concerned about how he would balance his pious Muslim faith with the temptations he knew awaited him. Qutb quickly became disenchanted with what he viewed as the moral decadence of American society. Though he was briefly reassured during the six months he studied in Greeley, CO, Qutb remained convinced that American society was obsessed with sex and material wealth. Americans also seemed preoccupied with the battle between capitalism and communism, a distinction that Qutb considered meaningless given the material focus of both systems. Instead, Qutb believed the important division was between materialism and Islam, which provided an all-encompassing system for creating an ideal society.

Upon returning to Egypt in 1950, Qutb was openly radical in his views and joined the Muslim Brotherhood, a group seeking to reform Egyptian society to be more in line with Islamic teachings. Qutb and his fellow Brothers supported a successful coup against the Egyptian King, but the new government quickly came to view the organization as a threat and imprisoned many of its members, including Qutb. While in prison, Qutb became increasingly radicalized against the Egyptian government and concluded that its leaders were not true Muslims, thus it was permissible to kill them in serving Islam. Upon his release, Qutb and other members of the Muslim Brotherhood developed a plot to overthrow the Egyptian government. When he was arrested and sentenced to death in connection to this plot, Qutb viewed himself as a martyr for his cause of spreading Islamism throughout the world, an effort he referred to as jihad.

Analysis

Although the events of the prologue and Chapter 1 do not connect directly to those presented in later chapters, they provide important context for the rest of the book. In

the prologue, Wright hints at his general thesis, that the American intelligence community had the information necessary to prevent the 9/11 attacks, but ignored it out of overconfidence. When describing bin Laden and al-Qaeda through the eyes of officials in 1996, Wright uses very specific language that serves to minimize its potential. The organization is considered “too bizarre, too primitive and exotic,” while its threats “seemed absurd and even pathetic” (7). The author contrasts this sharply with the confidence the country feels after defeating the Soviet Union in the Cold War. Coleman’s superiors, and the American public generally, could not imagine that such a small organization would pose a serious threat to the United States, especially given the country’s superior modern technology. Wright emphasizes this sentiment by pointing out that Coleman and most of his colleagues had been trained to “fight the Cold War” (5). This depiction foreshadows the blindness the FBI and other agencies would exhibit toward al-Qaeda and the shocking nature of the 9/11 attacks.

Although it begins more than 50 years before 9/11, Wright’s depiction of Qutb is essential in understanding the ideological development of al-Qaeda in two major ways. First, the author notes that Qutb was a prolific writer whose later works espoused violence as the method for reintroducing Islamic values in society. Despite this, Qutb’s works are quoted sparingly and the chapter focuses far more on his personal experiences in the United States and Egypt. By constructing the narrative in this way, Wright argues that radical Islamist views are a product of life events, not philosophical exploration. Qutb, like many of the figures discussed in later chapters, personally experienced disenchantment and alienation in societies that he came to believe were obsessed with materialism and sexuality. These emotions, rather than religious dogma and devotion, inspired his radical views. Second, Wright connects the direct conflict Qutb wages against the Egyptian government to his anti-Western views. At first glance, a corrupt leadership in Cairo seems unrelated to the values of American culture. Qutb, however, considers Western materialism as the link between these two. Accordingly, his struggle against his own governments is directed outward as opposition to the corrupting influence of the West and modernity as a whole. Immoral Arab governments cannot be separated from their Western backers, thus Qutb considers both to be enemies of Islam. This progression serves as the foundation for al-Qaeda’s ideology and mirrors the development of many of its leaders.

Vocabulary

imperious, fundamentalism, colonialism, reticence, narcissistic, alienation, secularism, polemic, junta

Chapter 2

Summary

Chapter 2 describes the early life and ideological development of Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor who would later become one of al-Qaeda's early leaders. The chapter focuses significantly on Zawahiri's time spent in prison in connection to his attempts to overthrow the Egyptian government.

Zawahiri, born in 1951, grew up in Maadi, a cosmopolitan suburb of Cairo. Maadi was home to a large number of European and American expatriates, along with some Egyptians. The community centered around the Maadi Sporting Club, an exclusive social society, and many middle class Egyptian residents focused on achieving the status necessary to gain admittance. By contrast, Zawahiri's family was more traditional and had little interest in the sporting club. Ayman was noted for defiance of authority and admiration for Sayyid Qutb. At the age of 15, angered by the execution of Qutb and his followers, Zawahiri formed an underground organization dedicated to overthrowing the Egyptian government and replacing it with an Islamist state. Egypt's humiliating loss to Israel in the Six Day War reinforced Zawahiri's belief that Arab society was in crisis and that a return to strict adherence to Islam was the only possible solution. Simultaneously, Zawahiri's anti-government cell grew as he became increasingly connected to like-minded Egyptians during his time in university and medical school.

Zawahiri's first connection to Afghanistan came in 1980 when he volunteered in clinics created to serve the refugees fleeing the Soviet invasion of the country. He encountered the "mujahideen," Afghan freedom fighters dedicated to expelling the foreign troops. At this time, Zawahiri became convinced that the United States, as well as the Soviet Union, was an enemy to Islam. He also viewed the fighting in Afghanistan as a "training course" for an eventual battle against the United States.

When Zawahiri returned to Egypt, he became involved in a direct plot to overthrow the Egyptian government by accumulating and distributing weapons to Islamist militants. Escalating tensions between the secular government and its Islamists opponents culminated with the assassination of President Anwar Sadat in 1981 by rogue military officers. Zawahiri was among hundreds of people arrested in connection to the assassination and convicted in a mass trial as accomplices. During his time in prison, Zawahiri was tortured at length, leading him to implicate several of his co-conspirators. Despite this, the doctor emerged from prison as an ideological leader in the Egyptian Islamist movement. The chapter closes with Zawahiri at the Cairo airport enroute to continue his medical training in Saudi Arabia, where he promised a friend that he would avoid engaging in politics.

Analysis

The name of this chapter, “The Sporting Club,” aligns with the important role the Maadi Sporting Club plays as a symbol of Western imposition in Egyptian society and Zawahiri’s life. Wright’s detailed description of the Maadi Club is extraneous to Zawahiri’s personal background; he has little interaction with the club itself. Simultaneously, Wright describes the club as inherently European and distanced, both geographically and in its values, from nearby Cairo. While it is technically open to Egyptians, its standards make it inaccessible to all but the most affluent and Westernized. Thus, like the modernity and secularism espoused by Western outsiders, the Maadi Club is present in Egypt but ultimately foreign to the vast majority of its population. Wright also notes that Zawahiri’s family is unlike many of its neighbors in seeking to join the organization. While his parents did not share the radical views Zawahiri would later embody, his belief in shunning the West clearly originated at an early age.

The depiction of Zawahiri’s early life is clearly meant to mirror that of Sayyid Qutb. As in Chapter 1, Wright briefly mentions specific texts and influences (including Qutb himself), but focuses far more on personal experiences with violence and abuse. These experiences are particularly clear in the imagery Wright uses to describe the mass trial. He states that the defendants “were crowded into a zoo-like cage” and “illuminated by the lights of TV cameras” (63). These descriptions clearly show the dehumanization faced by Zawahiri and his fellow defendants as they are stripped of their individuality and treated like animals and spectacles for viewing. Like Qutb, Zawahiri became caught in a cycle of hatred against the Egyptian government. As his views became more radical, he faced increased mistreatment leading to further radicalization.

Vocabulary

utopian, irrepressible, anti-Semitism, Islamism, guerilla, heretic

Chapters 3-5

Summary

Chapter 3 begins by briefly describing Zawahiri's presence in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, noting that the Egyptian likely met Osama bin Laden for the first time there. The majority of the chapter relates the recent history of the bin Laden family, beginning with Osama's father, Mohammed bin Laden.

Mohammed was born in Yemen, but immigrated to Saudi Arabia at the age of 23. At the time, Saudi Arabia was not a single country, but rather a collection of warring tribes. Shortly after, the country was united under the rule of Abdul Aziz bin Abdul Rahman bin Faisal al-Saud. Mohammed bin Laden began a career as a laborer shortly after the discovery of oil in Saudi Arabia led to a massive construction boom. Mohammed was noted for his skill in construction and honest leadership and soon formed his own construction company with sponsorship from that state oil company. Mohammed quickly gained the favor of the royal family, constructing several palaces, major roads, and significant renovations to the Prophet's Mosque in Medina and the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Islam's two holiest sites. Mohammed often donated portions of his resulting wealth to charity, claiming it was a religious obligation. He fathered at least 54 children, the 17th of which, Osama, was born in 1958.

Osama's upbringing and early life among his siblings was fairly normal, but he became deeply religious and pious at the age of 14. He was well-versed in the Qur'an and other Islamic texts and shunned earthly pleasures, particularly the discussion of sexual matters. In young adulthood, as Osama married and attended a Saudi university, he became interested in the the writings of Sayyid Qutb, but showed few signs of the radical Islamist he would become. He was also given a minor role in the bin Laden company by his older brothers.

Chapter 4 introduces Prince Turki, the youngest son of the Saudi king who was educated in the United States and became the head of the Kingdom's intelligence services. In November 1979, radical Islamists violently seized control of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, taking thousands of pilgrims hostage. Over the next two weeks, Prince Turki coordinated the Saudi government's response. Given the size and complexity of the mosque, Saudi security forces struggled to respond effectively, causing civilian additional casualties and weakening the public's faith in their government. Eventually, French special forces were called to assist removing the militants. The mosque attack coincided with the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. For Osama bin Laden and many other Muslims, this invasion represented an attack on Muslims by Western powers. These sentiments were particularly articulated by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, a Palestinian who called for Muslims to travel to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet invaders. While bin Laden was eager to do so, he promised his mother he would not travel to Afghanistan.

