ALL THE PRESIDENTS' WARS

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF AMERICA'S WAR ON TERROR

PETER BERGEN

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with David Sterman

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For Tresha, Pierre, and Grace

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That history just unfolds, independently of a specified direction, of a goal, no one is willing to admit.

—ROMANIAN PHILOSOPHER EMIL CIORAN IN *HISTORY AND UTOPIA* (1960)

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

For Arabic words I have used conventional spellings such as Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and al-Qaeda, unless they appear in a document that uses a different spelling.

NOTE ON SOURCING

This book is based on more than five hundred interviews I conducted from all sides of the war on terror, ranging from the leaders of jihadist groups to President Barack Obama. I was able to interview some of the key players multiple times. If an interview was conducted by someone else, that source is noted in the endnotes. I also relied on a wide variety of primary documents, such as the 470,000 files that were recovered at bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, and tens of thousands of pages of US government records. The book also draws on the past two and a half decades of my reporting on the post-9/11 wars, references to which can be found in the endnotes.

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PROLOGUE

On August 15, 2021, around midday, the Taliban's armored vehicles rolled into Kabul. It had been two decades since the army of religious warriors had ruled over Afghanistan; now they were back.

Afghan National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib had devised a plan to protect President Ashraf Ghani's wife, Rula, and told her about the arrangements to escort her to safety in the United Arab Emirates. It was time to put it into action.

Around 2:30 p.m. President Ghani's chief of staff, Matin Bek, heard a helicopter take off near the palace grounds. Assuming it was American, he didn't think much of it.

The Afghan minister of foreign affairs, Haneef Atmar, was searching for the president. He tracked down Bek, the person most likely to know.

"Any word about the boss?" asked Atmar.

"He was with us like half an hour ago. He went home; it's his nap time," said Bek.

"No!" Atmar said, realizing what had happened. "He ran away!"

Mohib had decided to depart Kabul with President Ghani after the head of the presidential guard had warned him that the president's life could be in danger if he stayed. He was cautioned that even the palace guards might turn against the president if the Taliban arrived at the palace. There was also

the real risk that the Taliban, as they had done with their political opponents before, might execute the president.

Acting quickly, Mohib found President Ghani and told him, “We must go.”

The Afghan president lifted off in a helicopter from the grounds of his palace so abruptly he didn’t even have his passport.

The helicopter that Bek had heard earlier was whisking the president and his wife from the palace northward to the neighboring country of Uzbekistan.

Bek felt betrayed: Ghani was the president of a country at war. Bek’s own father, a member of the Afghan parliament, had been killed by a Taliban suicide bomber a decade earlier. Terrible things happen in war; Bek accepted that, but you had to show leadership. Ghani’s departure, Bek believed, had killed a small window for some kind of peaceful transition deal between the Afghan government and the Taliban. For that, Bek could never forgive him.

Now, Bek believed, the blame for the Taliban victory was going to fall squarely on the elected Afghan government—rather than on the flawed US withdrawal agreement from Afghanistan, which the Americans had negotiated directly with the Taliban, bypassing President Ghani and his team.

As President Ghani flew over the country that he had governed he felt a range of emotions. He looked over the valleys and mountains and thought about the prosperous, stable Afghanistan that could have been. The helicopter flew past Bagram Air Base; Ghani had first landed there on December 26, 2001, leaving behind his comfortable life in Washington as a World Bank official to try to help in post-9/11 Afghanistan.

As he flew above northern Afghanistan Ghani feared what women, young people, and the poor would endure following the Taliban victory. In his own mind Ghani hadn’t been a party to the dissolution of his elected Afghan government; it was the United States that had acted as a colonial power. The Americans had simply given away the nation of Afghanistan to the Taliban.

Throughout their negotiations with the Taliban the Americans had excluded the Afghan government. The chief US negotiator was Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, a man Ghani had known since they were both teenagers. Ghani now loathed him because he believed that Khalilzad had purposely misled the Afghan government and people about the substance of his negotiations with the Taliban.

Around 10 p.m. on August 15, Taliban fighters arrived inside the lush grounds of the presidential palace. A group of them headed to President Ghani's office. There one of the fighters recited a verse from the Koran: "Indeed we have granted you a clear triumph, Oh Prophet!"

The "Islamic Republic of Afghanistan" was officially dead. In its place the new "Islamic Emirate" of the Taliban was just beginning.

Three months after the 9/11 attacks, the Taliban seemed to have been utterly defeated by the United States and its local Afghan allies, and al-Qaeda was on the run. Two decades later, the Taliban were back in control of Afghanistan, while the United States' ignominious retreat from Kabul made its hasty departure from Saigon in 1975 look dignified.

The Afghan withdrawal was long in the making, as was the resurgence of the Taliban. The withdrawal was also emblematic of a series of debates about how best to conduct the "war on terror" that roiled four American presidencies—those of George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, and Donald Trump.

Those debates typically involved questions about whether to intervene militarily in another country and how best to do so; whether to rely on airpower alone; when to send in US conventional forces or rely on the "light footprint" of US special operations forces; when to withdraw US forces from a country where they had been deployed; when to use armed drones outside of conventional war zones in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen; whether to "nation build" or not; how best to build up the armies of counterterrorism partners such as Iraq or whether to arm American proxy groups like the Syrian Kurdish forces who fought ISIS; and even whether "war" was the proper framing in the first place when it came to defeating shadowy jihadist groups.

As the Prussian strategist Carl von Clausewitz observed, the "most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature." Since 9/11, successive American presidents and their top national security officials and senior generals had struggled with the question: "What kind of war are we embarking on?" They would answer this fundamental question in markedly different ways and with varying degrees of success.

The confusion about the kind of war the United States was going to fight began on the day of 9/11, when senior Bush administration officials began mapping out a conflict that would extend beyond Afghanistan to other countries, such as Iraq. The term "war on terror" was so vague and all-encompassing that it meant that the war could take place globally and for decades into the future.

After 9/11, stopping the next terrorist attack—wherever it might emerge from—was the "primary goal" of the Bush administration, according to Douglas Feith, the top policy official at the Pentagon. Destroying the Taliban regime was supposed to be a signal to other "state sponsors" of terrorism such as Iraq that they could also be targeted. Just two days after 9/11, Paul Wolfowitz, the number two official at the Pentagon, told reporters how ambitious the war on terror would be: "It's not just simply a matter of capturing people and holding them accountable, but removing the sanctuaries, removing the support systems, ending states who sponsor terrorism."

The war on terror would not just be about punishing al-Qaeda and the Taliban, it would also be about preventing any kind of attack against the United States from a range of other terrorist groups and states. That is why Pentagon leaders started planning in earnest for the Iraq War three months after the 9/11 attacks, even though Iraq had nothing to do with them.

The war on terror was costly in blood and treasure. Seven thousand American service members died and many more were wounded. The Afghan and Iraq wars relied heavily on American contractors, and more of them died in those conflicts than members of the US military; an estimated

eight thousand. Ordinary Iraqis and Afghans paid a very high price: Around 200,000 Iraqi civilians and more than 45,000 Afghan civilians were killed during the wars.

The monetary cost of those wars is estimated to be around $6 trillion: $4 trillion of Pentagon and State Department spending, and $2 trillion of current and projected veterans' care. Meanwhile, the Bush administration significantly cut taxes, and those cuts were largely extended during the Obama administration, so these expensive wars were paid for using borrowed money that expanded record US federal deficits.

And then there were the unintended consequences of the conflict. The war on terror precipitated one of the most crucial changes in the Middle East in decades: the sharp increase in sectarian conflict between the Shia and Sunnis and the rise of Iran as a critical player in the region. Sectarianism, of course, has been around since the dawn of Islam one and a half millennia ago, but its role in the conflict was supercharged by the US decision to invade Iraq in 2003. By overthrowing the Sunni dictator, Saddam Hussein, the United States inverted the power pyramid in Iraq so that the Shia were now on top, which precipitated a bloody civil war that killed hundreds of thousands. An official US Army history of the Iraq War concluded that Iraq's neighbor Iran—governed by Shia theocrats—was the only winner of that war. This was not the judgment of a vocal war critic like Noam Chomsky, but of a group of the Army's chosen military historians.

We know now how much of this turned out, from the hard truth that Iran was the victor of the Iraq War, to the ultimately successful ten-year hunt for Osama bin Laden, to the Taliban victory in Afghanistan in 2021. And we are still watching the repercussions unfold, as the war on terror takes unanticipated directions with Trump's war against Iran. When Trump launched the war he said the Iranian regime was "the world's number one state sponsor of terrorism." This book will examine the policy choices of the post-9/11 presidents and their war cabinets and how those choices, in turn, interacted with the choices of the leaders of al-Qaeda, ISIS, the Taliban, and the theocrats who ran Iran, who often adapted themselves to US strategies in unexpected ways.

The subject of the "war on terror" is a large one, so this account will focus on the critical military and policy decisions of Bush, Obama, Biden, and Trump. It will also examine the rise of the CIA's armed drone program; the CIA's emergence as a paramilitary agency targeting terrorists; the

transformation of US special operations forces from a barely used counterterrorism force before 9/11 to an industrial-level killing machine; and the crucial role of the National Security Agency in penetrating enemy communications. All these developments played important roles in eventually decimating al-Qaeda's leaders, including the operation that killed bin Laden in 2011.

During the "global war on terror"—known to Washington policymakers by the ungainly acronym "GWOT" and pronounced GEE-WHAT—the United States cycled through a variety of strategies and tactics, some of which backfired spectacularly, such as Bush's 2003 Iraq invasion and the bipartisan fiasco of Trump and Biden's withdrawal from Afghanistan more than a decade and a half later. The dual debacles of the Iraq War and the Afghan withdrawal signaled that the US superpower had little idea what it was doing when it came to foreign policy, which undercut its position around the world.

This was underscored by Trump's impetuous decision to go war against Iran with no kind of imminent threat to the United States, no backing from the United Nations or NATO allies, and no authorization from the US Congress. Where once the United States had tried to uphold the "rules-based" global order, now it was seen as a destabilizing force around the world.

Other approaches during the war on terror, such as using America's armed drones and special operations forces, greatly diminished al-Qaeda and ISIS. In tandem with these developments the CIA created a new role: "targeting officers" who tracked the leadership of terrorist groups to be captured or killed. Hundreds of CIA drone strikes in Pakistan killed many of al-Qaeda's leaders and middle managers.

While the CIA successfully deployed drones to kill leaders of al-Qaeda and eventually succeeded in hunting down bin Laden, the agency also used coercive interrogations against suspected members of al-Qaeda, and it "rendered" suspected terrorists to countries that practiced torture, such as Egypt. These practices were not only a moral stain on the CIA and the Bush administration, they were also largely ineffective in eliciting useful intelligence about al-Qaeda. FBI Director Robert Mueller—who had started

in his job a week before the 9/11 attacks—told a reporter in 2008 that he didn't know of any attack plots on the United States that were disrupted by information gained from the CIA's coercive interrogations, which was the key rationale for their use.

Similarly, the cumbersome military justice system at the US prison camp at Guantánamo was a failure. Key al-Qaeda members—such as the operational planner of the 9/11 attacks, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who was captured in Pakistan in 2003—did not go on trial because of the CIA's use of torture techniques on them, while Guantánamo was left holding these detainees indefinitely decades later.

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Innovations in one theater of the global war influenced US tactics and strategies in other theaters of the conflict. Bush's "surge" of troops into Iraq in 2007 influenced Obama's decision to surge troops into Afghanistan two years later; Obama's vastly ramped-up campaign of drone strikes against al-Qaeda in Pakistan influenced his decision to dramatically expand a campaign of drone strikes against the al-Qaeda affiliate in Yemen—which was plotting bombings of American planes that, had they succeeded, had the potential to replicate a 9/11-style attack. Obama's campaign of airstrikes in Yemen influenced his thinking about limiting the numbers of American boots on the ground in Iraq and Syria during his subsequent war against ISIS. The raid against bin Laden's hideout in Pakistan in 2011 succeeded because SEAL Team Six had executed similar raids against jihadist targets on a nightly basis for many years in Afghanistan. Trump's operation to capture Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in January 2026 on the grounds that he was a "narcoterrorist" succeeded because US Delta Force had carried out thousands of such raids in the Middle East after 9/11.

Just as the United States faced several strategic choices during the war on terror, so did its enemies. Jihadists' strategic choices involved a series of debates over core issues: whether to hold and govern territory; whether to prioritize attacks on the United States or on local governments; whether to centralize authority and planning, embrace an affiliate structure, or promote "lone actor" attacks in the West.

Jihadist groups also learned from the various theaters of the conflict. Suicide attacks were virtually unknown in Afghanistan before 2006; seeing

their success in Iraq, the Taliban imported the technique wholesale. In 2010, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen started publishing *Inspire*, a webzine that frequently called in colloquial English for "homegrown" attacks in the West; ISIS echoed these calls four years later in its own English-language webzine, *Dabiq*.

These incitements worked. Al-Qaeda's Yemeni affiliate inspired an attack by a US military officer in Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009 that killed thirteen people, and ISIS inspired an American terrorist in Orlando, Florida, who killed forty-nine people at the Pulse nightclub in 2016. Using a variety of suicide bombing and mass shooting tactics that they learned from other terrorists in the post-9/11 era, jihadist groups also carried out terrorist attacks in major cities such as Brussels, London, Moscow, and Paris.

Yet, the central aim of the war on terror was achieved: there were no large-scale lethal attacks in the United States carried out by foreign terrorist groups in the quarter century after 9/11. In the half decade after 9/11 few could have predicted this. During this period *Foreign Policy* magazine regularly polled some one hundred of the country's leading foreign policy experts; two-thirds consistently believed that another 9/11-scale attack was likely within five years, while around a quarter believed such an assault could happen with the next six months.

All the Presidents' Wars is an attempt to tell the history of the war on terror, which on some levels is as much a consequential epoch in American life as the Cold War was, though with lower (nonnuclear) stakes, but arguably similarly profound ramifications both at home in the US and in the Muslim world.

President Bush's initial response to the 9/11 attacks gave him the highest favorability ratings of any president since records began in the 1930s. Yet his disastrous war of choice in Iraq greatly contributed to the American public's growing distrust of their government. It also torpedoed the notion around the world that the US superpower knew what it was doing on the world stage. The United States had won the Cold War against the nuclear-armed Soviets, and during the first Gulf War the US had deftly expelled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait in 1991. A decade later the CIA and the US military easily toppled the Taliban in the winter of 2001

while suffering almost no casualties. Some observers even began to refer to the United States as a "hyperpower." That hyperpower image was buried in the deserts and cities of Iraq, where American soldiers got sucked into a long, violent insurgency and were caught in the middle of an intense civil war, during which the US came off as hapless and clueless.

