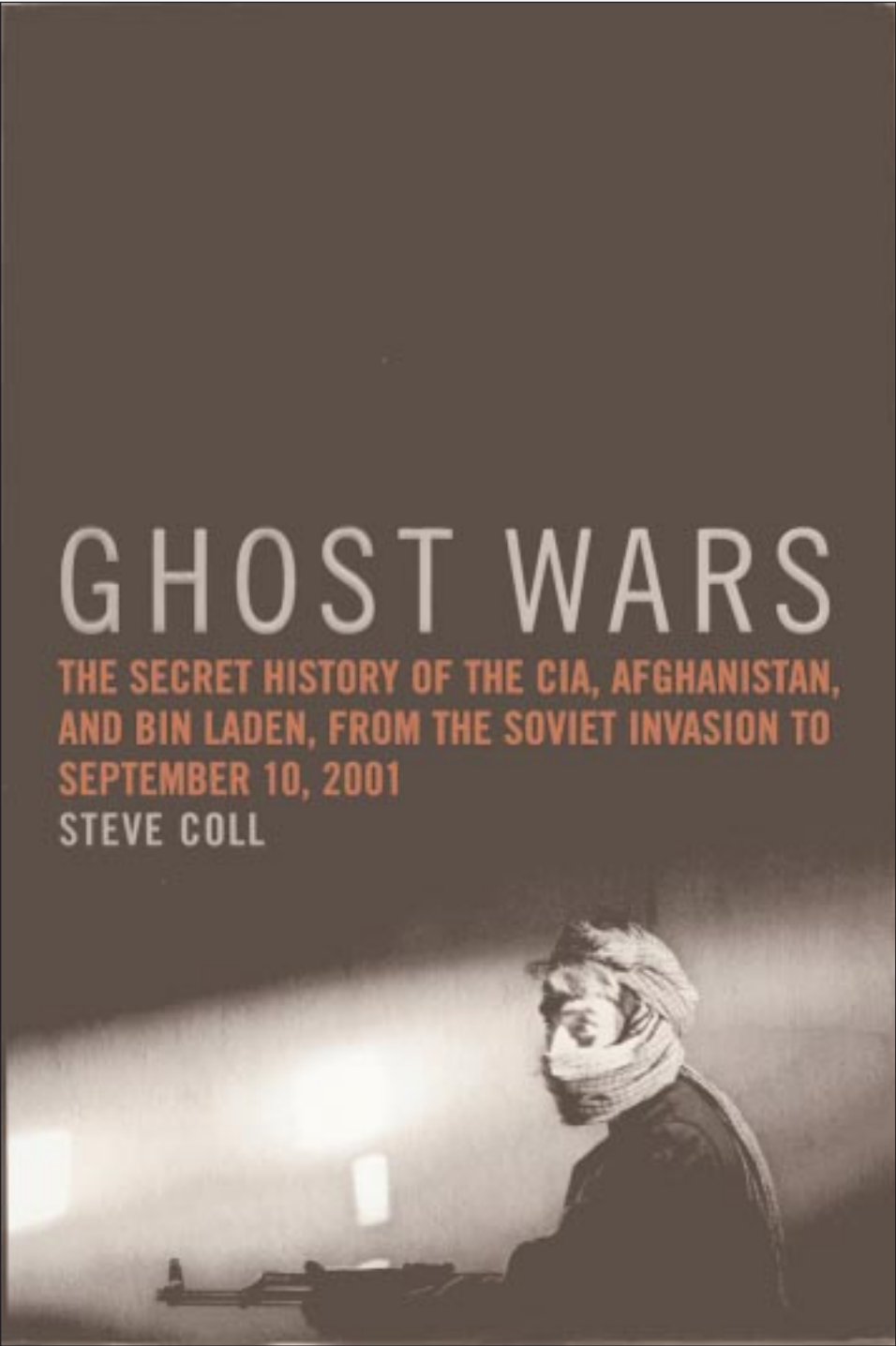


Spectre of War Haunts 2005 Pulitzer



By Raymond Barrett

Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars*, a history of the CIA's participation in the Afghanistan conflict and its failed hunt for Osama Bin Laden, is an extensively researched account of how Afghanistan found itself the nexus of a geopolitical intrigue that culminated high above the streets of Lower Manhattan on September 11, 2001. Winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for General Non-fiction, the Washington Post described the book as "a well written, authoritative, high-altitude drama with few heroes, many villains, bags of cash, and a tragic ending..."

The lively opening details the storming of the US embassy in Pakistan by Islamist students in 1979 and how the assorted group of diplomats, CIA agents and Marine guards managed to hold out until the cavalry arrived in the form of the Pakistani army. This first chapter manages to both grip the reader and convey the essence of the book: the rise of global Islamic militancy and the schizophrenic choice of partners successive American administrations have relied on to combat it.