Chapter 5 traces bin Laden's growing support for the mujahideen, Afghan fighters resisting Soviet control of the country. With the help of the Saudi government and Azzam, bin Laden began funneling large amounts of money to the Afghans from his home in Saudi Arabia. This included money he personally contributed from his vast fortune and donations he collected from like-minded associates. Before long, bin Laden moved to Afghanistan's neighbor Pakistan, a staging ground for the fighters, to more closely coordinate his funding efforts.

Though bin Laden had no military experience at the time, he increasingly travelled to the front lines in the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan and became enchanted by what he viewed as the religious heroism of the mujahideen. He soon began to assemble a brigade of Arab volunteers who wanted to travel to Afghanistan to fight the Soviets and, ideally, be killed as a martyr for Islam. Rather than victory, martyrdom was the ultimate goal that guaranteed one's passage into heaven.

The Arab brigade was untrained and largely viewed as nuisance by the more experienced Afghan fighters, but bin Laden established an all-Arab camp inside Afghanistan that he named "The Lion's Den." This was the beginning of bin Laden's efforts to assemble and train an international force to wage a jihad against the enemies of Islam. Bin Laden led his small, inexperienced group in an attack against an Afghan government outpost, drawing retaliatory strikes from the government and their Soviet allies. The Arabs were outnumbered and outgunned, but managed to hold off the Soviets for several weeks and eventually force them to withdraw from the area. While it was only a minor tactical victory, bin Laden and his followers viewed their success as symbolically indicative of their ability to defeat a world superpower because of their religious devotion.

Analysis

Wright's objective in this section is to provide context for bin Laden's personal evolution and rise to prominence in three important ways. The first, as detailed in Chapter 3, is the bin Laden's family close connection to the Saudi monarchy. While the Mohammed bin Laden collected immense wealth in connection to their construction projects, they are far more remarkable because of their personal relationships with the royal family. The bin Laden company was chosen for the most important construction projects in the Kingdom, most notably the renovations of Islam's two holiest sites. Such projects elevated the family to a status among the most important religious figures. Mohammed is also described as "patient when the royal treasury was empty" (75), demonstrating his personal dedication to the kingdom. Wright furthers this idea by relating a story in which Mohammed was permitted to fly in an airplane above Saudi territory, a privilege normally reserved for the military. While Mohammed and his company are mentioned only briefly in later chapters, the prestige he passed on to his sons, including Osama, plays an important role in the narrative. As Osama became more radical and problematic for the Saudi monarchy, they struggle to respond appropriately to a man who inherited such tremendous status within the Kingdom.

The Grand Mosque attack demonstrates the upheaval occurring in Muslim society at the time that Osama was entering adulthood. It clearly shows the presence of Islamist extremists within the country and the failure of the Saudi government to control them, a reality that would continue to pose challenges for the Kingdom. Additionally, Wright points out that this was a defining moment for Saudi society in general, as its population saw radical militants openly defy their authoritarian rulers. The government's slow and bungled response only served to reinforce the idea that they were incapable of protecting Muslims and their holiest sites. Finally, the assistance of French troops, though a minor detail in the military operation, foreshadows the need for American and other foreign troops to garrison in Saudi Arabia approximately a decade later in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. In both cases, the Muslim community was horrified by the need for foreign assistance in defending important Islamic landmarks.

Finally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan began bin Laden's direct involvement in Islamist jihad. While the events at the Lion's Den began bin Laden's connection to the area that would eventually become his stronghold, they were far more important for their symbolic significance. Wright specifically describes bin Laden's Arab brigade as obsessed with martyrdom. This ideology is emphasized in descriptions of Sheikh Tameem, a bizarre religious scholar and member of the brigade, who prayed hysterically and begged bin Laden to be sent to areas of the most intense fighting. While Tameem was the most extreme of the group, he is symbolic of the group's mentality as a whole. Bin Laden's followers were not particularly interested in material goals, but were instead dedicated to giving their life for their religion. This will play an important role throughout al-Qaeda's development. Further, the victory at the Lion's Den was an important moment for bin Laden personally. He was now convinced of the blessed nature of his efforts and the ability of his radicalized fighters to successfully fight a superpower with far superior military might.

Vocabulary

jihad, pilgrim, monotheism, emulation, nonplussed, paragon, cataclysm, venal, edification, martyrdom, idolaters

Chapters 6-8

Summary

Chapter 6 returns to Ayman al-Zawahiri, who in 1986 travelled to Pakistan to serve in a clinic established to treat refugees from the war in Afghanistan. Zawahiri espoused an ideology referred to as “takfir,” which would become central to al-Qaeda’s doctrine. Takfir refers to the excommunication of Muslims for purported unfaithfulness. It allowed Zawahiri to advocate the killing of other Muslims, an act forbidden by the Qur’an, by arguing that such victims were not, in fact, true Muslims.

At this time, Zawahiri became directly acquainted with Osama bin Laden. The two men’s strengths complimented each other; bin Laden had an immense fortune and the ability to finance Islamist operations, while Zawahiri provided the causes and ideology to direct bin Laden’s resources. Simultaneously, the two men differed on the target of their efforts. While Zawahiri remained committed to overthrowing the Egyptian government, bin Laden held the United States and its Western allies as ultimately responsible for crimes against Islam. As the Soviet army retreated from Afghanistan and infighting began among the mujahideen, bin Laden and Zawahiri sought to redirect their group of Arab jihadists. It was at this time that al-Qaeda was officially founded as a small group of dedicated Islamists. Its name, translated as “the base,” reflects its leaders intent that their organization would serve as a training base for Muslims from throughout the world who wanted to wage jihad.

Chapter 7 begins in 1989, when bin Laden returned to Saudi Arabia as a celebrity because of his success in fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan. Saudi society at the time was in crisis. The government restricted all forms of free expression, and declining oil prices led to increasing unemployment. Many young Saudis were idle and frustrated with their lack of prospects and were drawn to the anti-Western ideas of bin Laden and similar-minded activists. Above all, bin Laden was driven by the Prophet Mohammed’s statement that there must be only one religion in the Arabian Peninsula. While most Muslims interpreted this as meaning that Islam should be the dominant religion in the area, bin Laden believed it necessitated expelling all Jews, Christians, and Shia Muslims. For this reason, he was furious with the Kingdom’s decision to allow American troops into the country to protect it from invasion by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. This anger was shared with Saudis in general who were humiliated by the need for Jewish and Christian soldiers, many of them women, to defend their country.

In Chapter 8, bin Laden moved to Sudan where Islamists had been seized in a military coup. The new government was led by Hasan al-Turabi who sought to institute Sharia law and make Sudan the new center of the world’s Muslim community. Turabi was far more moderate than bin Laden and the two grew to resent each other over time, but bin Laden thoroughly enjoyed his time in Sudan and openly considered quitting al-Qaeda and leading a peaceful life. He focused his efforts on investing in and constructing Sudan’s infrastructure, much as his father had done in Saudi Arabia. Ultimately

however, bin Laden was infuriated by the continued presence of U.S. troops in the Kingdom. Along with a circle of Islamists who immigrated to participate in Sudan's Islamist experiment, bin Laden conceptualized the United States as the source of Christian power and the corrupting influence of modern values and globalization. These forces, bin Laden felt, were the antithesis of Islam and threatened the core of Muslim society. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, bin Laden and the other leaders of al-Qaeda refocused their organization on confronting the United States, as the sole force capable of preventing the creation of an Islamic caliphate and the renewed dominance of Islamic culture.

Analysis

In this section, Wright demonstrates why bin Laden's ideology was so appealing to Muslim youth. The Saudi Arabia to which bin Laden returned was a society in crisis, lacking direction and purpose. Wright specifically contrasts the lives of ordinary Saudis with those of their royal family. As he states, the monarchy "was known for...boozing and carousing in the ports of the French Riviera" (166) while its subjects, most notably young college graduates, were unable to find the jobs guaranteed to them by the government. These youth were not only frustrated by the lack of economic opportunity, but horrified by the decadent lifestyle of their leaders in an otherwise deeply pious and simple society. By combining personal empowerment with strict Islamic values, bin Laden appealed to both of these emotions.

The theme of humiliation plays a major role in this narrative. Following his return, bin Laden presents of Qutb-inspired narrative that blamed the United States and the West for the failure of the Arab world to succeed. The combination of Western values eroding traditional Islamic institutions and direct attacks by the West on Muslim countries had deprived the Arabs of their rightful place in the world community. This was demonstrated most clearly by the need for American troops to defend Saudi Arabia from a potential Iraqi invasion. While bin Laden was obsessed with the Prophet's commandment against non-Muslims in the Arabian peninsula, Wright depicts the humiliation of Saudis on a more practical level. Their country was supposedly the rich and powerful, yet it depended on foreign soldiers to protect itself. This event motivated bin Laden to focus exclusively on the United States.

Vocabulary

takfir, fratricidal, excommunication, intifada, emir, fanaticism, fatwa, existential, subsidiary, intractable, zealotry, sharia, caliphate

Chapters 9-10

Summary

In February 1993, Ramzi Yousef detonated a truck bomb in the parking garage of the World Trade Center in New York City, killing six people in the first attack by Islamic terrorists in the United States. He was not particularly religious and instead sought revenge for American support of Israel. Yousef quickly fled to Pakistan, but he was far from the only Islamist active inside the United States. Numerous clerics and activists had travelled throughout the United States seeking donations to support mujahideen operations in Afghanistan and other Islamist groups in the Middle East. Among them was Ayman al-Zawahiri who sought assistance for his organization, al-Jihad, that remained focused on overthrowing the Egyptian government. From his base in Sudan, Zawahiri directed al-Jihad cells to attack high-level Egyptian government officials. All of these attacks failed and only drew a strong backlash from Egyptian security forces and popular opinion. However, al-Jihad was successful in infiltrating the U.S. military and intelligence community through an operative named Ali Abdelsoud Mohammed.