As a result, Senator Hillary Clinton's vote in favor of the Iraq War undermined her chances of becoming president. By contrast, Barack Obama's opposition to the war helped the junior senator from Illinois to become president.

Donald Trump's first presidential campaign took place at a time when ISIS was directing or inspiring high-profile mass casualty terrorist attacks in the West. On November 13, 2015, ISIS-trained terrorists launched attacks in Paris, killing 130 people. Two weeks later, ISIS-inspired terrorists stormed into the offices of the San Bernardino County health department in California and killed 14 people. As a result, just over half of Americans said they were "very" or "somewhat" worried that they, or a member of their family, would be the victims of a terrorist attack. This was the largest number to worry about terrorism since just after the 9/11 attacks. Trump channeled their concerns better than any other politician and his election victory in 2016 owed much to his stance on terrorism, which was the top issue for voters, after the economy. His election underlined how the "war on terror" continued to have an outsized impact on American politics long after 9/11.

Once in office the Trump administration negotiated a "peace" deal with the Taliban that was, in fact, a withdrawal agreement and signed it in early 2020. President Biden went through with that withdrawal the following year, and, predictably, the Taliban immediately took over Afghanistan. This gave them a significant victory: billions of dollars' worth of US military equipment and control of a country that was home to more than two dozen jihadist groups, according to the United Nations.

Legacies of the American war on terror played out in wider arenas. Russian President Vladimir Putin's 2022 war of choice in Ukraine echoed Bush's war of choice in Iraq. Despite their different goals, both were wars of aggression launched without the justification of self-defense and were

widely condemned by other countries. Putin's invasion of Ukraine may also have been precipitated in part by Biden's botched US withdrawal from Afghanistan during the summer of 2021, which seemed to presage a more significant American withdrawal from the world. Three months after the US pullout from Afghanistan Putin moved tens of thousands of troops to the Ukrainian border and three months later, he ordered the invasion of Ukraine.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States pioneered the now-widespread global use of targeted killings using drones. They have since been used in some two dozen conflicts around the world by other countries and terrorist groups.

America's war of choice in Iraq, the CIA's use of coercive interrogation techniques on members of al-Qaeda in its secret prisons, and the campaigns of American armed drones in countries that were not formally at war with the United States, such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen: all of these conflicts and tactics undercut American claims to be the steward of the "rules-based" international order.

The "war on terror" evolved yet again when the second Trump administration expanded its scope and the State Department formally designated a dozen drug cartels as "Foreign Terrorist Organizations." These designations bracketed the cartels with groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, labeling them no longer as simply criminals, but as terrorists. On September 2, 2025, the Pentagon carried out airstrikes on a Venezuelan boat that was purportedly transporting drugs, killing eleven people. Trump administration officials justified the strikes as battling narco-terrorists. They would be the first of many American attacks on suspected cartel boats.

Then, early in the morning of January 3, 2026, US Army Delta Force operators captured Venezuelan strongman Nicolás Maduro in Caracas. President Trump's Justice Department had indicted Maduro for allegedly partnering with "narco-terrorists" responsible for transporting thousands of tons of cocaine into the United States.

The following month President Trump took the biggest foreign policy gamble of his presidency to date when he ordered "Operation Epic Fury" to commence on February 28, against Iranian targets, having assembled the largest US military force in the Middle East since Bush's ill-fated invasion of Iraq.

President Trump’s war of choice against Iran drew on the logic of Bush’s “preventive” invasion of Iraq more than two decades earlier. Just as Bush had justified his war to prevent the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, from ever giving weapons of mass destruction to terrorists, Trump’s rationale for his war against the Iranian regime was that they were an imminent threat to the United States because they were pursuing nuclear weapons and backing terrorist groups across the Middle East.

A quarter century after 9/11 the global war on terror not only lived on but was continuing to take on new and unexpected forms.

Washington DC, March 23, 2026

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CHAPTER ONE

9/11

There is a tendency in our planning to confuse the unfamiliar with the improbable.

—THOMAS SCHELLING IN *PEARL HARBOR: WARNING AND DECISION* BY ROBERTA WOHLSTETTER (1962)

There was a sense of euphoria that we'd done it at last; we'd landed a punch on those arrogant great powers . . . on those white fellows.

—JAPANESE LITERARY CRITIC OKUNO TAKEO IN 1941 COMMENTING ON PEARL HARBOR

On September 9, 2001, summer was turning into fall in northern Afghanistan, bringing a chill to the morning air. Two muscular Arab TV journalists had been hanging around in the Panjshir Valley for the past couple of weeks waiting to interview the veteran Afghan guerrilla commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. Now they finally got their chance to speak to the storied general.

Massoud, aged forty-eight, had been at war for more than two decades, first against the Soviets, then during the Afghan civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal, and now against the Taliban. Massoud's gaunt face was framed by a brown beret-like hat and a thin beard. He exuded charisma and intelligence.

Before the interview began Massoud joked to an aide, "Neither looks much like a reporter to me. Perhaps they are wrestlers?"

The cameraman's first question to Massoud was: "Sir, what is the situation in Afghanistan?" A bomb hidden inside his camera then exploded, killing the cameraman and mortally wounding Massoud.

Massoud's assassination was the curtain-raiser for the 9/11 attacks that followed two days later, and the two "journalists" were in fact assassins dispatched by al-Qaeda to kill Massoud. He was the key Afghan commander who stood between the Taliban and their total victory in Afghanistan.

In August 2001 bin Laden knew the 9/11 attack plan was in its final stages. He also knew that the attacks were likely to cause some problems for his Taliban hosts, whom he had neglected to inform about the impending assaults on New York and Washington, DC. Bin Laden assumed that the likely US response to the 9/11 attacks would be similar to the ineffectual cruise missile strikes that had targeted his Afghan training camps three years earlier after his men had blown up two US embassies in Africa in 1998.

Bin Laden's military commander, Abu Hafs, believed that the American response to al-Qaeda's planned attacks on New York and Washington would likely replicate the bombing campaign that the US had waged against Serbian forces in Kosovo in 1999, during which there were no US forces on the ground. And over the previous year, after al-Qaeda had bombed the USS *Cole* off the coast of Yemen, killing seventeen US sailors on October 12, 2000, there had been no military response either by the outgoing Clinton administration—which had continued in office for four more months after the bombing—or the incoming Bush administration, which had by then been in office for seven months. Michael Sheehan, an intense former Special Forces officer who was the State Department's ambassador for counterterrorism, exclaimed to Richard Clarke, the White House counterterrorism coordinator, "Does al-Qaeda have to attack the Pentagon to get their attention?"

Bin Laden and Abu Hafs had succumbed to a common delusion; namely, starting to believe your own propaganda. Bin Laden asserted in interviews that he considered the United States to be as weak as the Soviets had been when they had withdrawn from Afghanistan after occupying the country during the 1980s. As a result, bin Laden's expectations of the likely US response to the 9/11 attacks would prove to be wildly off base. But following the attacks bin Laden did expect at least *some* retaliation by the Americans, which would surely complicate his relationship with the Taliban, who treated him as an honored guest even if some of their leaders privately griped that his presence in Afghanistan was complicating their quest for recognition on the world stage. Bin Laden therefore calculated that the biggest gift that he could give the Taliban to mollify them for any hard feelings they might have after the 9/11 attacks was the head of their mortal enemy, Ahmad Shah Massoud.

On September 11, 2001, buoyed by the news of the assassination of Massoud, bin Laden and a group of his men were in eastern Afghanistan listening intently to a radio tuned to the BBC's Arabic service. The newsreader announced a bulletin: "Reports from the United States say that an airliner was destroyed upon crashing into the World Trade Center in New York." Bin Laden told his followers to wait; more good news was coming.

Half a world away, at 9 a.m. the same day, President George W. Bush was visiting an elementary school in Sarasota, Florida. Just before the president started reading a story about a goat to a group of second graders, an aide told him that some kind of plane had flown into the World Trade Center.

Around 15 minutes later the news came on the BBC of a second plane flying into the Trade Center. Bin Laden and his men exploded with joy, proclaiming, "*Allah-u-Akbar!* God is great!" They wept and they prayed.

Andrew Card, Bush's chief of staff, whispered in the president's ear: "A second plane hit the second tower. America is under attack." Bush said nothing. His face registered surprise and confusion.

Bush's startled facial expression was emblematic of how his administration was caught completely by surprise by the attacks. And yet the CIA had provided senior Bush officials a stream of more than forty ever

more strident classified warnings during the first eight months of 2001 that al-Qaeda was planning to attack American targets, including possibly in the United States.

Despite these warnings, after the 9/11 attacks Bush and his senior national security officials said nothing to contradict the widespread view that they represented an "intelligence failure." It became a common phrase, part of a widely accepted narrative that helped explain how 9/11 was allowed to happen. In his 2010 memoir Bush would even write that the US intelligence community had "missed something big."

Blaming the intelligence agencies is a common dodge for policymakers when things go wrong, since the agencies work *for* the policymakers so they can't easily fight back. They are also hard put to defend their highly classified work in the public arena.

During the spring and summer of 2001 the "Senior Executive Intelligence Brief," which was circulated to top Bush administration officials on a regular basis, contained multiple warnings by the CIA that al-Qaeda was planning a large-scale attack. They were titled: "Bin Ladin Public Profile May Presage Attack," dated May 3; "Bin Ladin Attacks May Be Imminent," dated June 23; and "Bin Ladin Planning High Profile Attacks," dated June 30. The precise date and manner of al-Qaeda's planned operation was not specified, which is often typical of such intelligence.

One morning during the late spring of 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney asked Bush's CIA briefer, Michael Morell, if all this threat reporting might not be some kind of deception operation by al-Qaeda designed to get the US government's attention and waste its time and resources.

In response, CIA analysts prepared another classified report dated June 30, and titled it "Bin Ladin Threats Are Real."

One of the CIA's most urgent intelligence warnings was in the highly classified President's Daily Brief that Morell presented to Bush when the president was staying at his ranch in Texas on August 6, 2001. That assessment was titled: "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the U.S."

The only reason we now know about this top-secret document is because of the work of the 9/11 Commission, which the Bush administration fought hard to prevent from ever being convened. Senior Bush officials made the nonsensical claim that any inquiry into how 9/11 happened would distract from the war effort. By contrast, there were *eight* US government investigations of Pearl Harbor during World War II. Because of unrelenting

pressure from the 9/11 families, the Bush administration eventually conceded at the end of 2002 that a bipartisan investigation of the worst mass murder in American history was indeed necessary, and the 9/11 Commission was formed.

The real reason that Bush administration officials wanted to bury any 9/11 inquiry is they knew they had much to hide about their incompetence in the run-up to the attacks. After the bin Laden briefing at his Texas ranch, Bush chose not to interrupt the most prolonged presidential vacation in three decades; no senior Bush officials spoke publicly about the threat from al-Qaeda, nor did they ask the FBI to locate suspected members of al-Qaeda who might be in the United States.

This was far from an abstract concern: Ahmed Ressam, who had trained at a jihadist camp in eastern Afghanistan, had been stopped at the US–Canada border in mid-December 1999, driving a vehicle loaded with components for explosives that he planned to detonate at the Los Angeles airport during the Christmas travel season. Had Ressam succeeded, large numbers of Americans would likely have been killed.

The nineteen 9/11 hijackers were living in the United States using their real names. If senior Bush officials had sent up a flare in the summer of 2001, a little digging might have found at least some of them. This was not an intelligence failure but a policy failure.

Senior Bush officials such as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, a Sovietologist by training, and the secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, who had served as chief of staff in Gerald Ford's White House, were unreconstructed Cold War warriors. They simply didn't understand that a group like al-Qaeda—which wasn't backed by any of the states that the Bush team worried most about, such as Iraq—might indeed be a serious danger to the country. During a meeting about terrorist threats at the White House in April 2001, Paul Wolfowitz even asked, "Why are we beginning by talking about this one man bin Laden?"

This was a decidedly odd question. After all, al-Qaeda had already blown up two US embassies in East Africa in 1998 using suicide bombers driving trucks that had killed more than two hundred people. Two years later, it had almost sunk one of the most advanced warships in the Navy, the USS *Cole*, while it was anchored off the coast of Yemen. A pair of suicide bombers steering a small boat loaded with explosives blew a gaping hole in the *Cole*'s reinforced hull, killing seventeen American sailors. The embassy

attacks resulted in the FBI's most extensive overseas investigation at the time and thousands of media stories, while the CIA determined the *Cole* attack to have been the work of al-Qaeda, and it similarly received a great deal of media coverage.

All of this was well known to Bush officials, but they couldn't get their heads around the idea that bin Laden and his men, who were not formally backed by any state, could pose a serious threat. Their discounting of al-Qaeda's abilities helps account for why senior Bush officials were not only completely surprised by 9/11 but also why they massively overreacted to the attacks and immediately began searching for other monsters to destroy. They started discussing plans to take down imagined terrorist hotbeds in Iraq within hours of 9/11.

Another standard narrative about 9/11 is that it was a "failure of imagination" that no one could have seen coming. This was a core analysis of the authoritative 9/11 Commission report. Still, it also missed the mark. In the period before 9/11, the public record was rich with warnings about the threats and capabilities of al-Qaeda and allied groups and their intent and capacity to attack targets in the United States as well as to hijack American planes and even crash them into targets in the United States. You did not need access to classified information to divine any of this; it was all out there in the media.

Attacks by Islamist terrorists with links to Afghanistan or al-Qaeda had already taken place in the United States before 9/11. A group of Islamist terrorists living in the United States bombed the World Trade Center on February 26, 1993, using a van packed with explosives that they parked in the basement of one of the towers, killing six. The terrorists hoped to bring down the Trade Center buildings. Jamal al-Fadl, an al-Qaeda defector, testified at a Manhattan trial in 2000 that he saw Ramzi Yousef, the ringleader of the Trade Center attack, at the Sadda training camp on the Pakistan–Afghanistan border sometime between 1989 and 1991. Sadda was a training camp used by al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups.

The same year as the Trade Center attack, a group of Islamist terrorists living in the United States associated with Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, a spiritual inspiration to al-Qaeda, plotted to bomb the United Nations headquarters in Manhattan and other landmarks such as the Lincoln Tunnel and the George Washington Bridge. The FBI had an informant in the group, and the plot was foiled.