The first section (1979-1989) focuses on the CIA's efforts to support the *mujahadeen* resistance to the Soviet invasion in 1979. It charts the incremental rise in the level of American support to the many resistance groups that emerged: initially in the form of funds to buy Lee Enfield rifles in 1981 to supplying the Stinger Surface-to-Air-Missile five years later. A recurring motif is the resurgence of CIA self-confidence through the Reagan administration, after bouts of soul searching in the 1970s as a result of many embarrassing intelligence disasters.

Through numerous interviews with present and former CIA operatives, Coll (who covered Afghanistan for the Washington Post and is now its managing editor) also describes how the agency handed over control of arming the *mujahadeen* to the Pakistani intelligence services (ISI) and then encouraged Saudi Arabia to send first money, and then men, from all over the Islamic world to fight in the guerrilla war against the Soviets.

One of the techniques the author employs to keep the reader interested throughout are his vivid characterisations (some might argue caricatures) of the key players. William Casey appears as a gruff CIA chief; Ahmed Shah Massoud prowls the foothills of the Panshir Valley as both militia leader and renaissance man (spending his downtime from fighting the Soviets reading Persian poetry) while the former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki Al-Faisal comes across as a suave yet 'wily' Arab statesman. These are but some of the people that stand out from the

extensive dramatis personae the author provides to assist the reader in keeping track of the large cast of players that appear onstage.

Anyone who picks up *Ghost Wars* hoping for a serious fix of Al-Qaeda and UBL (as the world's most famous fugitive was referred to at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia) will be disappointed at having to get through over three-hundred pages before the Saudi finally becomes the focus of attention. Similarly, those who want a fly-on-the-wall account of the Taliban's rise to power in Afghanistan would be better served by turning to Ahmed Rashid's excellent *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, the result of the Pakistani journalist's more than twenty years covering the region.

The pace of the book flags somewhat two-thirds of the way through, in the section that details 1998-2001, partly because this was a time of frustration and inaction for the CIA, as they vainly tried to collect the necessary intelligence to either capture or kill Bin Laden. However, the writing sparkles when Coll focuses on the CIA's inability to gain the actionable intelligence on Bin Laden and how this led Langley to accelerate the use of Predator pilot-less aircraft. These were used to first track and later engage targets thousands of miles away from the safety of CIA headquarters. Also, the transition process from the Clinton to the Bush administration is delicately described. He shows how incoming presidential advisors often have to cram in order to be fully informed before they assume key positions within government; incoming National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice (a European and Soviet expert) initially asserted the possibility that the Taleban received support from the Iranian government, despite the fact that such an alliance would have been anathema to both parties for religious reasons.

Another notable achievement is how the author illustrates the diversity of groups and factions that were involved in the Afghan conflict: Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Pashtuns along with royalists who supported the return of the exiled King Zahir Shah. We also see the rise of future president Hamid Karzai, whose father was murdered by the Taleban in 1999.

At times you can sense the author's frustration at the opportunities that were missed by a succession of US administrations in Afghanistan. The potency of the anti-American militancy that took root in the country once the Soviets withdrew in 1989 was repeatedly misjudged. This lack of awareness is epitomised by a 1991 quote attributed to the then President George Bush, who seemed confused at the continuing civil war and CIA activity in Afghanistan. "Is that thing still going on?" the president enquired.

Did you know...

The Pulitzer Prizes were first awarded in 1917 to reward excellence in Journalism. They were the vision of Hungarian-born newspaper owner Joseph Pulitzer. Arriving in the USA in the 1860s as a teenager speaking little English, he rose through the ranks of a local German-language newspaper in St. Louis to become a publishing magnate. At the height of his career he owned The New York World, which at one point had a readership of over 600,000. By the time of his death in 1911, he had made provisions in his will for the establishment of a number of prizes that would honour the work of journalists and writers across the country. Every year, panelists in conjunction with Columbia University award the prizes in areas such as international reporting, photography and editorial cartoons. Over the years, the prizes have expanded to 21 different categories and now encompass literature such as fiction, poetry and drama.

Pulitzer himself stressed the importance of independence and quality in the media after he was accused of libeling the then President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909, after publishing a corruption story which implicated many prominent and powerful people. "Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together," he said. Prominent winners include The Washington Post in 1973 for its reporting of the Watergate affair that eventually led to the resignation of President Richard Nixon.



One of the cartoons that won Nick Anderson of the Louisville Courier-Journal the 2005 Pulitzer for editorial cartooning.