Mohammed, a former Egyptian army officer, approached the CIA in Cairo and offered to serve as a spy. The CIA determined him to be untrustworthy and a likely double agent. By the time he was placed on watch list to prevent his entry into the United States, however, Mohammed had moved to California. He eventually joined the U.S. Army and impressed his commanders with his skills and commitment to teaching his fellow soldiers about the Middle East and Islam. Simultaneously, he was training Muslim militants in New York and writing a terrorist training guide based on the army's training manuals. After he retired from the military, the CIA approached Mohammed who revealed the existence of jihadi training camps in Afghanistan run by al-Qaeda and acknowledged that he had provided some training in espionage and hacking. This information was largely ignored and eventually lost by the Department of Defense.

Chapter 10 describes bin Laden's efforts to train jihadi fighters, eventually drawing the ire of the Saudi government. While in Sudan, bin Laden created a training camp for young men throughout the world to provide weapons, funding, and lessons in terrorist tradecraft. In doing so, he brought several disparate Islamist groups under his umbrella. Simultaneously, bin Laden instilled his trainees with his specifically anti-Western ideology-- that all of the problems faced by Arab governments were the result of U.S. interference. He also pointed to events in Vietnam and Lebanon to suggest that, despite its strong appearance, the United States was weak and would retreat from conflict if it suffered enough casualties. This view was reinforced by the downing of two American Blackhawk helicopters in Somalia in 1993. Despite evidence to the contrary, bin Laden claimed that al Qaeda-trained militants were responsible for the attack and claimed credit for the resulting withdrawal of U.S. troops from their peacekeeping mission in the country.

While bin Laden was enjoying his life in Sudan and training a considerable force of jihadist militants, the Egyptian government, tired of attacks in their country organized by bin Laden's associates, pressure the Saudi government to rein in their prominent citizen. The Saudis sent multiple envoys, including members of the bin Laden family, to persuade Osama to return to Saudi Arabia and end his violent activities. After he repeatedly refused, the Saudis revoked his citizenship and cut off the allowance he received from the family construction family. This, combined with a series of poor investments in Sudan left bin Laden with little wealth, forcing him to once again consider ending his ties to extremism.

Analysis

These chapters present two contrasting, but equally inaccurate views of the capabilities of al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists in the early 1990s. Wright chooses two very specific examples, the World Trade Center bombing and Mohammed's infiltration, to demonstrate the negligence of U.S. security officials in responding to these early threats. While the bombing clearly foreshadows the eventual 9/11 attacks, the infiltration more accurately epitomizes Wright's argument about the U.S. intelligence community. Mohammed plays no role in the remainder of the book, but the author chooses to provide a very detailed narrative of his experience. He specifically mentions the several agencies and units with whom Mohammed comes in contact, often on multiple occasions, emphasizing that this was not a one-time oversight, but a repeated failure. Further, he states that those advocating extremism "may as well have been speaking in Martian as Arabic, since there were so few Middle Eastern language specialists available to the FBI" (201). As in the prologue, Wright argues that this failure did not derive from a lack of skill or information, but a belief that radical Islamism was too foreign and bizarre to pose a serious threat. These two events, and others like them, were clear indicators of a threat, but a combination of ignorance and overconfidence blinded intelligence agencies.

In contrast, bin Laden held an inflated view of his militants, as demonstrated by his response to the helicopter downing in Somalia. This situation clearly parallels bin Laden's victory at the Lion's Den against Soviet troops. Though the Somalia incident did receive extensive coverage and precipitate the removal of U.S. troops from the country, it was, in purely military terms, a minor loss. Bin Laden, however, viewed this a significant victory against a superpower, claiming his group "saw the weakness, frailty, and cowardice of U.S. troops" (215). Wright emphasizes that al-Qaeda fighters were not responsible for this attack and, in fact, ran away out of fear. Clearly, bin Laden's beliefs and the narrative he espoused to his recruits did not align with reality. Further, Wright's description of bin Laden's response to the Saudi government's overtures suggests a troubled and incoherent thought-process. He shifted rapidly from feelings of homesickness and despair about his financial losses to "boasting about al-Qaeda" (228). Much like his followers, bin Laden had accepted a overly grandiose narrative of jihadist success and power.

Vocabulary

cogent, fortuitous, sheikh, nationalism, nihilist, degenerate, shura, apostate

Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11 shifts back to the United States in 1995 and introduces, John O'Neill, the new chief of the FBI's counterterrorism unit. Before even formally beginning his new position, O'Neill was informed that the Ramzi Yousef had been found in Pakistan and he begins planning a successful operation to capture him and return him to the United States to stand trial. The FBI had only recently been given the authority to execute renditions, legal kidnappings in foreign countries, and struggled to navigate the bureaucratic hurdles imposed by foreign governments and other agencies within the U.S. government. O'Neill's ability in overcoming these challenges, due to his strength of personality and network of contacts, made him a polarizing figure within the government. He was incredibly generous to and protective of younger agents who gave him their absolute loyalty, but he made enemies with those who seemed to oppose him. Despite this, he became close to Dick Clarke, the White House's counterterrorism coordinator. These were two of the few people who recognized the threat terrorism posed, even as they struggled to truly understand it.

Six months later, bin Laden published a lengthy manifesto eviscerating the Saudi King, an action unheard of in the repressive Kingdom. Predictably, the letter focused on the desecration of holy lands by the continuing presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia. These soldiers, bin Laden argued, only served to protect the royal family's wealth and American interests in the oil market. Shortly, a communications center for the Saudi National Guard was bombed, killing seven people, including two Americans present to help train Saudi forces. While the attack was likely not ordered by bin Laden, he praised the bombers and Prince Turki considered this "bin Laden's 'first terrorist blow'" (241).

Chapter 12 begins with al-Jihad's assassination attempt of the Egyptian President, part of Zawahiri's continued efforts to overthrow the government. The assassination failed and triggered a massive crackdown on the Egyptian Islamist movement. In one incident, Egyptian intelligence agents drugged and forcibly sodomized two teenage boys then blackmailed them into spying on and attempting to assassinate Zawahiri and al-Jihad's leadership. When the boys were caught by al-Jihad and Sudanese intelligence, Zawahiri had them executed. The Sudanese were horrified by al-Jihad's actions and ordered them to leave the country immediately. At the same time, international pressure was mounting on Sudan in response to their involvement in the World Trade Center bombing and attacks in Egypt. In attempt to regain international standing, the Sudanese government seized most of bin Laden's property and expelled him. Lacking his Saudi citizenship, bin Laden disbanded much of his organization and returned to the lawless tribal areas of Afghanistan.

Analysis

John O'Neill's introduction foreshadows the descriptions of bureaucratic infighting that becomes a major focus for the remainder of the book. Wright gives a very detailed description of O'Neill's exhaustive planning process. O'Neill remained at FBI headquarters for multiple days, pulled agents from various law enforcement units into the operation, and ordered that an Air Force jet be repainted in civilian colors and refueled midair to support the operation. As Wright states, "O'Neill was operating well outside his authority, but he was reckless and domineering in nature" (232). In doing so, the author argues that even when officials recognized a clear threat from terrorism, extreme efforts and outsized personalities like O'Neill's were necessary to take action. Personal descriptions of the counterterrorism chief serve a similar purpose. While his eccentric character traits are interesting and provide context for later actions, Wright's portrayal of them also suggests that personality and personal conflicts play an important role in the response to terrorism. The author seems to divide the bureau into two groups, those who are incredibly loyal to O'Neill and those who despised him. Unfortunately, much of the country's counterterrorism efforts were hampered by this dynamic.

In Chapter 12, Wright describes arguably the most extreme actions taken by Zawahiri and bin Laden to date. Zawahiri's execution of the young boys and bin Laden's scathing attack on the Saudi monarchy shocked those around them. Wright clearly demonstrates the extent of each man's radicalization, but focuses on the response of their surrounding communities. In both cases, the men and their organizations were widely denounced by their fellow Muslims and the international community. Even Sudan, which the author previously portrays as a safe haven for jihadists groups, is quick to distance itself from both Zawahiri and bin Laden. This reversal demonstrates the alienation the these men and their followers faced, even within their own communities. In some ways, this mirrors Zawahiri's experiences in prison earlier in his life. In both cases, his radical views and actions drew a strong response, furthering his radicalization.

Vocabulary

rendition, extradition

Chapters 13-15

Summary

By the time bin Laden returned to Afghanistan, much of the country was controlled by the Taliban, an Islamist militia formed to combat the mujahideen government that had seized power following the Soviets' withdrawal. Their leader, Mullah Mohammed Omar declared himself the ruler of all Muslims. The Taliban did not invite bin Laden to their territory and were told to hold on to him and keep him quiet by the Saudi government. The Taliban did not trust bin Laden, but hoped that he would invest in their country much as he had done in Sudan. Among his small group of remaining followers, bin Laden compared his relocation to the "hijira," the time in the Prophet Mohammad's life when he was expelled from his home in Mecca. This was a turning point in Islamic history that revitalized the Prophet's followers and began Islam's rapid spread throughout the region. At this time, bin Laden officially declared war on the United States and met with another jihadist, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed, who, for the first time, suggested training pilots to crash airplanes into buildings.