"Operation Bojinka" was a plan by the mastermind of the 1993 Trade Center attack, Ramzi Yousef, to bomb a dozen US airliners in Asia. This plot was hatched along with Yousef's uncle, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, known as KSM, who would later become the operational commander of the 9/11 attacks. In January 1995, a Philippine National Police raid discovered materials in a Manila apartment indicating that Yousef and KSM planned not only to blow up American commercial flights in Asia but also to crash an airplane into CIA headquarters in Virginia.

The plan to use a plane as a weapon against CIA headquarters was noted in several prominent contemporaneous newspaper stories, including in the *Los Angeles Times* and three stories in the *Washington Post.*

The worry that planes might be used as weapons prompted officials to impose flight restrictions over the Atlanta 1996 Olympics. Similarly, the *Washington Post* reported that planners for the Sydney Olympics in 2000 were working to prevent a scenario where a hijacked airliner crashed into the main stadium for the event. During the Genoa G8 Summit in July 2001, Italian authorities installed surface-to-air missiles to protect the summit from aerial threats.

Bin Laden had also repeatedly made public statements to leading American media organizations warning of attacks on the United States. Al-Qaeda's leader hinted he was planning an attack against the United States in his first television interview, which aired on CNN in 1997, and he repeated this threat in an interview with ABC News a year later and to *Time* magazine in 1999.

The sum total of all this pre-9/11 public record coverage demonstrated that al-Qaeda-trained terrorists wanted to attack symbolic targets in the US, particularly in major cities such as New York and Los Angeles; that they wanted to launch mass casualty attacks against American targets; that they had an interest in commandeering planes; and that they were willing to carry out suicide attacks. All of this could be determined before 9/11 from widely available public information.

Anyone following al-Qaeda closely could see that in the summer of 2001 the group was planning some spectacular anti-American attack. At the time I was writing a book about al-Qaeda, and while I only had access to unclassified information, I became increasingly alarmed by what was out there publicly. On August 17 I emailed John Burns, the *New York Times*' leading foreign correspondent, writing, "I think there is a major story to be

told wrapping around the new bin Laden videotape and the various threats against U.S. facilities in past months, which can paint both a compelling picture of the bin Laden organization today and responsibly suggest that an al-Qaeda attack is in the works."

The 9/11 attacks were only three weeks away.

Two days before 9/11 a story headlined "On Videotape bin Laden Charts Violent Future" by Burns ran online at a time when the internet version of the *New York Times* was still only in its infancy, but it didn't run in the print edition until a day after the 9/11 attacks. Seemingly embarrassed by this, editors removed the online version of the story from the *Times*' website after 9/11, which they later admitted was a serious error.

Al-Qaeda's plans to attack the United States were hardly a secret before 9/11.

After the second plane hit the World Trade Center, President Bush was rushed onto Air Force One, which then hopscotched across the United States from one US Air Force base to another. On the plane was Michael Morell, the CIA officer who just over a month earlier had briefed the president about the highly classified CIA assessment "Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the U.S."

Bush summoned Morell to his Air Force One office and asked him directly: "Michael, who did this?"

Morell, who favored steel-rimmed glasses and had the fastidious air of a buttoned-down accountant, was not prone to hyperbole. He told Bush that he'd "bet my children's future that the trail would lead to the doorstep" of bin Laden. Officials at the CIA's Counterterrorist Center soon discovered that it was indeed bin Laden's men. Within two hours of the attacks, an agency official had pulled up the passenger list for the plane that had flown into the Pentagon and found that Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar were on the flight.

This was a sobering finding. The CIA had been tracking Hazmi and Mihdhar, and knew they had attended an al-Qaeda planning meeting in Malaysia in January 2000 and had probably entered the United States. Yet for a year and a half the CIA did not ask the State Department to "watch-list" these suspected terrorists so they would be barred from entering the

US, nor did they alert the FBI about them. It was only in late August 2001 that the two al-Qaeda suspects were watch-listed, and their names were forwarded to the FBI. By then it was too late to find them even though they had been living openly in San Diego. This certainly was an important tactical intelligence failure by the CIA even if, overall, the agency had done a good job of providing strategic warning to senior Bush officials that some kind of major al-Qaeda attack was being planned in the spring and summer of 2001.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration had to decide how to describe and prosecute the conflict with al-Qaeda. They proposed a hugely ambitious undertaking: a war not just against al-Qaeda but against what Bush termed "every terrorist group of global reach," which could also include other terrorist organizations across the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Backed by almost the entire American public, they quickly called for a war in which you were either with the US or against it, a war that could also be extended far beyond al-Qaeda's base in Afghanistan.

There was considerable consensus around the world that the United States had the right to respond militarily to the 9/11 attacks. A day after the attacks the United Nations passed a resolution affirming member nations' rights to self-defense and the same day NATO—for the first and only time—invoked Article 5, stipulating that an attack on the United States was also an attack on all nineteen members of the alliance.

A week after 9/11 Congress overwhelmingly passed an Authorization for Use of Military Force, which authorized military action against those who "committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States." This would become the legal basis for US military actions around the globe for more than two decades, not only in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, but also in lesser-known theaters of the war on terror that over time would come to include Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

Yet even in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, there were some calls for other approaches. Representative Barbara Lee, a Democrat from

California who was the lone vote against the Authorization for Use of Military Force, and American writer Susan Sontag raised concerns that a "war" on terrorism might pull the United States into a poorly defined and possibly endless military conflict. But Lee and Sontag were voicing views that were deeply unpopular at the time in the United States.

Despite the multiple intelligence warnings and the ample evidence that it was bin Laden's men who had carried out the 9/11 attacks, Bush and his war cabinet quickly settled on an alternative narrative about who was also purportedly responsible: Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Saddam certainly looked the part, like a baddie in a B movie with a luxuriant black mustache who was often filmed strutting around in a military uniform surrounded by loyal lackeys shouting, "Long live Saddam! Long live Saddam!" The fact that Saddam had used chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurdish civilians in 1988, killing thousands, and that he had lied to UN weapons inspectors about his weapons of mass destruction program during the 1990s made him an even more attractive fall guy for the 9/11 attacks.

Incompetence is generally a better explanation of most human activity than conspiracy, but the conspiracy theory that Saddam was "behind" 9/11 gripped the most senior officials in the Bush administration. Within hours of the attacks, at 2:40 p.m., Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked whether "to hit S. H. [Saddam Hussein] same time—not only UBL [bin Laden]," according to notes made by a deputy. The next day President Bush pulled aside his counterterrorism advisor, Richard Clarke, and asked him to investigate if Saddam was involved. Clarke said, "But al-Qaeda did this!" Bush replied, "I know, I know . . . but see if Saddam was involved."

The weekend after 9/11 Bush gathered his war cabinet at Camp David, the presidential retreat in the rural Maryland hills outside of Washington, DC. At the Camp David meeting, Wolfowitz, who passionately believed that the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, should be removed from power, said that he estimated there was a 10 to 50 percent chance that Saddam was involved in 9/11, and he made the case for striking Iraq. John McLaughlin, the CIA deputy director, argued there was no evidence that Iraq was involved. Bush said, "I believe Iraq was involved, but I'm not going to strike them now."

Ideas in bureaucracies don't just spontaneously appear out of nowhere: Why were some senior Bush officials so convinced that Iraq was behind 9/11? In part, because they wanted to believe it. They had long believed that President George H. W. Bush, the father of their current boss, had made a mistake during the Gulf War. The US had pushed Saddam's army out of Kuwait in 1991, but then the president didn't order his military to go all the way to Baghdad and overthrow Saddam. Key senior Bush officials were neoconservatives who believed that a more democratic Middle East would be more pro-America and more pro-Israel. To achieve this, in their minds, you needed to rid the region of dictators like Saddam. It turned out to be magical thinking.

Leading neoconservatives in the Bush administration, such as Wolfowitz, had no special knowledge of the Middle East nor of Iraq in particular, so they were easy marks for the crackpot theories of Laurie Mylroie, an academic who had taught at Harvard and had written her doctoral dissertation, in part, on Iraq. The 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center had launched Mylroie on an improbable quest to prove that Saddam's regime was the key source of anti-US terrorism. She laid out her case in *Study of Revenge: Saddam Hussein's Unfinished War Against America*, published in 2000 by the American Enterprise Institute, which was the Washington, DC, think tank most vigorously promoting neoconservative ideas about the necessity of regime change in the Arab world. In the acknowledgments of her book Mylroie wrote that Wolfowitz had "provided crucial support."

Like many conspiracy theorists, Mylroie had a seemingly encyclopedic knowledge of arcane elements of her chosen topic, knowledge that she would use to bury both her supporters and her critics in a mountain of "facts." But the truth was that six of the 1993 Trade Center bombers were tried in two separate trials in Manhattan, trials that each lasted for many months and produced a massive evidentiary record. No evidence emerged in these trials that Saddam's regime had anything to do with the bombing of the Trade Center.

Yet, even after those trials, Mylroie was undeterred. There is often an inverse relationship between the kookiness of someone's ideas and their actual influence on history; Mylroie was a prime example of this. The 9/11

attacks prompted the largest criminal investigation in US history, involving chasing down more than half a million leads and interviewing 167,000 people. That massive investigation unearthed no evidence of Iraqi involvement in 9/11, yet Mylroie and her fans in the upper echelons of the Bush administration were convinced that Saddam's regime was behind both the bombing of the Trade Center in 1993 and the 9/11 attacks.

After the 9/11 attacks CIA officers were regularly asked to brief Bush administration officials about Mylroie's theory that both the 9/11 operational commander, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and the mastermind of the first Trade Center bombing, Ramzi Yousef, were working for Saddam Hussein's regime. This belief was untethered to any facts, but the idea that al-Qaeda and Saddam were allied would exert a strong influence on American public opinion in the run-up to the Iraq War.

One narrative about responsibility for the 9/11 attacks that the Bush administration barely considered was the role that Saudi officials might have played in them. Fifteen of the nineteen 9/11 hijackers were Saudis, so a reasonable line of inquiry would have been to figure out if they had some kind of support network in the Saudi kingdom.

The Bush family had made much of their fortune in the oil business and, as a result, had close ties to the Saudi royal family. The Saudi ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, was so close to the Bush family that he could visit the president at the White House whenever he liked. An affable cigar smoker dressed in impeccably tailored European suits, Prince Bandar had trained as a fighter pilot in the US and served as ambassador in Washington for more than two decades. Bandar worked closely with both President George H. W. Bush and President George W. Bush. The tight relationship the Bushes enjoyed with Prince Bandar—so close he was nicknamed "Bandar Bush"—might help explain why the Bush administration, so quick to link Saddam to 9/11, was reluctant to examine any links that Saudi officials might have had in the attacks.

There was a puzzle about any possible official Saudi connection to 9/11; bin Laden's repeated publicly stated key goal was to expel all US troops from

the Saudi kingdom and he often condemned the Saudi royal family for not ruling according to his rigid Islamist beliefs. So, given bin Laden's intense animus against the Saudi establishment, why would al-Qaeda receive any support from elements within it?

To understand that you needed to go back to the Iranian revolution of 1979, when the shah of Iran, an oil-rich monarch supported by the United States, was overthrown by Shia Islamist revolutionaries. That same year a group of fanatical Sunni Islamists attacked and seized the Great Mosque of Mecca because, in their minds, the Saudi royal family was deviating from true Islam.

For the House of Saud these twin events in the same year raised the alarming possibility of an Islamist-led revolution in the kingdom. The royal family made the decision to double down on their longtime alliance with the Saudi fundamentalist religious establishment so they couldn't be outflanked by revolutionaries claiming the House of Saud was not ruling according to the most orthodox interpretations of Islam.

That meant giving the feared religious police in Saudi Arabia a free hand to enforce rigid gender segregation, closing movie theaters in the kingdom and clamping down on musical performances and art shows. It also resulted in the Saudis dramatically ramping up resources to export their version of puritanical Islam around the world.

This ultraorthodox proselytization effort was coordinated through the Saudi Ministry of Islamic Affairs and a web of related charities. Since Saudi Arabia was an absolute monarchy, these charities were not truly independent organizations and were closely allied with the government. Over time, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs and the charities it promoted became populated not only by devout Muslims but also by Islamists, some of whom were sympathetic to al-Qaeda. The Saudis spent an estimated $100 billion to spread their purist Sunni theology, which was intolerant of other Islamic sects such as the Shia, as well as other religions, around the world.

One of the Saudi proselytizing charities was Al-Haramain, which the US government determined had provided financial support to al-Qaeda members and supporters in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Indonesia, Kenya, Pakistan, and beyond. This financial support didn't pay for the 9/11 attacks themselves—which the 9/11 Commission estimated may have cost between $400,000 and $500,000 and the ultimate source of which was never

determined—but the commission noted that the wider al-Qaeda enterprise was funded to "the tune of approximately $30 million per year, by diversions of money from Islamic charities and the use of well-placed financial facilitators who gathered money from both witting and unwitting donors, primarily in the Gulf region."

When Prince Turki al-Faisal, the longtime director of Saudi intelligence, was interviewed by 9/11 Commission staffers in 2003, he admitted that his government had "a measure of naivete" about the charities based in the Saudi kingdom and what the money they collected was being used for. A year later the FBI and CIA came to a Top Secret conclusion, since declassified, that "the Saudi Government and many of its agencies have been infiltrated and exploited by individuals associated with or sympathetic to al-Qa'ida."

In its final report in 2004, the 9/11 Commission concluded that there was "no evidence that the Saudi government as an institution or senior Saudi officials individually funded [al-Qaeda]."

This confirmed the accepted narrative about the lack of official Saudi involvement in al-Qaeda that would remain firm throughout the Bush years and beyond. But two decades later, new evidence would complicate that picture. Lawsuits filed by the families of the 9/11 victims uncovered disturbing evidence that a Saudi official living in the United States had played a role in supporting the attacks. The Biden administration in 2021 also released around five thousand pages of the FBI's investigations into whether Saudi officials were involved in the 9/11 plot that uncovered additional evidence that this same Saudi official had provided important support to two of the 9/11 hijackers.

Before the 9/11 attacks, two of the hijackers who flew a passenger jet into the Pentagon—Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, both Saudis—were living in San Diego, where they received assistance finding housing from Omar al-Bayoumi, a perpetual Saudi student aged forty-three who took classes only intermittently. For more than two decades Bayoumi had been employed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's civil aviation agency, which made him a longtime employee of the Saudi government. His official job title was data processing technician, although there is little to suggest he did much of that. Instead, between January and May 2000 Bayoumi had frequent interactions with the two hijackers as they got settled in the United States.