Chapter 14 begins in 1996 with the bombing of the Khobar Towers military-housing complex in Saudi Arabia. The complex served as the barracks for an American unit enforcing a no-fly zone over Iraq and 19 soldiers had been killed. O'Neill was sent to Saudi Arabia to lead the investigation, which pointed to Iran-backed militants. The Saudi government was largely uncooperative and O'Neill left convinced that the true perpetrators would not be arrested. Shortly after, O'Neill took charge of I-49, an FBI anti-terrorism unit based in New York. One member of I-49, Dan Coleman was placed at Alec Station, the CIA's counterterrorism center run by Michael Scheuer, to serve as a liaison between the two agencies. Scheuer strongly disliked O'Neill and believed that Coleman was sent to steal information from the CIA. This exposed a fundamental conflict between the two groups; the FBI sought evidence on bin Laden that could be used in a criminal prosecution, while the CIA believed it was imperative that bin Laden be assassinated. In the course of his investigation, Coleman traveled to Kenya and uncovered information confirming al-Qaeda's existence and organizational structure and evidence suggesting the group was planning an attack in nearby Tanzania.

Chapter 15 opens with Mullah Omar concerned about bin Laden's declaration of war on the United States. The Taliban leader wanted to avoid provoking the United States and moved bin Laden to his stronghold in Kandahar so he could watch him more closely. Simultaneously, Zawahiri had moved to Central Asia in the hope of reestablishing al-Jihad. After being intercepted by Russian authorities however, he moved to the same compound in Afghanistan where bin Laden was staying. The families of the two men interacted frequently and formed a fairly normal community with those of the other jihadists around them. Zawahiri learned that militants in his native Egypt had attacked a major tourist attraction, once against drawing an intense backlash from the government and public opinion. Long convinced of the illegitimacy of Egypt's leadership, Zawahiri increasingly blamed the Western "Christian-Jewish alliance" for its existence. As a

result, he wrote a declaration that would unite all of the jihadists groups in Afghanistan into a single organization, the Islamic Front, led by Osama bin Laden and focused on attacking the United States.

Analysis

The most important element in this section is the symbolism of bin Laden's "hijira," as Wright emphasizes with the title of Chapter 13. While bin Laden's ideology was obviously deeply linked to religious ideas, this was the first time he overtly compared himself to the Prophet Mohammed. The practical details of each man's experience are similar; both preached a new interpretation of religion and enjoyed a limited but fervent following for a short period, before being expelled from a city they considered their home. For a man that sought to follow the Prophet's model so intensely, this connection was source of comfort during a desperate time. Simultaneously, as Wright notes, bin Laden used this symbolism as an effective propaganda tool among his followers. Al-Qaeda as a whole was demoralized at the time. By referring to their relocation as a hijira, bin Laden not only provided a historical example of a group returning from a similar predicament, but implied that his followers were like the earliest adherents of Islam. Their mission was not only possible, but inevitable and sanctioned by God.

Al-Qaeda's spiritual revival mirrors the role bin Laden achieved at the end of Chapter 15. While bin Laden had been a prominent Islamist for many years, he was one among several jihadist leaders. With the foundation of the Islamic Front, he became, for the first time, the single leader of a united jihadist group. In doing so, he surpassed all those around him, most notably Zawahiri as the leading voice in the radical community. Wright ends this chapter with bin Laden ordering other prominent members of the group to cease infighting, end their ineffectual attacks in Egypt, and focus on the United States. This clearly demonstrates the personal influence bin Laden now possessed.

Vocabulary

hijira, jurisprudence, madrassa, chrysalis, financier, privation

Chapters 16-17

Summary

Following his declaration of war against the United States and the formation of the Islamic Front, bin Laden became more well-known throughout the Muslim world and sought to use this publicity to build his movement. He called groups of reporters to his training camps in Afghanistan to give interviews, explain his anti-American views, and predict a future in which the United State broke into separate entities like the Soviet Union. In the United States, O'Neill and Scheuer planned an operation to capture bin Laden, though their dispute over whether bin Laden should be tried in a U.S. court or simply killed prevented any action. Instead, the CIA asked Saudi Arabia to remove bin Laden from Afghanistan and contain his influence. Prince Turki travelled to Afghanistan to meet with Mullah Omar and discuss a deal in which the the Taliban would turn bin Laden over to Saudi authorities in exchange for trucks and weapons from the Kingdom. Mullah Omar accepted some equipment as a form of down payment, but ultimately refused, citing tribal code that mandated the protection of guests.

In July 1998, the CIA captured a senior member of al-Jihad in Azerbaijan and his computer containing extensive information on al-Qaeda's internal structure. The agency, however, refused to share the computer with the FBI, believing that doing would so would turn the information they gathered into "evidence" and "news," rendering it useless as intelligence. O'Neill eventually forced the Azerbaijani government to share the computer's contents with the FBI, but this dispute only added to the ill will between the CIA and the Bureau. Neither agency was able to prevent bombings at the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, which killed a combined 224 people. These attacks were the first definitively carried out by al-Qaeda, marking the point at which the group's actions began to match its grandiose rhetoric. Although O'Neill's office was charged with investigating the attacks, O'Neill himself was barred from traveling to the bombing sites. FBI agents sent to Kenya did capture Mohammed al-'Owhali, one of two men who planted the truck bombs outside of the American embassy. During his interrogation, al-'Owhali claimed that al-Qaeda was planning an even larger attack on the United States itself. In response to the embassy bombings, the U.S. military fired cruise missiles at targets in Sudan and Afghanistan linked to al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups. The response was largely ineffective, the missiles failed to cause major damage to extremist organizations and instead rallied many local populations around bin Laden and his anti-American views.

In Chapter 17, Mullah Omar called the U.S. State Department to suggest that the missile strikes were counter-effective. Despite realizing that his decision to shelter bin Laden put his organization at risk, he still refused to force him out of Afghanistan. Shortly after, the CIA considered assassinating bin Laden with a cruise missile strike while he was staying at a hunting camp popular with Emirati princes, but cancelled the plan fearing collateral casualties. As a result, Michael Scheuer angrily ranted at several

of his colleagues over their unwillingness to take decisive action and was dismissed as the head of Alec Station.

As the year 2000 approached, O'Neill and others were concerned that al Qaeda would carry out several coordinated attacks to coincide with the symbolism of the new millennium. These fears were seemingly confirmed when a bombing at Los Angeles International airport was prevented by border patrol agents only days before it was to be carried out. In response, the White House devoted additional resources and agents to helping O'Neill and his team investigate potential threats, but once again downsized operations after the new year passed without a major attack. The chapter closes with two men who discover a small boat laden with explosives outside Aden harbor in Yemen. The men were confronted by al Qaeda operatives and the boat sunk, but investigators later learned that it was intended for use in a suicide attack on a U.S. naval ship.

Analysis

Wright's descriptions of the investigations following the embassy bombings give a series of tangential details, all illustrating the incompetence American officials exhibited in response to the terrorist threat. His tone throughout this section is slightly different from his usual critique of the national security bureaucracy and presents the challenge that well-meaning agents faced with this unfamiliar threat. A clear example of this is the capture and interrogation of 'Owhali. Originally, the bomber pretended to be an Arab tourist who happened to be injured in the attack. However, an FBI agent, Steve Gaudin, noticed slight inconsistencies in his story, particularly the excellent condition of his clothing despite the fact that he claimed to have bled on them and not changed in several days. Gaudin uses these inconsistencies to force a full confession out of the young man. The agent is described as being young, inexperienced, and sent to Kenya mainly to physically protect the other agents investigating the attack. While these details highlight Gaudin's competence, they reflect poorly on the Bureau as a whole. The supposedly expert investigators were deceived by 'Owhali's act. Wright specifically notes that an agent of Gaudin's rank would not normally be permitted to ask direct questions of a suspect and has to request special permission to do so. Even Gaudin relied not on his expertise in terrorism, but his former training in counter interrogation techniques. Further, another agent present in Kenya, Ali Soufan, is described as being only one of eight agents in the entire FBI at the time that spoke Arabic. He was assigned to the case primarily because he had developed an expertise of bin Laden by taking the personal initiative to study his writing. The implication of these details is that while there were well-intentioned individuals involved in these investigations, the bureaucracy as a whole was not designed to respond to terrorism. Few of its agents spoke Arabic or had expertise in the Middle East. Wright's description of Gaudin suggests that the Bureau apprehended 'Owhali out of pure luck. These ideas are reinforced by Wright's depiction of the ineffective cruise missile strikes and continued rivalry between the CIA and FBI and then-current government that was incapable of responding to the threat.

The events in this section also clearly foreshadow coming attacks. ‘Owhali specifically states that al-Qaeda is planning an attack inside the United States, an idea reinforced by the attempted bombing of LAX. The final scene with the Yemeni men and the small boat foreshadows the attack on the USS Cole, depicted in the next chapter.

Vocabulary

concubine, unflappable, mercenary, infidel

Chapter 18

Summary

Chapter 18 begins by presenting some demographic information about the men who travelled to Afghanistan to train with al-Qaeda, depicting a diverse group from a variety of countries and backgrounds. In the spring of 1999, bin Laden ordered Khaled Sheikh Mohammed to initiate his “planes operation,” crashing hijacked airplanes into major American government and commercial buildings. Bin Laden originally selected the U.S. Capitol, the White House, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Center as the targets of what would eventually become the 9/11 attacks. The al-Qaeda members chosen for this attack were divided into two teams and sent to Germany and Malaysia, respectively, to begin flight training and obtain visas to enter the United States. The CIA, with the help of foreign intelligence services, became aware that the team in Malaysia was planning some sort of attack and tagged several individuals involved as potential threats. However, likely due to a continued resistance to sharing information outside the agency, they failed to inform their colleagues at the FBI, who could have intercepted the attackers when they entered the country months later. It is also possible that the CIA intended to recruit some of the Malaysia team operatives as informants, thus wanted to avoid interference from the FBI, or that they were simply overwhelmed by reports of threats given the small number of analysts they had devoted to counterterrorism.

In October 2000, the American destroyer USS Cole was bombed in Aden by two men in a small, explosive-laden fishing boat. The blast blew a 40 foot square in the side of the powerful warship, killing 17 U.S. sailors and injuring 39 more. Recognizing his experience in tracking al-Qaeda, O’Neill’s superiors sent him, along with Ali Soufan, to lead the FBI’s investigation of the attack. While in Yemen, O’Neill’s investigation was repeatedly hampered by uncooperative Yemeni authorities and, more importantly, the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen who placed extreme limits on the FBI’s actions to avoid alienating their hosts. The investigators eventually arrested Fahd al-Quso, who admitted to working with one of the Cole bombers to send money to an al-Qaeda operative Malaysia just before the attack. Soufan, thinking it was odd that the Yemeni operatives would send money away before a major operation, believed another attack was being planned. The CIA, however, did not respond to his request for more information about meeting in Malaysia. Combining this with information the FBI already had would have allowed them to arrest two of the 9/11 conspirators already inside the United States. O’Neill was recalled from Yemen shortly after. The chapter closes with Wright stating that although many jihadist groups existed at the time, bin Laden was the only leader focused on the United States rather than Middle Eastern governments. Thus the Cole and 9/11 attacks would not have happened without his direct involvement.

Analysis

The Cole bombing and its aftermath dominate this chapter and serve an important symbolic role in the larger narrative. This is particularly clear in Wright's physical description of the Cole and its weapons systems. Despite having frequent references to warfare and military operations, this book never gives technical information about the weaponry involved. Technology is referred by generic names such as "missile" or "machine gun." By contrast, Wright uses an entire paragraph to describe the destroyer's capabilities in great detail. He writes that the ship was "more than five hundred feet long, displacing 8,300 tons...with seventy tons of armor" (360). Its weapons included "Tomahawk cruise missiles,...the Phalanx Close-In Weapons System, (and a) network of computers and radars, called AEGIS,...capable of simultaneously tracking hundreds of incoming missiles or aircraft" (361). By contrast, the boat used by the bombers was a "tiny skiff" made of fiberglass (361). Wright notes that bin Laden saw incredible symbolism in this attack and uses these highly technical descriptions to convey that symbolism to the reader. Like the United States, the Cole was incredibly powerful and projected influence throughout the world. It dominated Aden harbor, a relatively obscure locale in the global scheme, but still within reach of U.S. military might. By contrast, the skiff, like al-Qaeda, was unremarkable at first glance and crewed by a very small group. Its weapons were crude and technologically simple, but highly effective when aimed at a specific target.

Wright diverged from bin Laden, who believed that the United States could be broken up like the Soviet Union by al Qaeda attacks, in noting that the Cole did not sink, but was heavily damaged and had to be carried back to the United States on the deck of a salvage ship. Similarly, Wright argues that the United States cannot be destroyed by al-Qaeda, but the group's attacks can be damaging and humiliating, and force a withdrawal from certain areas. Finally, the author ends his description of the warship by noting that it "was superbly designed to fight the Soviet navy" (361). This aligns with his thesis, most clearly articulated in the prologue, that American officials were not wholly incompetent, but rather were focused on the wrong threats and too willing to dismiss Islamic extremism.

Vocabulary

expatriate, reputedly, entreat

BOOKRAGS

Chapter 19

Summary

Chapter 19 begins with the marriage of bin Laden's son Mohammed to the daughter of another al-Qaeda, rare celebration in the community at which bin Laden reads a poem he had written to commemorate the Cole bombing. Shortly after, al-Qaeda fully absorbed Zawahiri's al-Jihad group, ending years of infighting and making bin Laden the clear leader of the new joint organization. At the same time, Zawahiri's fellow Egyptians maintained dominant roles in al-Qaeda's leadership. Bin Laden would ask these Egyptians to take the lead in assassinating Ahmed Shah Massoud, the leader of of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance in Afghanistan who, with U.S. support, prevented bin Laden's allies from taking full control of the country. Two men posing as journalists killed Massoud on September 9, 2001, the same day that Prince Turki resigned as the chief of Saudi intelligence.

While foreign intelligence services were warning of the potential for an attack in the United States, the Bush administration clearly did not consider counterterrorism a priority. Condoleezza Rice, the National Security Advisor, downgraded Dick Clarke's position, leading Clarke to request a new assignment and recommend John O'Neill to take his place at the White House. O'Neill, fearing negative reaction from his counterparts with the national security bureaucracy, eventually turned down the position and became the head of security for the World Trade Center in New York City upon retiring from the FBI.

At this time, the one major victory the United States scored against al-Qaeda was the May 2001 conviction of four men in connection to the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania. Even so, O'Neill and Clarke recognized the limits in pursuing terrorists through the justice system and the I-49 team continued to be hobbled by bureaucratic infighting. This is clear given that most of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were already in the country by the time of the convictions. Several agents throughout the CIA and FBI had partial information on these individuals or other al-Qaeda operatives who could connect them, but no one person or agency had complete information. The author attributes this mainly to a 1995 policy that limited intelligence agencies in sharing their information with law enforcement, mainly the FBI. This policy, meant to protect citizens accused of crimes, was over-interpreted by the CIA and used to restrict virtually all information sharing, most notably intelligence received about the embassy and Cole bombings. It is clear that had additional information been shared at the right time, the FBI would have uncovered the 9/11 plot, arrested many of its conspirators, and likely prevented the attack.

The chapter closes with the 9/11 attacks, focusing primarily on the collapse of the two World Trade Center towers, killing 2,749 people, including John O'Neill. A third plane crashed into the Pentagon, the headquarters of the U.S. military. The fourth, intended for the U.S. Capitol, did not reach its target.

Analysis

Given the tragedy and immense importance of the 9/11 attacks, it is telling that Wright's description of them is relatively brief and undetailed. Most major details of these events are known to the average reader and the author clearly does not feel the need to rehash them, but he also make a conscious choice to focus on the intelligence failures directly preceding them. He conveys some details about these failed investigations, listing numerous names and investigations, each of which had the potential to uncover a larger plot. Wright gives the reader the impression that the United States was, in fact, very close to preventing 9/11, were it not for a few ignored e-mails or unreturned phone calls. While this highlights the tragedy, it suggests Wright's view on the larger conflict between al-Qaeda and the United States. Unlike bin Laden, who is depicted responding to 9/11 with glee and grandiose statements, the author argues that 9/11 was primarily caused by the American failures, not al-Qaeda's successes. This delegitimizes al-Qaeda's grand narrative, but simultaneously emphasizes the risk of post-Cold War overconfidence.

This point is supported in a more symbolic sense by the removal, through various means, of four key individuals from positions of power. Dick Clarke was demoted, then resigned, months before 9/11. Prince Turki, who continually sought to remove bin Laden from Afghanistan, resigned only two days before 9/11. Al-Qaeda's primary enemy within Afghanistan was killed the same day. Most importantly, John O'Neill left government service shortly before the attacks, forced out largely by bureaucratic infighting, and tragically became the chief of security for the World Trade Center. None of these four men could have personally prevented the attacks, but they are symbolic of a larger ignorance of al-Qaeda's threat. At the time of greatest danger, many of the leaders in the fight against bin Laden were absent. They had become officially silenced in a community that had silenced their warnings for years.

Vocabulary

mollify, turpitude, injunction

Chapter 20-Afterword

Summary

Chapter 20 briefly recounts the aftermath of 9/11, most notably FBI investigations into the attacks. Having returned to Yemen to investigate the Cole bombing further, Ali Soufan questioned Quso, one of the men arrested, about a photo of a meeting in Malaysia to plan the 9/11 attacks. Quso identified one of the men pictured as Khallad, who planned the Cole attack. This was the first clear link between al-Qaeda and 9/11. Soufan also interrogated Abu Jandal, a former bin Laden bodyguard who was Yemeni custody. Though resistant at first, Abu Jandal warmed to Soufan when he realized that the agent could speak Arabic and debate the finer points of Islam. Upon learning of the 9/11 attacks, Abu Jandal initially maintained that al-Qaeda could not possibly be responsible, given the enormous bloodshed, claiming they must have been carried out by Israel. Soufan, however, tricked him into identifying the hijackers as al-Qaeda members. Abu Jandal was convinced that bin Laden must have gone insane and soon shared everything he knew about al-Qaeda's internal structure. Simultaneously, Soufan's colleagues at I-49 in New York were demoralized by the attacks. Not only had they failed to prevent them, but they were blamed for this failure by people who refused to listen to their warnings. Beginning in December 2001, the U.S. military attacked al-Qaeda's safe haven in Afghanistan, largely eliminating the group, but Zawahiri and bin Laden were able to sneak over the Afghanistan-Pakistan border and disappear.

The 2011 Afterword, written five years after the original version of this book, states that bin Laden was finally killed by the United States in 2011. By then, he was mainly an inspirational voice to jihadist militants, rather than a direct organizer of attacks. Over that span, many former al-Qaeda members had denounced the group and its tactics. Young people in the Arab world are frustrated with their governments and societies, as evidenced by the massive protests referred to as the Arab Spring, and radical Islamism remains attractive to many of them. Despite this, Wright is optimistic that young Muslims are more interested in building a new future, rather than returning to the historical ways advocated by al-Qaeda and similar groups.