In late September 2001 British police searched the residence of Bayoumi, who was then living in Birmingham, having left San Diego for the UK two months earlier. The police questioned Bayoumi about his dealings with the two hijackers. Bayoumi said that he had met them during a chance encounter at a halal café in Los Angeles. He had opened a bank account for his new friends and found them a place to stay in San Diego in his apartment building. Bayoumi said he helped the future hijackers because they didn't speak English. He even cosigned their lease. This was either extraordinarily elaborate hospitality for fellow Saudis who were new to the United States, or something else. Bayoumi himself stated that he couldn't recall helping anyone else in the same manner. After his encounters with the British police, Bayoumi returned to Saudi Arabia, where he kept a low profile.

For many years it was the FBI's official position that Bayoumi's support to the hijackers was unwitting of their plans to take part in a "martyrdom" operation in the US. (For operational security reasons al-Qaeda kept knowledge of the actual targets secret from most of the hijackers, and they were known only to the group's leaders, such as bin Laden and the four pilots of the 9/11 attacks.)

But with new evidence that emerged in 2024, it seems that Bayoumi was in on some aspects of the 9/11 plot. Seized by British police at Bayoumi's residence in Birmingham was a video of a visit he had made to the US Capitol in the summer of 1999. It was key evidence that was only unsealed by a US court two and a half decades later. Shot on a video camera before the era of the smartphone, this was not a typical tourist videotape; instead, it appeared to be a casing video.

On the tape Bayoumi addressed his "esteemed brothers," saying, "I will report to you in detail what is there," while also referring to "the plan" and "the demons in the White House." Bayoumi videotaped the entrances and exits of the Capitol, and the security posts around the building. As a passenger plane flew low overhead, Bayoumi explained on the tape that there was an airport near the Capitol, Reagan National Airport. While he was filming this videotape Bayoumi was accompanied by two Saudi government officials who worked for the Ministry of Islamic Affairs at the Saudi embassy in Washington.

When Bayoumi was filming the Capitol, it was just months after bin Laden and other key 9/11 planners had started selecting their targets in the

United States, which included the Capitol, the Pentagon, and the World Trade Center. The Capitol was the fourth target of the 9/11 hijackers and was only saved by the heroic passengers on United Flight 93 who rushed the hijackers, resulting in the plane crashing in Pennsylvania before it could hit its intended target.

Another telling piece of evidence was picked up during the raid of Bayoumi's British residence. This was a document consisting of a sketch of an airplane and handwritten equations written by Bayoumi that appeared to show calculations suitable for guiding a plane to follow a "straight, constant, descending flight path" once a landmark appeared on the horizon fifty to seventy miles away, according to an FBI aeronautical expert who deciphered the equations. The equations also seemed to align with the flight path of the hijacked passenger jet that crashed into the Pentagon.

In 2007 the FBI set in motion "Operation Encore" to reexamine the evidence they had already gathered and to reinterview key witnesses about Bayoumi's interactions with the two hijackers in San Diego. One piece of evidence was a videotape of a party that Bayoumi hosted for the hijackers and some two dozen other Muslim men in San Diego in February 2000. On the tape Bayoumi treated the hijackers as honored guests.

The FBI had found that Bayoumi received monthly stipends of $4,000 a month for unspecified work from a Saudi government contractor and up to $3,800 a month for "other allowances." Those payments significantly increased when the hijackers were living in San Diego and while Bayoumi was getting them settled there.

By 2017 the FBI suspected that Bayoumi was some kind of Saudi spy, working for the General Intelligence Presidency (the Saudi equivalent of the CIA), and was receiving a monthly stipend from none other than Prince Bandar. An FBI source said that Bayoumi obtained intelligence on members of the Saudi community in California that he would then forward to Prince Bandar. Another FBI document detailing reporting from an informant suggested, "there is a 50/50 chance [Bayoumi] had advanced knowledge the 9/11 attacks were to occur."

So, what did all this mean? Bayoumi, a Saudi government employee who may also have been an intelligence asset for the Saudis, appears to have cased the US Capitol for a potential attack by "the brothers" and made calculations that seemed to be for the glide path of a plane aiming to crash into a landmark. Bayoumi also made sure that the Pentagon hijackers were

well installed in San Diego before he skipped town, just two months before the 9/11 attacks, when he moved to the UK. This doesn't imply that the Saudi government was behind 9/11, but it does suggest the extent to which al-Qaeda sympathizers on the Saudi government payroll were part of the support structure for the terrorist group. Bayoumi has denied knowing anything about the 9/11 plot.

This raises an interesting question: What role did the type of fundamentalist Islam espoused by the Saudis play in the 9/11 attacks? After the attacks some commentators opined that Islam was inherently violent, while others countered that Islam was a religion of peace and bin Laden was an aberration. No religion, of course, has a monopoly on violence; Christian beliefs have fueled numerous crusades, pogroms, and wars over the centuries. Islamism—as distinct from Islam—is a politicized version of the religion that often advocates for a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam and the merger of mosque and state. Bin Laden and the 9/11 hijackers subscribed to these Islamist beliefs.

Bin Laden grew up in Saudi Arabia and his religiosity was striking from a young age: when he was a teenager he fasted twice a week. He also learned all six thousand verses of the Koran by heart. Bin Laden's religious beliefs only hardened when he fought in the holy war against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s. Out of that conflict emerged al-Qaeda, which bin Laden saw as his vehicle to bring true Islam to the world: "To lift the word of God, to make His religion victorious."

In a written statement provided to Al Jazeera TV after the 9/11 attacks, bin Laden explained that the war he had embarked on was "fundamentally religious." To justify his holy war with endorsement from the Koran—which for believers is not just a book but the Word of God—bin Laden frequently quoted the Koranic "sword verses": "Once the Sacred Months have passed, kill the polytheists wherever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and ambush them on every way," which urged unprovoked attacks on non-Muslims. (The verses had a caveat, "But if they repent, perform prayers, and pay alms-tax, then set them free." Bin Laden ignored this caveat.)

A colorful plastic-laminated card of Arabic script showing a Muslim cleric praying in a prison cell was a key to understanding why close to three thousand people lost their lives on the morning of September 11, 2001. This card was circulating among members of al-Qaeda in the years before the 9/11 attacks. The Arabic on the card read: "A *Fatwa* [religious ruling] of the captive Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman . . . Extract the most violent revenge . . . Cut off all relations with [the Americans, Christians, and Jews], tear them to pieces, destroy their economies, burn their corporations, destroy their peace, sink their ships, shoot down their planes and kill them on air, sea, and land." Sheikh Rahman, the "Blind Sheikh," who had been jailed for life for his role in terrorist conspiracies in New York City during the mid-1990s, signed the fatwa: "Your brother Abdel Rahman, from inside American prisons."

The Blind Sheikh, who had been unable to see since he was an infant, cut a distinctive figure, habitually wearing black shades and a red felt cap on his head that indicated he was a graduate of the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo, the apex of Sunni Islamic learning. The Blind Sheikh's fatwa was distributed by two of Rahman's sons at al-Qaeda's first and only press conference, where bin Laden spoke to some dozen Pakistani reporters in eastern Afghanistan in May 1998.

Bin Laden was not a religious scholar, so he had no authority to issue a fatwa, while the Blind Sheikh had a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence that enabled him to issue religious rulings. Rahman's fatwa to "kill them on air, sea, and land" gave al-Qaeda's leaders the religious blessing they felt they needed for the attacks they were planning against American civilian targets, such as the two US embassies in Africa that were bombed by al-Qaeda's terrorists only three months after their press conference in Afghanistan.

The 9/11 hijackers truly believed that they were soldiers in a righteous holy war. On the morning of 9/11, the lead hijacker, Mohamed Atta, left an Arabic document in his car at Boston's Logan International Airport titled "Manual for a Raid." The document contained more than fifty specific religious instructions about what the hijackers should do the night before the attacks and as they were carrying out the hijackings, admonishing them to "Be cheerful and confident because you carry out an action that God loves and approves. Then a day will come that you will spend with God's permission with the black-eyed [virgins] in paradise." So yes, the 9/11

attacks had something to do with Islam, albeit a far-from-mainstream interpretation of Islamic tenets.

The 9/11 attacks were also based on the flawed strategic reasoning of al-Qaeda's leader. Just as it would be hard to explain why the Germans instigated World War II without understanding the life experiences and ideology of Hitler, so too you couldn't explain 9/11 without understanding bin Laden's beliefs. Bin Laden believed that the thousands of US troops posted in Saudi Arabia during the 1990s contravened the words that the Prophet Muhammad is supposed to have said on his deathbed, "Let there be no two religions in Arabia." For bin Laden that meant expelling those "infidel" American soldiers, which he believed would only happen if enough military pressure was applied to the United States.

Bin Laden's analysis of US foreign policy was based on the US withdrawal from Lebanon in 1983, after Hezbollah's attack on the Marine barracks in Beirut that killed 241 American servicemen, and the US pullout from Somalia in 1993 after 18 US soldiers were killed in Mogadishu. Bin Laden told Al Jazeera in June 1999, "We think that the United States is very much weaker than Russia. Based on the reports we received from our brothers who participated in jihad in Somalia we learned that they saw the weakness, frailty and cowardice of US troops."

The attacks of 9/11 and the events that followed were the fruit of bin Laden's defective strategy. The US had few compelling interests in either Lebanon or Somalia, while it had great strategic interests in Manhattan and in the Washington, DC, region. But bin Laden's total dominance of al-Qaeda meant that his organization was a hostage to his fanciful strategic thinking, which was to attack targets in the United States so that the Americans would end their support for the Saudi royal family and Israel.

Bin Laden also had slavish followers who were willing to carry out his wildest schemes. They admired their leader because he was the scion of an enormously wealthy Saudi family who had given up everything to wage holy war. When you joined al-Qaeda you typically swore an oath of allegiance to bin Laden, who was the "emir," the prince of the group. The men who worked for al-Qaeda even had to request permission before they spoke to bin Laden, typically asking, "Dear Prince: May I speak?"

After 9/11 a narrative developed that bin Laden wasn't really the mastermind of al-Qaeda, but rather the real "brains" of the group was his deputy, the Egyptian surgeon Ayman al-Zawahiri. This was akin to claiming

that Joseph Goebbels was the “brains” of the Nazi Party. There was no evidence that bin Laden’s most important strategic decision to target the Americans had anything to do with Zawahiri, who was obsessed with overthrowing the Egyptian government, an issue that bin Laden cared little about and almost never mentioned in any of his voluminous public statements. It was only in the midsummer of 2001 that bin Laden finally told Zawahiri about the impending attacks on Washington and New York, which al-Qaeda’s senior leaders had been planning in detail for more than two years, according to the findings of the 9/11 Commission.

Zawahiri also had no role in the founding of al-Qaeda, which evolved from the base bin Laden had built in eastern Afghanistan in 1987 to fight the Soviets. Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi journalist who covered the young Saudi volunteers led by bin Laden in their fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan, considered Zawahiri to be an “insignificant doctor” located in neighboring Pakistan. Al-Qaeda was an armed organization, and Zawahiri wasn’t a warrior.

The co-founder of al-Qaeda, together with bin Laden, was Mohammed Atef, known as Abu Hafs, an Egyptian who had fought against the Soviets and was the military commander of the group. After al-Qaeda had bombed the two US embassies in Africa in August 1998, it produced a secret list of all its 170 members; Abu Hafs was described as the number two commander and Zawahiri wasn’t listed at all. It was Abu Hafs who had played the key role in the years of decision-making that led to 9/11, a role that was obscured by the fact that he was killed in an American airstrike in Kabul in mid-November 2001. After the death of Abu Hafs, Zawahiri started playing a prominent role in al-Qaeda as bin Laden’s new top deputy.

Bin Laden was one of those rare individuals who shifted the currents of history—though not, as it turned out, with the results he had hoped for. Without bin Laden there would have been no 9/11 attacks, nor the “global war on terror” that flowed from them.

The architect of 9/11 took great pride in the attacks; it was a tremendous victory, in his mind, against the American “infidels.” Bin Laden firmly believed that the United States was as weak as the Soviet Union had once been when it withdrew its troops from Afghanistan after occupying the

country during the 1980s. Because of this purported American weakness, bin Laden further believed that after the 9/11 attacks the United States would greatly reduce its presence in the Muslim world. In particular, the United States would pull all of its troops out of the Middle East, especially the thousands of US soldiers then based in his native Saudi Arabia, whom he saw as infidels trespassing on Islam's holiest land.

Bin Laden had been warned by some of his advisors that angering the American superpower might not be a good idea, but this self-assured son of a Saudi construction magnate ignored their advice and pushed forward with the attacks.

The 9/11 attacks—which demolished the World Trade Center and a wing of the Pentagon, killing almost three thousand people—were a great psychological shock to Americans. Protected by two oceans, the continental United States hadn't been attacked since the War of 1812, when the British had burned down the White House. The most lethal attacks on 9/11 took place in New York City, the media capital of the world, so they were arguably the most watched events in human history, not only live but also on endless loops replayed on television.

Surprise attacks on the United States have produced vigorous responses. Despite the strong isolationist sentiment of the era, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, it precipitated America's entrance into World War II. Similarly, the 9/11 attacks inaugurated a "war on terror" of global reach.

As a result, within months of 9/11, the US had destroyed the Taliban regime, which was protecting al-Qaeda and was the one government in the world that bin Laden and his followers believed was ruling in accordance with their ultra-Islamist ideals.

Bin Laden's overarching goal of removing infidels from the Middle East was exactly the opposite of what some Western commentators and writers argued bin Laden's motives for the 9/11 attacks were. They ascribed to bin Laden a diabolically clever plan to suck the United States into unwinnable wars in the Middle East. In fact, bin Laden had no idea that after 9/11 the United States would inflict considerable damage on al-Qaeda or that his followers would lose the best base they had ever had in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. Nor was bin Laden a clairvoyant who could have foreseen President Bush's war of choice in Iraq a year and a half after 9/11.

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CHAPTER TWO

TOPPLING THE TALIBAN

This crusade, this war on terrorism, is going to take a while. And the American people must be patient.

—PRESIDENT BUSH TO REPORTERS ON SEPTEMBER 16, 2001

To kill one person is to kill all of humanity.

—KORAN 5:32

On September 11, 2001, President Bush thought that the first plane hitting the World Trade Center was likely an accident; the second jet crashing into the Trade Center he felt was surely an attack, and the third plane, which plowed into the Pentagon, was a "declaration of war."