Analysis

The last chapter serves as a conclusion to Wright's overall argument that intelligence failures were responsible for 9/11. He focuses on one agent, Ali Soufan, and his actions in Yemen that allow the FBI to uncover how the attack was planned and which individuals were involved. The speed and ease with which Soufan accomplishes this, interrogating only two individuals for relatively short periods, speaks to how simple it should have been for his agency to prevent 9/11. This augments the descriptions, provided in Chapter 19, of ongoing investigations that were close to uncovering the plot but stymied by a lack of information sharing. Further, the United States's rapid response in invading Afghanistan only two months after 9/11 supports Wright's argument that the

country had the resources to combat al-Qaeda, but ignored the threat and redirected those resources.

Vocabulary

entrepeneurial

Important People

Osama bin Laden

Osama bin Laden was a founding member and the leader of al-Qaeda. He was involved in a variety of Islamist extremist activities throughout his life. He was the most prominent terrorist in recent history.

Bin Laden was born and raised in Saudi Arabia as the seventeenth son of Mohammed bin Laden. The bin Laden family was extremely wealthy and enjoyed a close relationship with the Saudi royal family. As a young man, bin Laden was an extremely observant Muslim but did not immediately endorse violence in the name of his religion. In 1979, he began fundraising for the Afghan mujahideen fighting to expel Soviet invaders from their country. He eventually fought alongside Afghan fighters, but was never considered a skilled military commander. He spent a good portion of his life in Sudan where his views became increasingly extreme and anti-American, leading him to found al-Qaeda as a training base for global terrorist operations. After being expelled from Sudan, he returned to Afghanistan where he planned and trained operatives to carry out attacks on two U.S. embassies in East Africa, the USS Cole, and the 9/11 hijackings. He escaped into Pakistan following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and was killed by American special forces in 2011.

Bin Laden's defining ideology was his focus on American and Western targets. While most of his contemporaries sought to attack secular Arab governments, bin Laden claimed that the United States and its allies were the true source of anti-Muslim sentiment. As a result, al-Qaeda, the organization he founded, was uniquely focused on what bin Laden called "global jihad."

Ayman al-Zawahiri

Ayman al-Zawahiri is an Egyptian doctor and Islamist extremist. He is considered the ideological mind behind al-Qaeda and was chosen as the group's leader after bin Laden's death.

Zawahiri was born in Egypt and was a devout Muslim from a young age. At the age of 15, he founded a cell dedicated to overthrowing the secular Egyptian government, which he viewed as illegitimate. He was imprisoned following in his involvement in the assassination of Egypt's President, reinforcing his negative views of the government and their Western allies. Zawahiri used his medical training to assist the Afghan mujahideen in their fight against the Soviets while simultaneously running al-Jihad, a terrorist organization focused on instituting an Islamist regime in Egypt. He was a natural partner to Osama bin Laden, whom he met while in Afghanistan, providing the ideological causes to channel bin Laden's personal wealth and fundraising activity. He was a founding member of al-Qaeda while living in Sudan, though he remained focused

on al-Jihad until the two organizations were merged in the late 1990s. Following the American invasion of Afghanistan, he fled with bin Laden to Pakistan.

Sayyid Qutb

Sayyid Qutb was an Egyptian teacher and bureaucrat who lived in the United States while attending college in the 1950s. He came to view the United States as morally decadent and materialistic and developed intensely negative views toward American society and culture. As a devout Muslim, he felt that his religion was antithetical to and threatened by the materialism embodied in both capitalism and communism. As a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, he sought to Islamize Egyptian society as a way to shield it against the corrupting influence of Western values. Eventually, he sought the overthrow of the secular Egyptian government and justified violence against it through his “takfiri” ideology. He was executed for conspiring to assassinate the President of Egypt and viewed himself as a martyr for Islam. His writings and ideas became a significant inspiration to later Islamists, most notably Zawahiri and bin Laden.

John O'Neill

John O’Neill was an FBI agent and head of the Bureau’s counterterrorism efforts in the years leading up to 9/11. At the time, O’Neill was one of the few U.S. officials who understood the true threat posed by terrorist groups like al-Qaeda but was routinely stymied in his efforts to lead more thorough investigations following the embassy bombings and the USS Cole attack. This was partially due to O’Neill’s polarizing personality. Though he was loved by agents loyal to him, O’Neill ostracized a great number of his fellow officials, most notably his counterparts at the CIA. His driven nature made him an effective investigator but also created conflict with those whom he felt stood in his way. Shortly before 9/11, frustrated by constant bureaucratic infighting and seeking a higher salary, O’Neill resigned from the FBI and became the chief of security at the World Trade Center in New York City. He was killed when the WTC collapsed after being struck by a hijacked plane.

Ali Soufan

Ali Soufan was a Lebanese-born FBI agent, notable as one the few agents that spoke Arabic prior to 9/11. Because of his language skills and Muslim faith, Soufan became a major asset to John O’Neill’s counterterrorism effort and led the investigations of the bombings of the East African embassies and the USS Cole. He was the first person to definitively link al-Qaeda to the 9/11 attacks by interrogating an operative involved in the Cole bombing.

Mohammed bin Laden

Mohammed bin Laden was the father of Osama bin Laden. Born in Yemen, Mohammed migrated to Saudi Arabia just before its formal foundation. Beginning as a construction laborer, Mohammed was quickly noted for his skill and business acumen and eventually founded his own construction company. His company became a favorite of the Saudi royal family and was commissioned to build palaces, major roads, and renovate Islam's two holiest mosques. As a result, the bin Laden family was extremely wealthy and had a close relationship with the Saudi royal family.

Hassan al-Turabi

Hassan al-Turabi is the ideological leader of Sudan's Islamist government. Compared to al-Zawahiri and bin Laden, his views were moderate. Turabi believed in the gradual implementation of Sharia law to Muslims in Sudan and sought to make the country the center of the new global Islamic community. His government sheltered bin Laden and other Islamist extremists for several years.

Mullah Mohammed Omar

Mullah Omar is the founder leader of the Taliban, an Islamist militant group that ruled Afghanistan from 1996 to the U.S. invasion in 2001. Mullah Omar was initially skeptical of bin Laden's return to Afghanistan in the early 1990s, fearing that bin Laden's presence would make the Taliban the target of U.S. military strikes. However, he was a strict observer of local tribal code, which requires a host to protect his guests, and refused to turn bin Laden or his followers over to the United States or his allies.

Mohammed 'Owhali

Mohammed ‘Owhali was one of the bombers at the U.S. embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, the first terrorist attack directly linked to al-Qaeda. When detained by the FBI, ‘Owhali gave a false name and denied any involvement in the bombing. Agents eventually discovered inconsistencies in his story and forced a confession. At that time, ‘Owhali warned that al-Qaeda attacks outside of the United States were meant as distractions from a much larger attack planned on the American homeland.

Prince Turki al-Faisal

Prince Turki was a member of the Saudi royal family and the head of Saudi intelligence. He led Saudi Arabia's response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and worked with Osama bin Laden to channel money to the Afghan mujahideen. He eventually considered bin Laden a nuisance, then a violent threat, and sought to have him returned to Saudi Arabia from Sudan and Afghanistan so that the Saudi government could control

his activities. Prince Turki resigned from his intelligence position two days before the 9/11 attacks.

Objects/Places

The United States

The United States was the sole remaining world superpower following the fall of the Soviet Union, viewed by Osama bin Laden as the source of all Western values and Christian power.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia was Bin Laden's home country and the location of Islam's two holiest cities, Mecca and Medina.

The House of Saud

The House of Saud was the ruling family of Saudi Arabia.

Egypt

One of the world's largest Muslim countries and Ayman al-Zawahiri's home country, Egypt is a repeated target of terrorist attacks by al-Jihad.

Sudan

Sudan is an African country led by Hassan al-Turabi's Islamist government. It was a temporary safe haven for bin Laden and other Islamist extremists.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a majority Muslim country in Central Asia. It was invaded by the Soviet Union in 1979, and later became the location of al-Qaeda's training bases and central leadership.

Tora Bora

Tora Bora is the rugged region of Afghanistan where bin Laden moved al-Qaeda following his expulsion from Sudan.

Islamist Extremism/Radical Islamism/Jihadism

Islamist Extremism/Radical Islamism/Jihadism is the belief that society should be ordered solely by Islamic law, referred to as Sharia, and the willingness to use violence to advance this belief.

Takfiri Ideology

Takfiri Ideology was created by Sayyid Qutb; it justified Muslims in killing other Muslims, an act forbidden by the Qur'an, when the target had been "excommunicated" for betraying their Muslim faith.

Mujahideen

Mujahideen are Afghan militants that resisted the Soviet invasion and eventually turned against each other in the Afghan civil war.

The Lion's Den

The Lion's Den was Bin Laden's first military base in Afghanistan at which he forced a Soviet retreat in a largely symbolic victory.

The Taliban

The Taliban is a militant group that ruled Afghanistan following the Afghan civil war and sheltered al-Qaeda and its leaders.

Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

The FBI is the main U.S. federal law enforcement agency. It is one of several agencies responsible for preventing and investigating terrorist threats.

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

The CIA is one of several U.S. intelligence agencies responsible for preventing and investigating terrorist threats

I-49

I-49 is a relatively small FBI unit charged with with investigating threats from Islamist extremism before 9/11.

al-Qaeda

al-Qaeda is a jihadist group founded by bin Laden and several like-minded individuals, notable for its focus on attacking the United States, rather than targets in the Middle East. al-Qaeda is responsible for the East Africa Embassy Bombings, the USS Cole attack, and the 9/11 attacks.

al-Jihad

al-Jihad is a jihadist group founded by Zawahiri to overthrow the secular Egyptian government. al-Jihad eventually merged with al-Qaeda.

East Africa Embassy Bombings

The East Africa Embassy Bombings were the first terrorist attack definitively linked to al-Qaeda in which operatives simultaneously bombed the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

USS Cole

The USS Cole was a U.S. warship bombed by al-Qaeda while anchored in Aden, Yemen in 2000.

9/11 Attacks

al-Qaeda’s most significant terrorist attack on the United States occured on September 11, 2001; hijacked airliners were crashed into the World Trade Center towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. A fourth plane failed to reach its target, the U.S. Capitol.

Themes

American Overconfidence

Wright's overall purpose in writing this book is to explain how al-Qaeda and its leaders developed and why they were able to attack the United States so successfully on 9/11. He argues that the U.S. failure to prevent these attacks was rooted in the view that the United States was invincible following the Cold War.

Throughout the book, Wright points to the advantages the United States has over potential threats, most notably a powerful military and technologically advanced society. More importantly, Americans have a strong faith in their shared values. Even if some force could conceivably challenge the United States, no one exposed to the liberalism and modernity of the country's society would want to. Wright gives this view some credence by casting it in specifically post-Cold War terms. In the two decades preceding 9/11, the United States had indeed secured a major victory against the Soviet Union. This conflict was as much an ideological one as technological. Capitalism and liberal democracy, the American way of life, had triumphed over Communism. Compared to the magnitude of nuclear war, no other threat seemed meaningful.

There are two major consequences of this mentality. Firstly, the U.S. national security apparatus was designed to fight the Soviet Union. Most of the FBI and CIA agents that Wright describes were trained to fight the Russians or organized crime. Those that were reassigned to focus on terrorism were few and far between. The USS Cole, as Wright describes, is symbolic of the U.S. military's dominance in large scale warfare, but vulnerable to irregular attacks. This tangible weakness was exacerbated by the second consequence of overconfidence, an exoticization of the terrorism threat. The few Americans who were aware of al-Qaeda and similar groups viewed them as bizarre and almost pitiful. Compared to the Soviet Union, a small group of religious zealots seemed insignificant. If the U.S. military could not target these groups directly, surely the inevitable spread of American culture would convince them of the error of their ways. These factors led to the tragic events of 9/11.

Bureaucratic Competition and the Importance of Personalities

A related impediment to the U.S. response to al-Qaeda was infighting among national security officials, most notably the CIA and FBI. Particularly in the second half of the book, Wright demonstrates clearly that officials from various agencies had the information necessary to detect and prevent the 9/11 attacks. However, it was divided between various individuals who did not or could not share it with each other, thus no one person could take preventative action. Wright provides three reasons for this. First, due to ignorance and the overwhelming amount of information these agencies receive,

officials simply did not realize the threat al-Qaeda posed. Even potentially concerning intelligence was disregarded as not credible.

Secondly, there was a quasi-legal barrier to sharing information. The author describes a government policy, designed to protect accused criminals, that prevented intelligence agencies from sharing their information with criminal prosecutors. “The wall,” as its referred to, was eagerly embraced by the CIA. Wright takes a definitely negative view of the Agency, arguing that its agents were instinctively reticent to release information they had gathered, particularly to the FBI. Agents held a dim view of their FBI counterparts and felt intelligence was useless once it was used as “evidence” in a criminal proceeding. Thus the anti-sharing policy provided a convenient justification for the CIA to continue practices they had always embraced.

Finally, Wright argues that personal conflicts between individuals were as, if not more important, than institutional constraints. This is most clearly demonstrated through John O’Neill. O’Neill was an extremely driven FBI agent and expert on Islamist terrorism, but also a polarizing figure. He alienated and angered many of his colleagues with his aggressive manner and disregard for others. As a result, many officials, particularly at the CIA, refused to cooperate with O’Neill or his team. In this way, institutional policies were used to justify unrelated personal conflicts.

The Conflict Between Islam and Western Values

Wright argues that the driving factor behind most extremist ideology was a belief that Western values were inherently incompatible with and threatening to Islam and the international Islamic community. This view largely originated with Sayyid Qutb, who became deeply disdainful of the United States while studying there. In Qutb’s view, Americans were obsessed with material wealth and sexual perversions. This impression was deeply troubling to the conservative and pious Qutb, who struggled to avoid “temptations” and maintain his Muslim faith. In contrast, Qutb saw Islam as pure and perfect, a code of order that deemphasized materialism and stressed morality. Qutb may have been content to simply denounce the West and return to his society, except that he saw the Egyptian government as an extension of this perverse culture. To him, the secularism espoused by Egypt’s leaders was anti-Islamic and immoral. Even democracy was problematic, as it endorsed the idea that power originates from the people and not from God. As a result, Qutb became obsessed with overthrowing his government and establishing an Islamist regime.

This theme was later embodied by bin Laden and Zawahiri as they built their Islamist movements. They portrayed various world events, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, and the secularism of Arab government, as attacks on the Muslim faith. The West was using its military might and cultural influence to spread its corrosive values and corrupt Muslims into abandoning their faith. Accordingly, the two men saw their violent acts as part of a grand ideological struggle.

Frustration and Demoralization in the Arab World

An extension of the Islam versus the West conflict connected widespread underdevelopment in the Arab world to Western influence. Wright argues that most al-Qaeda militants were not intensely religious or ideological, but were frustrated with their personal lives and society and drawn to radical solutions. In the second half of the twentieth century, Arab countries watched as most of the world surpassed them in economic development. Arab society, most notably Saudi Arabia, was filled with young, college-educated men who could not find jobs because of declining oil prices. These men were frustrated with the lack of progress and angry with their governments. More acutely, the need for U.S. troops, a largely Christian army, to protect Muslim holy sites in Saudi Arabia was embarrassing to the Kingdom and its people. Bin Laden and leaders like him channeled this resentment into anti-Western sentiments, arguing that the West was responsible for humiliating Arab countries. Thousands of men were drawn to al-Qaeda and similar groups because they engaged people in a meaningful effort, however misguided, to restore Islam to its historic status.

Restoration and Nostalgia

An important component of al-Qaeda's ideology, emphasized by Wright throughout the book, is the idea of restoration and nostalgia. Bin Laden and others constantly refers to a "restoration" of Islam and a return to the faith as it was in its earliest days. In their view, the various additions and reinterpretations of Islam that have emerged since its founding in the seventh century are a distortion of the religion as espoused by the Prophet Mohammed. Modernity and the societal values that have emerged since that time are considered inherently antithetical to Islam.

Further, in a more tangible sense, Bin Laden hoped to return the Middle East to direct control by religious authorities as it had been for many centuries. Modern forms of government, most notably secular democracy, have marginalized religion. A similar, though less extreme form of this view is embodied by Hassan al-Turabi in Sudan. Turabi's government is structured around the precepts of Islam and seeks to introduce Islamic law to the country. He also saw his capital city as the center of a new worldwide Islamic community. For this reason, it became a hub and haven for radical elements like bin Laden, Zawahiri, and their followers.

Styles

Structure

Wright's narrative mostly follows a chronological structure, with some shifts to emphasize related events. Throughout, the book traces three major individuals: Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahri, and John O'Neill. Other major and minor individuals are introduced and explained as they interact with these three men. Chapters generally cover a single theme or series of related events. On a few occasions, entire chapters are dedicated to one individual, but they generally shift between the three primary individuals to demonstrate how actions and events indirectly affect each other. Wright frequently uses anecdotes or lengthy descriptions to emphasize certain points or themes. These sections are not directly related to the progression of events, but illustrate a larger trend or symbolic significance.

Perspective

Lawrence Wright is a journalist, playwright, and the author of several nonfiction books. The Looming Tower is written with a generally objective perspective. It presents a series of events, both in the Middle East and the United States in a factual manner and generally allows the reader to draw their own conclusions. Wright does advance certain arguments about why Islamist extremism emerged and flourished and why the United States was unable to prevent the 9/11 attacks. However, his depiction of the related facts allows to reader to examine his theses critically. Wright's one possible bias is his negative view of the CIA. In Wright's narrative, most failures of the intelligence community originate from the Agency's unwillingness to share resources and information. He presents strong evidence for this, but an argument could be made that blame should be spread more widely, rather than focusing on one agency.

Tone

Like his perspective, Wright's tone is largely objective throughout this book. He does however use tone to emphasize the views and situations of the various individuals presented. When describing bin Laden and other extremists, the author uses more grandiose language, metaphors, and extensive symbolism. His objective is to mirror the inflated view these men held of themselves and their worldview. In contrast, his depictions of American officials are ominous and suggest a level of futility. Well-intentioned agents are shown struggling against an overwhelming bureaucracy that continually limits their effectiveness. In both cases, Wright uses extensive foreshadowing and draws explicit parallels between various historic events. Finally, reflective of his perspective, Wright uses a sharply critical tone when discussing the CIA. Its leadership is depicted as territorial, petty, and intransigent, particularly in its cooperation with the FBI.

Quotes

The most frightening aspect of this new threat, however, was the fact that almost no one took it seriously. It was too bizarre, to primitive and exotic. Up against the confidence that Americans placed in modernity and technology and their own ideals to protect them from the savage pageant of history, the defiant gestures of bin Laden and his followers seemed absurd and even pathetic.
-- Lawrence Wright (Prologue paragraph 2)

Importance: The author argues that Islamist extremism is a threat primarily because Americans do not understand it and assume that nothing can harm them after their victory in the Cold War.

Only Islam offered a formula for creating a just and godly society. Thus the real struggle would eventually show itself: It was not a battle between capitalism and communist; it was between Islam and materialism. And inevitably Islam would prevail.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author shows that Sayyid Qutb saw no distinction between capitalism and communism, the major competing ideologies of his day, and viewed both as opponents of Islam.

Qutb came to a characteristically radical conclusion: His jailers had denied God by serving Nasser and his secular state. Therefore, they were not Muslims. In Qutb's mind, he had excommunicated them from the Islamic community. The name for this in Arabic is takfir.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 1 paragraph 4)

Importance: The author explains the origins of takfiri ideology and why it justified the killings of fellow Muslims by jihadists groups.