As Air Force One flew over the United States on 9/11, President Bush watched the TV images of people jumping to their deaths from the windows of the Trade Center. Bush vowed to find out who did this and "kick their ass."

The problem was that the Pentagon, which typically developed plans for all sorts of possible conflicts, had no plans whatsoever for an ass-kicking

ground war in Afghanistan, despite al-Qaeda's attacks on the US embassies in Africa and the USS *Cole*. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld even warned Bush that he would be underwhelmed by the war plans for Afghanistan that his top generals would present.

But the Pentagon *did* have war plans for Iraq. On the night of 9/11 Rumsfeld and his top deputy Paul Wolfowitz met with General Hugh Shelton, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Bush's most senior military advisor, in Rumsfeld's spacious office at the Pentagon. Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz tried to get Shelton to dust off the Pentagon's war plans for Iraq. "*We gotta get this guy"* was all Shelton was hearing from Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz—meaning Saddam, not bin Laden. General Shelton told them, "Not until I see some evidence that says Saddam was involved in this, and I don't think there is any. I think it will be al-Qaeda."

At 8:30 p.m. on 9/11, Bush addressed Americans from the Oval Office, telling his fellow citizens, "We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them." This was a novel doctrine that classified the Taliban and al-Qaeda equally as enemies.

At the White House the same night, Rumsfeld told Bush, "You know, we've got to do Iraq. There just aren't enough targets in Afghanistan. We need to bomb something else to prove that we're big and strong and not going to be pushed around by these kind of attacks."

The next morning at the White House at a National Security Council meeting chaired by Bush, Wolfowitz started pushing to attack Saddam Hussein's regime, backed up by Rumsfeld.

"Wait a minute," Bush said. "I didn't hear a word said about him being responsible for the attack."

Cofer Black, who ran the CIA's Counterterrorist Center, gathered his team on September 13. A big guy with the physique of a linebacker, Black had spent much of his career running CIA operations in the field in Africa and had a bombastic flair for the dramatic. Black believed that many CIA officers would die in the war that would surely come next. "It really pains me to tell you this," Black told his team, "but by the time this is all over, we will not all be here. If you remember one thing from this, I'd like it to be, we're the good guys and we're going to win."

A day later Rumsfeld met with his top generals and policy advisors at the Pentagon, telling them: "Don't over-elevate the importance of al-Qaeda." Since al-Qaeda was solely responsible for the 9/11 attacks this was a bizarre statement. Douglas Feith, one of Rumsfeld's top deputies, interpreted this statement to mean there were other terrorist groups that Rumsfeld might want to go to war with such as Lebanese Hezbollah or state sponsors of terrorism such as Iraq.

That same day Bush visited the ruins of the World Trade Center and addressed the rescue workers there. When one of them said that he could not hear what the president was saying, Bush made off-the-cuff remarks that resonated deeply with many Americans: "I can hear you. The rest of the world hears you. And the people who knocked these buildings down will hear from all of us soon." Bush's remarks were broadcast around the world and his robust rhetoric drove his ratings up to 90 percent favorable.

The following day, Saturday, September 15, Bush's war cabinet convened at the presidential retreat at Camp David in Maryland. Bush's top advisors were all over the map about what to do next. Again, Rumsfeld made it clear that he wanted to go to war in more countries than just Afghanistan, urging possible attacks against state sponsors of terrorism such as Iraq, Libya, and Sudan. Bush's secretary of state, Colin Powell, CIA Director George Tenet, and General Shelton all objected: Afghanistan was where the 9/11 attacks had been planned.

Wolfowitz again raised going to war against Iraq as he would at pretty much every meeting. Bush's national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, thought that Wolfowitz's constant harping on about Iraq was a huge distraction when there was so much else that needed to get done. Responding to the discussion of Iraq, at one point President Bush took General Shelton aside and said of Saddam Hussein, "We're going to get that guy out of there, but we're going to do it at a time and a place of our choosing."

General Shelton presented three military options to attack al-Qaeda; two were cruise missile strikes or manned bombers. This seemed like a redo of the strikes that the Clinton administration had launched against al-Qaeda in 1998 after the group's attacks on the two US embassies in Africa. Cruise missiles aimed at al-Qaeda's crude training camps in Afghanistan had achieved little more than to turn bin Laden into a global celebrity.

"We're not going to just pound sand," Bush told his war cabinet firmly.

Shelton presented a third option of cruise missile strikes, bombers, and "boots on the ground," but realistically those US soldiers would take a long time to deploy to remote, landlocked Afghanistan.

CIA Director Tenet had a different plan. He handed out thick packets of information titled "Destroying International Terrorism." It was far better thought out and on a much faster timeline than what the Pentagon was proposing. His plan would send a small group of CIA officers into Afghanistan, where they would link up with the leaders of anti-Taliban forces known as the Northern Alliance, who had tens of thousands of fighters under their command. Massoud was dead, but other leaders of the Northern Alliance were more than willing to fight on, such as Abdul Rashid Dostum, a feared Uzbek commander with a proclivity for torturing his opponents. Equipped with pallets of cash to buy the loyalty of local fighters, the CIA officers on the ground would call in massive US airstrikes against Taliban and al-Qaeda positions.

Tenet also suggested using armed drones to kill bin Laden's lieutenants. At the time armed drones had only been used in test flights in the US and never in combat. Tenet's plan was novel and potentially risky, but it was clear that the Pentagon had no immediate, workable plan.

On Monday, September 17, at the White House, Bush told his war cabinet, "I want the CIA to get in there first. I buy the idea of you going in first and preparing a way for the military." The same day President Bush also authorized lethal action against al-Qaeda, turning the CIA into a paramilitary organization with a focus on killing terrorists.

Three days earlier at CIA headquarters, Cofer Black met with Gary Schroen, a fifty-nine-year-old CIA officer who was about to hit the mandatory retirement age at the agency. Schroen—who spoke fluent Farsi, which is closely related to the Afghan language Dari—had taken a trip into Afghanistan in 1996 to meet with Massoud to discuss efforts to capture bin Laden and they had had a good relationship. Schroen was worried now that he might have to miss out on the action because of his impending retirement. Instead, Black asked him, "Will you take the first team in?" Schroen thought, "Oh, God. Everybody in the United States wants to do this and they're giving me the job!"

Before they left, Schroen—whose rank at the CIA was equivalent to that of a general—and his team of six agency officers met with Black for their final marching orders. Black told them: "When you capture those guys, I

want you to cut their heads off. And the lieutenants, I want you to put their heads on pikes and display them and photograph them. And bin Laden, I want you to take his head and put it on dry ice in a box and ship it back, so I can take it to the president to see it."

"Well, that's the clearest orders I've ever received here in the CIA," Schroen said. "Okay, maybe we could cut off their heads, maybe. I doubt it, but maybe we could. We can certainly make pikes out in the field. That's not hard. But where am I going to find dry ice in Afghanistan?"

"Oh, get the hell out of here. Go kill bin Laden!" Black replied.

Just over a week after the 9/11 attacks, Schroen and his team left Washington for the trip to Uzbekistan, Afghanistan's northern neighbor. A CIA helicopter then flew them into Afghanistan. The Pentagon was still mired in its pre-9/11 posture of taking as few risks as possible, dictating that a combat search and rescue team needed to be available if anything went wrong on a mission: since that wasn't possible, there were no American soldiers with Schroen and his team. To smooth the alliances that they hoped to forge with Northern Alliance commanders, Schroen and his team carried millions of dollars in cash. When they arrived in Afghanistan the CIA officers literally slept on piles of dollar bills.

On September 20, President Bush gave a speech to Congress that would define the course of American foreign policy for many years to come, laying down the doctrines of what he described as the "war on terror." Bush said, "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaeda but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated." This was a formulation for a conflict that could go on anywhere indefinitely.

Then Bush explained why he believed the United States was attacked on 9/11: "Why do they hate us? They hate our freedoms—our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with one another." This was false. By now bin Laden had given several interviews and had issued many statements about why he had launched a war against the United States, none of which mentioned the values described by Bush, but rather bin Laden had focused on attacking American foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly US support for Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Bush then claimed that al-Qaeda followed in the footsteps of "Nazism and totalitarianism." But the threat posed by al-Qaeda was nothing like that

of the Nazis, who instigated World War II, while the victims of Mao's and Stalin's brutal rule numbered in the tens of millions. Yet before an audience of eighty-two million Americans watching the speech on live TV, President Bush rhetorically raised al-Qaeda to the status of an existential threat to the United States. As a result of this purportedly existential threat Bush laid down an ultimatum, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." Bush could have instead said: "If you are against the terrorists, you are with us," which might have gained the Americans more friends in the Muslim world.

The day after Bush's speech to Congress, a Voice of America radio reporter interviewed the reclusive Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who rejected Bush's call to side with the United States and give up bin Laden, saying, "If we did, it means we are not Muslims . . . that Islam is finished." For Mullah Omar—who styled himself grandiosely as the "Commander of the Faithful"—the stakes for Islam were also existential.

Afghanistan's much larger and nuclear-armed neighbor Pakistan, however, did get Bush's message. The Pakistani military had supported the Taliban for years, and Pakistan was one of only three countries that had recognized the movement of religious warriors before 9/11. The US now needed a lot from Pakistan. The best way to deploy large numbers of American troops into landlocked Afghanistan was from US warships cruising in the Arabian Sea. Those troops would have to fly over Balochistan, a Pakistani province bordering Iran, to get to southern Afghanistan. So, Bush officials wanted overflight rights. The Americans also wanted the Pakistanis to arrest any al-Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan, and wanted to use Shamsi Airfield in the middle of the Balochi desert to secretly launch drones and bombers into Afghanistan against Taliban and al-Qaeda targets.

The Pakistanis readily agreed to this laundry list; they didn't have much choice since the Americans were clearly going to war, even if in many quarters of Pakistan bin Laden was still regarded as a hero for having "stood up" to the Americans. Over time the Pakistanis would revert to providing support to the Taliban, but that was years in the future.

Before 9/11 Bush's war cabinet had waved away the CIA assessments of a possible large-scale al-Qaeda attack. They now went into overdrive in the opposite direction. Every nugget of "intel"—no matter how "raw" or insubstantial—that indicated some possible threat was part of the president's daily briefing at the White House at 7 a.m. The CIA compiled a daily multipage document known as the "Threat Matrix" that went to President Bush every day until 2004. The Bush White House was now flooded with threat warnings, many of which were likely bogus, but no one wanted to be responsible for overlooking that one piece of intelligence that could have prevented another attack. And there were real fears at the White House of a "second wave" of attacks.

Those fears were greatly compounded by the anthrax attacks in the United States. On October 5 an editor at the *National Enquirer* in Florida died after opening an anthrax-laced letter. Similar letters containing anthrax were sent to members of Congress and major media outlets, killing a total of five people. The anthrax attacks had a large impact on President Bush. They seemed to indicate that terrorists were prepared to deploy weapons of mass destruction in the United States. (Years later, the FBI would determine that Bruce E. Ivins, a biological weapons researcher with idiosyncratic beliefs working for the US government, was responsible for the anthrax attacks.)

The second CIA team into Afghanistan was Team Alpha, which landed by helicopter on October 15 in a region of northern Afghanistan where the Uzbek commander Abdul Rashid Dostum's forces were concentrated. They came bearing gifts. Someone at the CIA had done their homework; General Dostum's care package included ten bottles of premium Russian vodka as the general had a taste for it, having once allied himself with Soviet forces in Afghanistan. A key member of the CIA team was David Tyson, an agency officer who spoke fluent Uzbek, much to the amazement of Dostum's men, most of whom had never met an American, let alone one who could joke around in their own language.

The first US soldiers arrived in Afghanistan four days later, on October 19—a dozen Green Berets from 5th Special Forces Group—known in the US Army as "The Legion," led by thirty-one-year-old Captain Mark

Nutsch. The Special Forces Group met up with Dostum's Uzbek horsemen led by General Dostum himself, riding a white horse. With the three hundred men he commanded, General Dostum aimed, as did the Special Forces, to capture Mazar-i-Sharif, the key city in northern Afghanistan, which would open up the way to attack Kabul in central Afghanistan.

So that the Special Forces soldiers could ride into battle alongside them, Dostum's men supplied them with horses, which to American eyes were more like large donkeys and very ornery. Captain Nutsch had been a rodeo star in his home state of Kansas but others on the team were neophyte horsemen who found riding the bucking broncos on Afghan saddles tough going. Nutsch requested airdrops of Western saddles and bundles of hay, but the US military wasn't used to providing matériel for horsemen. The request eventually landed on Rumsfeld's desk, who asked, "What the hell is this about?" General Tommy Franks, the overall commander of the Afghan War, explained, "They're on wooden saddles and it really hurts them, and the horses are hungry." Captain Nutsch was in fact leading the first American cavalry patrol since World War II.

The Green Berets started calling in precision bombing raids by B-52s against Taliban targets, marking them for attack with a special laser that "painted" the targets with a beam the warplanes could lock onto. The bombs decimated the Taliban's front lines. Dostum's militiamen started calling the Americans "avenging angels with swords of lightning," referring to an old Uzbek folk tale. Other Afghan militia leaders started to join Dostum's caravan once they saw the damage that he and his American friends were inflicting on the Taliban.

Few Western journalists were on the ground in Afghanistan and the battles being fought there were far out of sight of the media. Reporters started invoking Vietnam; *New York Times* reporter R. W. Apple Jr. wrote a story headlined "A Military Quagmire Remembered: Afghanistan as Vietnam."

After only a week on the ground a message was relayed to Nutsch's team from the Pentagon, the gist of which was: "What the hell are you guys doing?" Rumsfeld, a hypercompetitive former wrestler in college, was annoyed that the CIA was "first in" to Afghanistan. Now he wanted to know what his Green Berets were accomplishing.

Captain Nutsch dashed off a reply: "Frankly, I am surprised that we haven't been slaughtered. . . . We killed the bastards by the bushel full

today, and we'll get more tomorrow. The team sends its regards."

Within twenty-four hours President Bush was reading Captain Nutsch's message.

On November 9, Mazar-i-Sharif fell to General Dostum's men and the US Special Forces team. They were greeted as liberators; the streets of the city were thronged with cheering men, some of whom had just shaved off their Taliban-mandated beards.

Gary Schroen, who was leading the CIA teams in northern Afghanistan, rotated out of Afghanistan at the end of October as he had now hit the mandatory retirement age of sixty. He was replaced by Gary Berntsen, who also spoke Farsi. Berntsen started calling in US airstrikes on the Taliban front lines north of Kabul.

On November 13 Kabul fell to the Northern Alliance. That evening, bin Laden's number two, Abu Hafs, was killed in a US airstrike in Kabul. The death of al-Qaeda's military commander was a significant loss. Abu Hafs was bin Laden's chief executive officer and had founded al-Qaeda with him back in the late 1980s. Now bin Laden himself was on the run, heading toward the city of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and, from there, up into the mountains along the border with Pakistan.

During the fall of 2001 the real stronghold of Taliban power was in southern Afghanistan, which is majority Pashtun, the same ethnic group that made up the Taliban leadership. The Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, had made the key southern city of Kandahar his de facto capital and he rarely traveled to Kabul. That meant that a whole separate war would have to be fought in the south, in parallel to the war that was being fought in northern Afghanistan.

Overseeing the war in southern Afghanistan for the CIA was Pakistan station chief, Robert "Bob" Grenier. Cerebral and well-dressed, Grenier was not a glad-handing, back-slapping kind of guy like many of the other officers on the operations side of the agency. For his first move Grenier opted for something straight out of an old-school agency playbook, and that was to create splits in the Taliban leadership or foment a coup against Mullah Omar. On 9/11 Grenier called Mullah Osmani, the number two Taliban leader, on his satellite phone. Grenier knew that Mullah Osmani had

long despised bin Laden. Three days later the CIA station chief in his well-cut tweed blazer and the Taliban leader in his turban made an odd couple as they sat down together in a hotel in Quetta, Pakistan, just over the border from Kandahar.

Mullah Osmani opened. “I’m speaking for the Taliban leadership,” he said. “We don’t particularly like bin Laden. Obviously, bin Laden now has created a great problem for us. We’re concerned about what’s going to happen.” “Well, great!” Grenier thought, but Mullah Osmani offered no practical steps for how to get bin Laden into American hands.

“We can send in commandos, capture him, take him off your hands, and nobody need be the wiser and the whole problem goes away,” Grenier offered. “And you can go on ruling Afghanistan in whatever way you like.”

Mullah Osmani went back to Kandahar, where he made no progress on the bin Laden issue. Grenier met him again in Quetta on October 2 and suggested that Mullah Osmani mount a coup against Mullah Omar, giving him a play-by-play of how to do it, including seizing the Taliban’s radio station, Radio Shariat. Mullah Osmani seemed to mull this idea over in his mind seriously, but in the end, he didn’t go through with it.

On the night of October 7, the US began its air war against the Taliban. President Bush announced the beginning of the campaign from the White House: “Today we focus on Afghanistan, but the battle is broader. Every nation has a choice to make. In this conflict, there is no neutral ground. If any government sponsors the outlaws and killers of innocents, they have become outlaws and murderers, themselves. And they will take that lonely path at their own peril.” Less than a month after 9/11 President Bush was publicly laying out his rationale for the coming attack on Iraq.

The same day, in the city of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, Mullah Omar told a reporter for an Arabic-language magazine that he didn’t believe bin Laden was the architect of the 9/11 attacks, asserting instead a bonkers conspiracy theory: “The investigation has not considered the absence on the day of the incident of four thousand Jews who worked at the World Trade Center.”

And also on the same day, bin Laden appeared on TV news networks around the globe, gloating about the 9/11 attacks: “There is America, full of

fear from its north to its south, from its west to its east. Thank God for that," he said. "What America tastes now, is something insignificant compared to what we have tasted for scores of years. Our nation [the Islamic world] has tasted this degradation for more than eighty years."

While not exactly taking credit for the attacks, which would have undercut the Taliban's position that he wasn't responsible for them, bin Laden did provide a rationale for them that was silent about the American cultural "freedoms" that President Bush had recently claimed was their motivation. Instead, bin Laden referred to the eight decades of Western domination of the Middle East that had followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I.

A closely held secret at the time was the fact that the first night of the war in Afghanistan also inaugurated the use of the armed drones that CIA Director Tenet had suggested three weeks earlier at Camp David. In June 2001 at the China Lake Naval Air Weapons Station in California's Western Mojave Desert, the CIA had constructed a crude replica of bin Laden's residence located outside Kandahar. Using a Predator drone armed with a missile the agency destroyed the replica house.

Now the Predator was going to be used to hunt and kill. At CIA headquarters on October 7, a group of CIA officials and a US Air Force officer were watching a live video feed from a Predator armed with Hellfire missiles that was circling over Mullah Omar's compound near Kandahar. Leaving the compound late at night were some SUV vehicles, which indicated that someone of importance was likely inside; perhaps even Mullah Omar himself. The convoy stopped at another compound that looked like it might contain a mosque. General Tommy Franks had been explicitly ordered by President Bush that mosques were off-limits for any strike; this war was not a war against Islam.

Instead, the decision was made to strike a security vehicle that was slightly separated from the main convoy. The Predator fired a Hellfire missile into the vehicle, destroying it. An airman watching the video feed remarked, "We have flippers." Flippers meant that dead bodies were seen flipping out of the vehicle.

Mullah Omar was not among the dead. On one level the strike was a bust, but now the Predator drone had been blooded in combat for the first time. Watching this unfold on a live video feed at CIA headquarters, Air Force Major Mark Cooter reflected, "The face of aerial warfare had just changed forever." This would prove to be a shrewd assessment.

In addition to trying to foment a coup against Mullah Omar, Grenier also placed some bets on a handful of Pashtun warlords and politicians who he believed might have a chance of gathering opposition forces against the Taliban among the Pashtuns. One of them was Abdul Haq, whom the CIA had supported during the anti-Soviet jihad. Haq traveled into Afghanistan with a small group of supporters on October 23. Three days later the Taliban strung him up on a tree and hanged him.

Grenier would have more luck with Hamid Karzai, a slight Afghan with a regal manner from a prominent Pashtun family. A former diplomat who spoke multiple languages well, including English, Karzai didn't look like the kind of warlord who might overthrow the Taliban, but Karzai's father had been killed by the Taliban in 1999, and he wanted to avenge his death. On 9/11 Karzai was living in Pakistan and he saw an opportunity; he thought that the Taliban would soon be ejected from power by the powerful Americans, and he wanted to be on Team USA.

Grenier assigned Greg Vogle, a tough CIA paramilitary officer, to be Karzai's minder. The Afghan tribesmen hanging around Karzai started calling Vogle "George Bush." With his fulsome handlebar mustache Vogle didn't look a bit like President Bush, but still, it seemed like a good sign.

The CIA had made inquiries about Karzai with the key commanders of the Northern Alliance who were from the Tajik and Uzbek ethnic minority groups. All of them said that Karzai was the only credible Pashtun from the south who had articulated a vision for a genuine Afghan nation-state.

CIA officer Duane Evans was also assigned to support Karzai. One evening over dinner Evans told Karzai it was important that he didn't get himself killed, given the central role he could play in Afghanistan's future. Karzai replied, "My life is unimportant. It doesn't matter if I live or die. The only thing that matters is if Afghanistan becomes free of the Taliban."

True to his word, the day after the Americans started bombing Taliban positions on October 7, Karzai and three companions made the risky journey by motorbike into southern Afghanistan, the heart of Taliban country.

At first it did not go well. Karzai headed to Uruzgan Province, around one hundred miles north of Kandahar, where he gathered some 120 fighters, but the Taliban kept attacking his men. Karzai urgently requested weapons from the CIA. On October 30, the agency made a supply drop of light machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades. But under increasing pressure from the Taliban, Karzai asked that he be airlifted to Pakistan. Vogle, the CIA officer, arranged for a helicopter to extract Karzai to Pakistan on November 4.

Two days later, Rumsfeld announced at a televised press conference that Karzai had been pulled out of Afghanistan by US forces to go to Pakistan for "consultations," and that they would soon return Karzai to Afghanistan. CIA officer Duane Evans was floored; the fact that the agency had extracted Karzai from Afghanistan was highly sensitive information, as was the plan to reinsert him.

On November 14, Karzai returned to Uruzgan accompanied by a Special Forces team led by thirty-year-old Captain Jason Amerine as well as Vogle. Karzai told Amerine he had a plan: first build a Pashtun guerrilla army effectively from scratch, then seize Uruzgan's provincial capital, Tarin Kowt, and then build an even larger Pashtun army to seize Kandahar. Karzai truly believed that if the Americans could provide him a degree of security, the Pashtun tribes would rise up against the Taliban. This was a classic Special Forces mission: embedding a small group of Green Berets with indigenous forces to help them build up a capable fighting force.

Amerine and Vogle arranged for a weapons drop into Uruzgan. As soon as the weapons arrived, tribesmen supportive of Karzai started coming out of the hills to join his growing army of some two hundred men. On November 16 Karzai's supporters rose up against the Taliban and hanged the mayor of Tarin Kowt. Captain Amerine knew that this would likely provoke a Taliban counterattack. A day later Karzai headed into Tarin Kowt and set up shop in the governor's mansion, where he met with local Pashtun tribal leaders, who told Karzai a column of vehicles containing hundreds of Taliban fighters was approaching from Kandahar.

Around three in the morning American F-18s spotted a small convoy of trucks heading toward Tarin Kowt.

"Are they cleared to engage?" Captain Amerine's air combat controller asked.

Amerine's team was suddenly quiet.

"Smoke 'em!" Amerine ordered, then thought to himself, "Where did that come from? 'Smoke 'em': I don't say shit like that."

The F-18s wiped out the whole convoy, although it turned out to be only the tail end of a much larger column of vehicles that continued to drive toward Tarin Kowt.

Under cover of the darkness before dawn, Amerine maneuvered onto an elevated ridgeline. With a better view of the approaching Taliban convoy, he called in as many airstrikes as he could. After the warplanes had dropped all their bombs, some flew in low to strafe the Taliban convoy with their machine guns. Several hours later the battle was over, and the Taliban were either annihilated or in full retreat. For Karzai, the battle of Tarin Kowt was a victory that transformed him from an ambitious Pashtun politician into an established military leader. For Mullah Omar the defeat of his forces at Tarin Kowt was a disaster. The Taliban leader finally abandoned Kandahar; meanwhile, Taliban commanders began negotiations about surrendering to Karzai.

On November 25 Marine Brigadier General Jim Mattis led an assault deep into southern Afghanistan. The Marines who deployed for the assault were stationed on warships in the Arabian Sea cruising four hundred miles to the south of their objective, an airfield not far from Kandahar. This was the farthest aerial assault from ships in American military history. The movement of a thousand Marines required the tricky nighttime refueling of gunships and helicopters in the air. The Marines successfully secured the airfield. Karzai read about this news in the online version of the *New York Times.* Elated, he shouted to his troops: "The Marines are in southern Afghanistan. We've won!"

Days after Kabul fell, Ambassador James Dobbins, a veteran American diplomat who specialized in managing peacekeeping missions in troubled places such as Bosnia and Haiti, flew into Afghanistan with Dr. Abdullah

Abdullah, one of the leaders of the Northern Alliance. Dr. Abdullah surprised Dobbins by saying, “Some of us have concluded that the next leader of Afghanistan can’t be a non-Pashtun and can’t be somebody from the Northern Alliance. So, we’re prepared to accept somebody who is a Pashtun and who comes from outside our circle.”

“Did you have in mind the former king?” Dobbins asked. The former king of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah, had long lived in exile in Rome and was popular among ordinary Afghans.

“No, the former king’s a very respectable figure, and maybe he can play some ceremonial role, but he’s really old,” Dr. Abdullah replied. “We need somebody who’s younger, more vigorous, and actually capable of running a government.”

“Well, do you have one in mind?” Dobbins asked.

“Hamid Karzai would be acceptable,” Dr. Abdullah said.

Dobbins already knew that Karzai would also be acceptable to Pakistan’s ISI, the powerful military intelligence agency that effectively ran Pakistan. Dobbins would soon find out that other key regional players such as India, Iran, and Russia were also in favor of Karzai to lead Afghanistan.

On November 27, leading Afghan commanders and politicians gathered in Bonn, Germany, to choose an interim government and its new leader. Karzai was clearly the favorite, but a formal vote was needed.

The same day that the Afghan delegates were meeting in Bonn, General Franks received an unexpected call from Rumsfeld. President Bush “wants us to look at options for Iraq,” Rumsfeld said. “What is the status of your planning?”

Franks said, “We have OPLAN 1003,” the Pentagon’s preexisting war plans for Iraq.

Rumsfeld asked the general if he thought that plan was “dated.”

Franks said he believed that the plan was indeed dated since it called for half a million US troops to invade Iraq. Given advances in American military technology over the past two decades this now seemed like overkill.

Rumsfeld asked if he could see an updated Iraq war plan by the following week. Franks said he would get on it.

Karzai gathered additional forces for the final push on Kandahar. They arrived just outside the city on December 5, together with Amerine's Special Forces team, to begin discussions of a Taliban surrender agreement. The war was for all intents and purposes over, but some American officers who outranked Captain Amerine had recently arrived in Afghanistan to oversee the ground war and were still calling in airstrikes.

Suddenly, there was a huge explosion; a bomb landed in the middle of Amerine's team and left a trail of vaporized and wounded bodies. It looked like an enemy attack. Greg Vogle, the CIA officer who had earlier arranged for Karzai to be extracted to Pakistan, threw himself on top of the Afghan leader.

The bomb that dropped was two thousand pounds, a massive amount of explosives, the size of a small car. The US Air Force attack controller who had called in the strike was using an unfamiliar targeting device and had mistakenly punched in the coordinates of Amerine's team. Master Sergeant Jefferson "J.D." Davis, Staff Sergeant Brian Cody Prosser, and Sergeant First Class Daniel Petithory were all instantly killed and the other members of the team were all wounded.

The first American military fatalities of the Afghan War were killed by their own side.

Karzai was rushed away from the scene of the American "friendly-fire" bombing. He soon received a call from a BBC correspondent who told him he had just been chosen to be the new leader of Afghanistan. Shortly afterward, Taliban cabinet ministers met with Karzai to offer their surrender.

It all seemed so easy. The United States overthrew the Taliban in just three months. The Americans did it with 110 CIA officers on the ground along with 316 Special Forces and scores of Delta Force and SEAL Team Six operators fighting alongside their Afghan allies, all backed by considerable American airpower. There also had been few American fatalities. CIA officer Johnny "Mike" Spann was killed in a Taliban prison uprising in northern Afghanistan, and three US Green Berets were killed in the friendly fire incident outside Kandahar.

By the time the Taliban surrendered, the Americans had killed more of their own soldiers than had the Taliban and al-Qaeda combined.