He saw the Afghan jihad as 'a training course of the utmost importance to prepare the Muslim mujahideen to wage their awaited battle against the superpower that now has sole dominance over the globe, namely the United States.
-- Lawrence Wright, quoting Ayman al-Zawahiri (chapter 2 paragraph 6)

Importance: The author provides context for why Zawahiri and bin Laden saw the fight in Afghanistan as pivotal in their larger movement, despite that fact that it seemed unrelated.

Radicalism usually prospers in the gap between rising expectations and declining opportunities. This is especially true where the population is young, idle, and bored; where the art is impoverish; where the entertainment-movies, theater, music-is policed or absent altogether; and where young men are set apart from consoling and socializing presence of women.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author argues that most followers of bin Laden and other jihadists were not religious zealots, but rather young men who were frustrated with their personal lives and societies.

From the Soviet perspective, the battle of the Lion's Den was a small moment in the tactical retreat from Afghanistan. In the heightened religious among the men following bin Laden, however, there was dizzying sense that they were living in a supernatural world, in which reality knelt before faith. For them, the encounter at Lion's Den became the foundation of the myth that they defeated the superpower.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author explains the symbolic importance that bin Laden gave to his victory at the Lion's Den and other similar events, despite the fact they seemed insignificant to his enemies.

Saudis were mortified by the need to turn to Christians and Jews to defend the holy land of Islam. That many of these foreign soldiers were women only added to their embarrassment. The weakness of the Saudi state and its abject dependence on the West for protection were paraded before the world thanks to the 1,500 foreign journalists who descended on the Kingdom to report on the buildup to the war.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 7 paragraph 5)

Importance: The author explains why it was so humiliating to the Saudi people to have American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia and why this event was one of bin Laden's major motivators.

Even the values that American advertised as being universally desirable - democracy, transparency, the rule of law, human rights, the separation of religion from governance - were discredited in the eyes of the jihadis because they were Western and therefore modern.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: The author argues that the anti-Americanism of jihadists extended to the values that the United States espoused and sought to spread internationally, rather than to just the country itself.

The former conception of al-Qaeda as a mobile army of mujahideen that would defend Muslim lands wherever they were threatened was now cast aside in favor of a policy of permanent subversion of the West. The Soviet Union was dead and communism no longer menaced the margins of the Islamic world. American was the only power capable of blocking the restoration of the ancient Islamic caliphate, and it would have to be confronted and defeated.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 8 paragraph 1)

Importance: The author demonstrates bin Laden's major ideological contribution to

Islamic extremism, that the United States was the ultimate enemy of Muslims and should be targeted. Most of his counterparts focused their attacks in Muslim countries.

Few Americans, even in the intelligence community, had any idea of the network of radical Islamists that had grown up inside the country. The blind sheikh may as well have been speaking in Martian as Arabic, since there were so few Middle East language specialists available to the FBI, much less to the local police.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 9 paragraph 3)

Importance: The author demonstrates, in a practical sense, why American officials failed to notice the threat of Islamist extremism within their country.

Their motivations varied, but they had in common a belief that Islam- pure and primitive, unmitigated by modernity and uncompromised by politics - would cure the wounds that socialism or Arab nationalism had failed to heal. They were angry but powerless in their own countries. They did not see themselves as terrorists but as revolutionaries who, like all such men throughout history, had been pushed into action by the simple human need for justice.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 10 paragraph 1)

Importance: The author argues that all of bin Laden’s followers, despite different sources of frustration, shared a belief that Islam could restore their societies to greatness.

He brilliantly reframed the disaster that had fallen upon him and his movement by calling up images that were deeply meaningful to many Muslims and practically invisible to those who were unfamiliar with the faith.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 13 paragraph 1)

Importance: The author demonstrates how bin Laden used religious metaphors and symbolism, the hijira, in this case, to motivate himself and his followers.

Overvaluing information for its own sake, the agency was a black hole, emitting nothing that was not blasted out of it by a force greater than gravity - and it recognized that O’Neill was such a force.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 16 paragraph 1)

Importance: The author argues that the CIA was generally resistant to sharing intelligence it had gathered and was particularly distrustful of John O’Neill as an individual, hampering his ability to investigate terrorism.

We need to hit you outside the country in a couple of places so you won’t see what is going on inside. The big attack is coming. There’s nothing you can do to stop it.
-- Mohammed 'Owhali (chapter 16 paragraph 1)

Importance: One of the embassy bombers explains that attacks outside the United

States are meant as distractions from a larger plot planned to target the American homeland.

Alone, alienated, and often far from his family, the exile turned to the mosque, where he found companionship and the consolation of religion. Islam provided the element of commonality. It was more than a faith - it was an identity.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author explains how young Muslims, even highly educated ones who lived in Europe, could be drawn to groups like al-Qaeda because of feelings of isolation.

Their goal was not only to inflict symbolic damage. Bin Laden imagined that America - as a political entity - could actually be destroyed.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author explains that bin Laden believed his attacks were not just symbolic, but were capable of dividing the United States into smaller entities like the Soviet Union.

The fact that the CIA withheld information about the mastermind of the Cole bombing and the meeting in Malaysia, when directly asked by the FBI, hampered the pursuit of justice in the death of seventeen American sailors. Much more tragic consequences were on the horizon.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author claims that the CIA could have helped the FBI with its investigation into the Cole bombings but refused to share the necessary information. He foreshadows that this refusal to cooperate will lead to the 9/11 attacks.

At a time when many Islamist movement, all of them concentrated on nationalist goals, it was bin Laden's vision to create an international jihad corps.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 18 paragraph 2)

Importance: The author argues that bin Laden was unique in his desire to attack the United States, rather than secular Arab governments.

Millions of dollars and thousands of hours of labor were consumed in replicating information that the U.S. government already had but refused to share.
-- Lawrence Wright (chapter 19 paragraph 3)

Importance: The author demonstrates the inefficiencies that resulted from the intelligence community's unwillingness to share information with the FBI.

Topics for Discussion

Explain Sayyid Qutb’s ideological evolution from a pious Muslim who was nonetheless optimistic about studying in the United States to someone with intensely anti-American views. Which aspects of American culture did Qutb find troubling? How did he link these elements to the Egyptian government? How might Qutb have misunderstood or overly generalized American society?

Here, the student is encouraged to examine their own culture and its international influence through Qutb’s eyes in an effort to understand his views. This question also addresses how misunderstanding between societies causes conflict.

Explain how how Ayman al-Zawahiri came to adopt Qutb’s ideology in his early life. What additions or modifications did Zawahiri make to these views? How are these views related to Zawahiri’s personal experiences?

This questions helps the student understand Wright’s argument that extremist beliefs are a combination of ideology and personal resentments. It also demonstrates how and why political ideologies evolve over time.

Compare and contrast the views of Ayman al-Zawahiri and Osama bin Laden. What did these men agree and how did they differ? What was unique about bin Laden’s views as compared to most extremists? How did this impact the attacks they planned and ordered?

This question encourages the student to understand bin Laden’s unique view that the United States should be the target of terrorist attacks and how he persuaded Zawahiri to adopt this view.

Give some examples of how bin Laden used religious and other symbolic imagery to explain his views and motivate his followers. Why were these images so impactful to his fellow militants yet meaningless to outsiders?

The Lion's Den, bin Laden's "hijira," and the USS Cole attack are good examples of the images bin Laden used. This encourages the student to examine why religious imagery was so influential among disaffected young Muslims but misunderstood by U.S. officials with no background in Islam or understanding of bin Laden's view of a global ideological conflict.

Give and explain reasons why Saudi Arabian society was in turmoil in the 1980s and 1990s. How did these conditions encourage young Saudis to join extremist groups? How were bin Laden and Zawahiri able to tie this turmoil to Western influence?

The economic downturn as a result of falling oil prices, the relative poverty of the Saudi people compared to the opulent royal family, and the absence of cultural experiences beyond religion are all reasons. This question encourages the student to understand Wright's argument that most militants were driven to al Qaeda because of personal frustration, not strong ideology.

Explain why most Americans, particularly national security officials, did not understand why al-Qaeda posed such a major threat. How did the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union affect this mentality?

This question challenges the student to understand the mindset of pre-9/11 Americans, particularly given that most students likely do not remember this period. The student is encouraged to put the decade preceding 9/11 into historical context.

Explain the evolution of the U.S. and Saudi governments' stance toward bin Laden over time. Why did they originally support his efforts to fund the mujahideen? Why was it difficult for either country to control or kill him after he became hostile?

Here, the student is encouraged to put al-Qaeda's rise in the context of historical events affecting the international community and examine how relationships between countries play a role in their actions.

Explain the institutional barriers that prevented the CIA and FBI from sharing information more freely. Why were these barriers put in place and how might they have served a positive function? How were they misused by officials in regards to terrorism?

Here, the student is challenged to think about why information sharing between agencies was limited and what good intentions were intended with those policies. It also examines how those policies became ineffective and overly limiting.

John O'Neill is depicted as an extremely driven figure. How did his intense motivation benefit his work? How was it detrimental? What impact did his polarizing character have on the willingness of his colleagues to work with him?

The student is encouraged to consider how personalities played a role in the pre-9/11 intelligence failures. Specifically, characteristics that made agents effective investigators also encouraged personal conflicts that hampered cooperation.

How have the 9/11 attacks and the threat of terrorism generally affected your own life? Are you confident that the U.S. government is doing enough to protect you? Do you believe it's important to understand the ideology of groups like al-Qaeda when fighting them?

This question challenges the student to connect this book to more current political discussions and issues that affect their daily lives.