Members of bin Laden's inner circle estimated that 1,600 out of the 1,900 Arab fighters then living in Afghanistan were either killed or taken

prisoner, while the CIA estimated that 5,000 to 10,000 Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters were killed. The CIA and US Special Forces together with their Afghan allies destroyed the Taliban regime and evicted al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, a notable victory in the history of unconventional warfare.

The Americans seemed to have achieved near omnipotence. But in victory sometimes the seeds of defeat can also be planted. Key Taliban commanders went to ground, biding their time to fight another day, while bin Laden and other leaders of al-Qaeda would slip away during the battle of Tora Bora, laying the groundwork for a revival of al-Qaeda's fortunes in the years ahead.

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CHAPTER THREE

TORA BORA

We never know when war will strike. We must know our way out of the mountains.

—OSAMA BIN LADEN'S ADVICE TO HIS SONS IN THE YEARS BEFORE 9/11

Three months after his great victory on 9/11, Osama bin Laden believed that death was closing in.

Al-Qaeda's leader was so worried that in mid-December 2001, he drafted his will. He wrote what read like a goodbye letter to his sixteen children, telling them he wished he'd spent more time with them. "Forgive me," he wrote, "because I have given you only a little of my time since I answered the call to holy war." Al-Qaeda's leader then took the extraordinary step of warning his children "not to work with al-Qaeda," the organization that had been his life's work. Bin Laden felt he'd failed.

In the first week of December 2001 bin Laden realized that al-Qaeda was close to obliteration. He and hundreds of his men were hiding in caves burrowed deep in an area known as Tora Bora in the Spīn Ghar mountains in eastern Afghanistan, enduring constant bombing raids by the Americans. One warplane dropped a "daisy cutter" bomb near their positions; the

15,000-pound bomb was the most lethal nonnuclear device in the US Air Force's inventory.

The Spīn Ghar mountains rise to 14,000 feet along the Pakistani border. It was the middle of winter, snow was packed deep on the ground, and temperatures were well below freezing. In the caves of Tora Bora, al-Qaeda's foot soldiers were growing increasingly desperate. There was no water to drink because it was frozen. A doctor treating the wounded performed a finger amputation using a pair of scissors. It was Ramadan, and bin Laden's followers were fasting during the day and wolfing down their sparse rations only after the sun had set.

Bin Laden and his men were in Tora Bora to fight what they believed would be their last stand. The Americans and their Afghan allies had seized the capital, Kabul, three weeks earlier, and the Taliban, who had ruled over Afghanistan for the past several years, were close to being defeated.

That bin Laden had chosen Tora Bora for his showdown with the Americans wasn't surprising; he knew these mountains well from his time crossing back and forth over the Afghanistan–Pakistan border when he was fighting the Soviets occupying Afghanistan during the 1980s. As a young man bin Laden had driven bulldozers for his family's giant construction business; in 1987 he had carved a crude road to transport his fighters across the Pakistan border, through the mountains around Tora Bora into eastern Afghanistan.

When bin Laden had returned in 1996 to Afghanistan, he lived from time to time in a small house in Tora Bora, from which he would take his sons on long hikes through the mountains. "My brothers and I all loathed these grueling treks," bin Laden's son Omar recalled, although they "seemed the most pleasant of outings to our father." Bin Laden loved the cold alpine air, even if his family wasn't thrilled to be living in a ramshackle house with no heating in the middle of a remote mountain range.

Yet, for all his advantageous knowledge of the local terrain, in early December 2001 bin Laden knew that his small army had few good options left. In addition to the rain of American bombs now falling on his followers, hundreds of Afghan fighters led by local warlords allied with the Americans were slowly making their way up into Tora Bora. Using a handheld radio, bin Laden told his followers, "I am sorry for getting you involved in this battle; if you can no longer resist, you may surrender with my blessing."

Bin Laden was overestimating the competence of his American enemies. When they had the leader of al-Qaeda and many of his followers bottled up in a relatively small area in Tora Bora, President Bush and his war cabinet threw away their best chance to capture or kill bin Laden. Some of them had already turned their attention to Iraq, while the Pentagon was reluctant to take the risks that came with putting more American boots on the ground in Tora Bora.

At the end of November 2001, Henry "Hank" Crumpton, a CIA officer who was managing the agency's Afghan operations, had briefed President Bush and Vice President Cheney at the White House about where bin Laden might go to ground. Crumpton, whose father was a surveyor, favored maps for his briefings with the president. Crumpton unfurled a map of the Afghanistan–Pakistan border regions, laid it on the floor of the Oval Office, and squatted down between Bush and Cheney to show them: right across the border from eastern Afghanistan, where bin Laden was believed to be hiding, were the largely ungoverned tribal regions of Pakistan.

"Is there any way we can seal this border?" Bush asked.

"You cannot expect the Pakistanis to seal that border. That is impossible," Crumpton replied. "You can't even expect the US to be able to seal the border with Mexico."

"Where is bin Laden now?" Bush asked.

"We believe he is headed to Tora Bora," Crumpton replied, pointing to the map, "if not already there."

That the US was losing its last best chance to bring bin Laden to justice was obvious to Gary Berntsen, who was leading the CIA's operations on the ground in Afghanistan. Berntsen, a hard-charging CIA officer, fired off a cable in early December to CIA headquarters. Berntsen requested hundreds of elite US Army Rangers to deploy to Tora Bora, adding, "We need to kill this baby in its crib."

By early December, Crumpton, who was Berntsen's boss back at CIA headquarters, was also certain that bin Laden was hiding in Tora Bora. He called the overall commander of the Afghan War, General Tommy Franks, to request additional soldiers to cut off his avenues of escape. Franks pushed back. He argued that the small US military footprint in Afghanistan

had proved very effective at defeating the Taliban. But fighting al-Qaeda in Tora Bora was not the same as overthrowing the Taliban, as Crumpton pointed out. “This was different, this was a high mountain stronghold heavily defended. We could not wait for weeks, even many days, because al-Qaeda, bin Laden in particular, would escape to Pakistan.”

General Franks also believed that sending more US soldiers to Afghanistan would repeat the Soviets’ military failure there during the 1980s. But deploying a few hundred American soldiers to try to entrap the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks in a remote region of eastern Afghanistan was hardly going to replicate the Soviet invasion and occupation of the country.

General Franks’s top deputy, Lieutenant General Michael DeLong, worried that putting US troops into the Tora Bora region might provoke a tribal revolt. DeLong later told congressional staffers investigating the Tora Bora battle: “We wanted to create a stable country and that was more important than going after bin Laden at the time.” Two and a half months after the 9/11 attacks—the largest mass murder in American history—the US generals in charge of the Afghan War had bigger and far more hypothetical concerns than the very real issue of hunting down the man who had orchestrated those murders. This muddled strategic thinking would have baffled the American public—had they known about it.

The confusion about the objectives of the Afghan War could be seen during the battle of Tora Bora. If President Bush had announced that the sole goal of the war was to destroy al-Qaeda, the Pentagon and senior Bush administration officials would surely have put much more emphasis on attacking bin Laden and the hundreds of his followers at Tora Bora. But Bush also emphasized that the Taliban needed to be removed from power because they had harbored al-Qaeda and were therefore culpable—even though there was no Taliban involvement in the 9/11 attacks—so overthrowing the Taliban rather than destroying al-Qaeda became the key objective of the US military.

General Franks later said that he didn’t send more US troops to Tora Bora because the intelligence that he had access to was unclear about whether al-Qaeda’s leader was there. This was false. Lieutenant General DeLong wrote in his memoir that he and his superiors were certain that bin Laden was in Tora Bora: “We were hot on Osama bin Laden’s trail. He was definitely there when we hit the [Tora Bora] caves. Every day during the

bombing, [Secretary of Defense Donald] Rumsfeld asked me, 'Did we get him? Did we get him?' "

The intelligence that al-Qaeda's leader was in Tora Bora was overwhelming. On December 10 the US picked up an intercept from Tora Bora that said, "Father [bin Laden] is trying to break through the siege line." Another intercept was soon picked up of bin Laden himself talking on his radio, and it appeared to locate bin Laden's position precisely, according to the US special operations forces commander on the ground, Major Tom Greer. A US Special Operations Command history confirmed that bin Laden was at Tora Bora, finding that "all source reporting corroborated his presence on several days from 9–14 December."

Berntsen said his team recovered a radio from a dead al-Qaeda fighter, which proved to be an intelligence jackpot: "We listened to bin Laden for several days using that radio, listening to his communications among him and his men. We listened to him apologize to them for having led them into this trap." The CIA's top Arabic linguist, who had been following bin Laden for years, told Berntsen: "It's him, I know him, I know his voice. I know his voice like I know yours: it's him!"

The information that bin Laden was at Tora Bora wasn't just known to the American intelligence community, it was also publicly discussed by senior Bush administration officials. On December 9, 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney appeared on NBC's *Meet the Press*, saying that "the preponderance of the reporting at this point" was that bin Laden was in Tora Bora. One day later, Paul Wolfowitz, the number two official at the Pentagon, was asked by reporters if bin Laden was in Tora Bora. Wolfowitz told the reporters, "We don't have any credible evidence of him being in other parts of Afghanistan or outside of Afghanistan."

General Franks's rationalizations about why he wouldn't send more US troops to hunt bin Laden were a symptom of the fact that top generals at the Pentagon were at the time more concerned with having enough "search and rescue" teams and medical capabilities available if a military mission went wrong than they were in finding the man who had ordered 9/11, including the attack on the Pentagon that had killed 184 people.

This risk aversion was a legacy of the "Black Hawk Down" episode in Somalia eight years earlier. About 28,000 US troops had deployed to Somalia to support a humanitarian mission to feed starving Somalis. In early October 1993, hundreds of those soldiers were hunting for a local

warlord and got into an intense firefight. Somali militiamen, some of whom may have been trained by members of al-Qaeda, killed eighteen American servicemen and shot down two US Black Hawk helicopters. Most of the American fatalities were from elite American units such as Delta Force. TV images broadcast globally showed mobs dragging dead American soldiers through the streets of Mogadishu.

Six months later President Bill Clinton pulled all US forces out of Somalia. Clinton had come of age in the Vietnam era, and he was determined to avoid any of the incremental escalations of US troops that President Lyndon Johnson had ordered during the Vietnam War. Clinton's view was: "When you find yourself in a hole, the first rule is to quit digging."

As a result of what became known as "Somalia Syndrome" senior US generals were wary of deploying large numbers of American soldiers in faraway countries they had little understanding of. That would, of course, change in the coming years, but in December 2001 Pentagon generals wouldn't risk sending just a few hundred more soldiers into combat against al-Qaeda even as the embers of the World Trade Center's destroyed twin towers were still smoldering.

Ironically, bin Laden would also take away the wrong lessons from Somalia. He later claimed that his men on the ground in Mogadishu in 1993 had seen the weaknesses of US troops for themselves. This was further evidence in his mind that the United States was a "paper tiger" that would pull all its forces out of the Middle East if al-Qaeda attacked targets in New York and Washington.

The narrative that Afghanistan was the "graveyard of empires," first for the British in the nineteenth century and then for the Soviets in the late twentieth century, clouded clear thinking about what was needed to capture or kill bin Laden. General Franks and other American flag officers blocked requests for additional US troops to deploy to Tora Bora, and President Bush and his war cabinet never pushed the Pentagon to send additional troops.

As a result, few American soldiers were on the ground at Tora Bora—forty Delta operators from US special operations forces, fourteen Green

Berets from US Special Forces, some US Air Force tactical controllers and signals interceptors, six CIA operatives, and a dozen British commandos from the Special Boat Service. They allied with a motley crew of local Afghan warlords of dubious loyalties and competence whose men left the front lines as the sun was setting to break their Ramadan fast. This was never going to be enough to secure Tora Bora's thirty-six square miles of frigid mountainous terrain.

Could a sizable American force have been deployed to block the escape routes out of Tora Bora? Leading a force of one thousand Marines, Brigadier General Jim Mattis had recently seized an airfield in southern Afghanistan. Mattis had an additional 3,500 Marines standing by on ships off the coast of Afghanistan's neighbor Pakistan. In early December Mattis proposed to the Pentagon that he send his Marines into Tora Bora, where they would set up observation posts to cut off any escape routes. Mattis planned to position his Marines so each observation post could see another post, which meant they could lay down "interlocking fields of fire." Hearing no response to his plan, Mattis started calling around to officers higher up in his chain of command, pointing out that bin Laden could escape if the valley exits from Tora Bora weren't blocked. His warnings were ignored.

While there were no guarantees that a larger American force at Tora Bora would have captured or killed bin Laden, the fact is that no additional US troops were ever sent. As a result, there were likely more international journalists—around one hundred—covering the battle of Tora Bora than the total number of American and British soldiers on the battlefield: about eighty. This was worse than a mistake; it was a monumental blunder, one that bin Laden would deftly exploit.

Haji Zaman Gamsharik, one of the local Afghan warlords leading the attack against bin Laden's men, had started negotiations with al-Qaeda members for their surrender that would begin on December 12. Al-Qaeda's leaders offered a ceasefire, implying that bin Laden would personally surrender. When he heard about the "surrender" agreement, Berntsen, the CIA commander on the ground, screamed into the phone: "No negotiations. Please tell them we came here to kill them all."

That was not to be. The surrender agreement was a ruse. Shortly before midnight on December 12, bin Laden, together with two of his sons and his deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, slipped out of Tora Bora. Confounding the

Americans, who assumed they would cross the border into Pakistan, they disappeared into the remote, mountainous Afghan province of Kunar.

The very same day that bin Laden slipped away from Tora Bora, General Franks was briefing the plan for the coming Iraq War to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld. At Rumsfeld's direction Franks and his staff had spent the past week revising the eight-hundred-page Iraq War plan. The meeting was scheduled for the afternoon of December 12 and was supposed to last forty-five minutes, but Rumsfeld was so fascinated by the briefing that it ran twice as long.

Eight and a half time zones ahead of the East Coast, bin Laden was *at almost exactly the same time* escaping from Tora Bora. It was an all too apt symbol for what lay ahead. Bush and his war cabinet were already focused on toppling the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, at the same time that the man who ordered the 9/11 attacks was escaping.

If the Bush team had captured or killed bin Laden at the battle of Tora Bora, perhaps some of the events that followed might have been avoided since much of the emotional energy around the war on terror was about bringing bin Laden to justice. Immediately after 9/11, the Bush administration had a simple demand of the Taliban: hand over bin Laden and other leaders of al-Qaeda or face the consequences. The Taliban claimed that there was no proof that bin Laden was involved in the 9/11 attacks, and that handing him over to the Americans would betray their Islamic principles. If the architect of the 9/11 attacks, along with many of his key lieutenants and hundreds of other members of al-Qaeda, had been captured or killed at Tora Bora, it could have been harder to sell a "global war on terror" to the American public.

Three weeks after bin Laden had snuck out of Tora Bora, Michael Morell, President Bush's CIA briefer, told the president that the agency assessed that bin Laden had escaped from Tora Bora. Morell briefed Bush on an almost daily basis, and the president was angrier than he had ever seen him. On a secure video line Bush called Cheney, Rice, and CIA Director George Tenet, berating them, "What the hell is this? Michael just told me something about bin Laden getting away?" The fact that President Bush didn't find out that bin Laden had escaped from Tora Bora until weeks after he had fled

underlined just how confused the wartime priorities of Bush's senior national security officials were.

In later years Bush and his war cabinet would claim that there was no evidence that bin Laden was at Tora Bora. In his memoir, President Bush wrote, "If we had ever known for sure where he was, we would have moved heaven and earth to bring him to justice." Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld claimed "no one knew that for certain" bin Laden was there. Bush's national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, asserted in her memoir, "There were conflicting reports about his whereabouts at the time." All those assertions were misleading at best.

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On December 12, 2001, late at night under a crescent moon, with only the muffled sound of hoofbeats, bin Laden rode away from the Tora Bora battlefield. It was the most sacred night of Ramadan, the "Night of Power," marking the time when the verses of the Koran were first revealed by the Angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad in a cave near Mecca. Bin Laden inhabited a world full of religious signs and portents: now, on this sacred day, Allah was delivering him from the clutches of the hated Americans.

Just how close the United States had come to finishing off bin Laden at Tora Bora was underlined by a videotape of al-Qaeda's leader that aired on TV networks around the world on December 27. On the tape, bin Laden was gaunt, and his beard was streaked through with white; he appeared to be two decades older than his forty-four years. His left side was immobilized during the entire half-hour videotape, indicating that he may have been injured following the US invasion of Afghanistan.

On the tape, bin Laden looked beyond his own death, proclaiming: "If I live or die, the war will continue."

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CHAPTER FOUR

THE WAR ON TERRORISM GOES GLOBAL

> *The essential lesson [is] that foreign policy is normally based on lies and misconceptions and that politicians and generals are fools who do not understand the nature of the historical tragedies that they unleash.*
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> —CLASSICAL SCHOLAR OSWYN MURRAY IN *THE MUSE OF HISTORY* (2024)

Two and a half months after the 9/11 attacks, the United Nations convened the conference in Bonn to decide the future leadership of Afghanistan. Afghan political leaders from across the country were invited to participate, though not anyone from the Taliban. Lakhdar Brahimi, the senior UN official present, said he believed that this exclusion was the "original sin" that helped set the conditions for the resurgence of the Taliban. But this analysis glossed over the fact that the war against the Taliban was still raging when the Bonn conference began in late November 2001. It's hard to imagine that either the United States or the Northern

Alliance would have given the Taliban a seat at the negotiating table when the religious warriors had yet to surrender.

Understanding that they were utterly defeated, the Taliban finally surrendered on December 5, 2001. That surrender *did* represent a lost opportunity to try to make peace with "reconcilable" elements of the Taliban. Such a move would have been quite natural in Afghanistan; low-level warfare is a way of life for some Afghans, and often the vanquished join the victorious side so they can live to fight another day.

Facing defeat after the fall of Kandahar, Taliban leaders were ready to make peace. With the permission of Mullah Omar, they wrote a letter to Karzai accepting his selection as the new leader of the country. They wanted immunity from arrest in exchange for agreeing not to get involved in politics. It was a time when the Americans had enormous amounts of leverage over the Taliban to make a peace deal on advantageous terms both to the Afghan government and the United States.

That didn't happen. After 9/11 the Bush administration was deep in either-you-are-with-us-or-against-us mode, and there was also a pronounced desire for revenge, which is rarely a basis for making smart judgments. On December 5, 2001, when the Taliban had surrendered, Karzai announced that Mullah Omar and other Taliban leaders could "live in dignity," and, once they had turned over their arms, they would be allowed to return to their homes. Furious, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld called Karzai, telling him any kind of amnesty for the Taliban was off the table.

On November 30, Rumsfeld had held a press conference at the Pentagon where he publicly vetoed a peace agreement with the Taliban, adding that the US would "vigorously oppose any idea of providing [Mullah Omar] amnesty or safe passage of any type." On December 6, White House spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters, "Those who harbor terrorists need to be brought to justice."

The Bush war cabinet bracketed together two distinct groups, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, even though the Taliban had no record of international terrorism. As a result, Taliban leaders were targeted for capture by US Special Forces. While it would take years for these kinds of actions to turn the Taliban into a full-blown insurgency, its roots could be found early in Karzai's tenure.

Robert Grenier, the CIA station chief in Pakistan, thought that the arrest of Taliban leaders was a great mistake. The Taliban foreign minister, Wakil

Ahmed Muttawakil, who privately had long been a staunch opponent of bin Laden, was arrested by US forces in early 2002. Grenier feared that other Taliban leaders who might be ready to reconcile with the Afghan government would draw their own conclusions about the foreign minister's arrest.

It's unclear if Mullah Omar had any interest at all in a peace deal, but certainly other leaders of the Taliban did, as they knew they had been totally defeated. This was an important missed opportunity; you should try to make peace with your enemies when they are defeated and suing for peace. Instead, when US negotiations with the Taliban began in earnest in 2018, more than a decade and a half after their defeat, the Taliban's successes on the battlefield substantially increased their leverage at the negotiating table. Clausewitz emphasized that "a peace treaty will always extinguish a mass of sparks that might have gone on quietly smoldering." The Americans did not take this path when they could have profited from it most.

The surrender of the Taliban in December 2001 seemed to signal that the Afghan War was over, but Operation Anaconda four months later was the most lethal battle for US troops so far in the conflict. US intelligence had received reports that hundreds of al-Qaeda fighters were gathering in a remote part of eastern Afghanistan. US Central Command (CENTCOM) commander General Franks approved a plan to attack them. Almost no members of the media witnessed the ensuing bitter fight that raged for many days in a mountainous region known as Shah-i-Kot during the frigid winter. It was one of the highest-altitude battles ever fought by the US military. American soldiers and al-Qaeda fighters fought pitched battles on peaks that started at eight thousand feet.

As the casualties mounted, more and more American servicemen were drawn into the fight. The battle was waged in the shadows by a gathering of the secretive "black" US special operations forces tribes—Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, and the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment—who fought a small army of al-Qaeda and remnants of the Taliban, who lost between 150 and 300 of their fighters. Al-Qaeda never tried to fight a conventional battle against American forces in Afghanistan again, while the US military limped away from the field of battle with eight special operators killed in action and many more wounded.

By the end of 2001 the US military had a prisoner problem: What to do with the hundreds of suspected Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters who were being picked up on the battlefield? Moreover, what status did these detainees have? Were they prisoners of war, or terrorists who could be charged with war crimes? On February 7, 2002, Bush signed an order stating the Geneva Conventions that protected prisoners of war did not apply to al-Qaeda or the Taliban detainees, who were put in a novel category of "unlawful combatants."

Guantánamo Bay, a naval base the US had leased from Cuba for the past century, was deemed, in the words of Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, to be the "least worst place" to hold these unlawful combatants, since in the minds of senior Bush administration officials, US laws such as the right to a lawyer and to a court hearing didn't apply there. (Two years after the first prisoners had arrived at Guantánamo, the US Supreme Court ruled that they did have rights to lawyers and hearings.)

After the first prisoners arrived, the Pentagon set up "military commissions" at Guantánamo, which were somewhat analogous to courts-martial, with US military officers serving as lawyers, judges, and jurors. The military commissions tied themselves into legalistic pretzels over the Guantánamo detainees, who could be held indefinitely and yet could also be tried for crimes, unlike ordinary prisoners of war.

The military commissions were a failure. Of the 779 detainees held at Guantánamo, only eleven were convicted of a crime and three of those cases were overturned on appeal. The problem was compounded by the fact that some of the prisoners held at Guantánamo had been tortured in secret CIA prisons. After 9/11 these "black sites" were set up outside the United States in countries such as Poland and Thailand, allowing the CIA to detain, interrogate, and torture prisoners outside of US law. President Bush effectively ended the program in 2006.

Under the legal doctrine of the "fruit of the poisonous tree," anything a detainee said while being coercively interrogated wasn't admissible in court. As a result, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the self-admitted 9/11 operational commander who was arrested in 2003 in Pakistan and then waterboarded by the CIA in a secret prison and eventually sent to Guantánamo, would still not be tried more than two decades after his capture.

Guantánamo was also a bust for gathering useful intelligence. Daniel Coleman, an FBI special agent known as “the Professor” because of his encyclopedic knowledge of al-Qaeda, said he “never saw anything useful” coming out of Guantánamo.

Over the years the prisoner population of Guantánamo was greatly reduced by successive administrations; Bush transferred 533 prisoners to other countries, Obama transferred 197, Trump, 1, and Biden, 25. The released prisoners were sent back to their native countries, or when that wasn’t possible, to American partners such as Oman.

In short, Guantánamo was a failure on all levels: it produced almost no convictions for terrorist crimes; it generated very little in the way of useful intelligence; and it was a moral stain on the US government, which had typically protested indefinite detentions when they were carried out by authoritarian regimes.

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The Bush administration was worried about a “second wave” of attacks by al-Qaeda. These fears were dramatically confirmed when Richard Reid, a British citizen, tried to ignite plastic explosives concealed in his hiking boots on an American Airlines flight between Paris and Miami on December 22, 2001. Passengers and crew on the flight managed to disable Reid. He told investigators that it was his hope that blowing up an American plane during the middle of the Christmas holiday season would have done substantial damage to the US economy. Reid, a small-time criminal who had converted to Islam, had been trained by al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. Believing he would die during his attack, Reid had instructed a friend to email his mother saying, “What I am doing is part of the ongoing war between Islam and disbelief.”

The high explosives in Reid’s boots would have been enough to blow up the jet over the Atlantic, making investigating the crime quite difficult while also killing some two hundred people on the plane. Long after Reid’s failed bombing, airline passengers were obliged to take off their shoes at airport security checkpoints before boarding flights.

The fears of a second wave of attacks often verged on paranoia. After Reid’s botched bombing, Dennis Montgomery, a Las Vegas gambler convicted of passing bad checks, persuaded the CIA that he had found

secret coded signals on Al Jazeera TV. The agency came to believe that these signals alerted al-Qaeda members to target passenger jets flying to and from the United States. As a result, dozens of flights were inexplicably canceled during the busy 2003 Christmas holiday travel season. But the secret signals emanating from Al Jazeera were later determined to be a hoax; by then the CIA had paid Montgomery handsomely for his bogus claims.

In 2002 US drone strikes for the first time expanded beyond Afghanistan, not as yet to Iraq but to Yemen, where al-Qaeda had established a presence. The US had identified al-Qaeda leader Qaed Al-Harethi, known as Abu Ali, as one of the masterminds of the USS *Cole* bombing when the warship was anchored off the port city of Aden in early October 2000. Abu Ali suspected he was being tracked by the Americans, so he used multiple cell phones, rotating them frequently. A Cryptologic Support Group, based in Yemen, part of the US National Security Agency, which specializes in signals intelligence, had identified some of Abu Ali's phones and had set an alarm system to go off when he was using one of them.

The Cryptologic Support Group tracked Abu Ali together with five associates to a Land Rover that was moving around northern Yemen. A Predator locked onto the Land Rover and fired a Hellfire missile into the vehicle, killing everyone inside. One of those associates was an American, Kamal Derwish from upstate New York, who was working with al-Qaeda and became the first US citizen to be killed in a drone strike.

Over the next two decades the United States would launch more than one thousand drone strikes in countries that the US wasn't formally at war with, such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, killing an estimated 6,800 suspected militants and as many as 570 civilians.

When they were running for office in 2000, Bush and his team had campaigned against "nation building." Condoleezza Rice published a piece in *Foreign Affairs* saying, "We don't need to have the 82nd Airborne escorting kids to kindergarten." This piece seemed intended to distinguish

the hardheaded “realists” on the Bush team from the Clinton administration, which had overseen peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Haiti.

This aversion to nation building helps explain some of the early American missteps in Afghanistan. A force of only some five hundred CIA officers and special operations forces working with tens of thousands of Afghan allied forces had overthrown the Taliban. But clearly there was going to have to be some kind of peacekeeping force to maintain order in Afghanistan, a country of 20 million people that had been at war continuously for more than two decades.

Yet the Bush administration, especially Rumsfeld, was opposed to such a force, particularly if it involved any US troops. In February 2002 Rumsfeld nixed the idea of expanding the role of the largely European International Security Assistance Force that was then securing Kabul to stabilize other cities in Afghanistan.

Having destroyed the Taliban government, the US had a responsibility to ensure that Afghanistan had a rudimentary state structure and a somewhat functional army and police force to prevent Afghanistan from descending into anarchy and becoming once again a haven for terrorists.

Despite Bush’s campaign opposition to “nation building” he ultimately changed his mind after 9/11. He wrote in his 2010 memoir: “Afghanistan was the ultimate nation building mission. We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better. We also had a strategic interest in helping the Afghan people build a free society. The terrorists took refuge in places of chaos, despair, and repression. A democratic Afghanistan would be a hopeful alternative to the vision of the extremists.”

Bush’s commitment to nation building in Afghanistan was often more rhetorical than real. Dov Zakheim, a Republican who was close with many senior Bush officials, was tasked by Rumsfeld in August 2002 to oversee Afghan reconstruction. But the US provided little in the way of funding for a country destroyed by war: around an average of $1 billion a year between 2002 and 2008, which amounted to about forty dollars a year for every Afghan. Zakheim later concluded that the “Taliban would not [have] been resurgent if the United States had looked to Afghanistan’s reconstruction and economic development needs after the Taliban were routed in 2001.”

Following the 9/11 attacks the Bush White House was on a hair trigger when it came to weapons of mass destruction and their possible use by terrorists. In late October 2001, Bush, Rice, and Powell traveled to China for an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. While they were in Shanghai, Vice President Dick Cheney called in on a secure videoconference line, incongruously dressed in white tie for a fancy dinner he was about to attend in Manhattan. Cheney looked ashen. The vice president explained that White House detectors had registered the presence of botulinum toxin, adding, "There is no reliable antidote. Those of us who have been exposed to it could die." Everybody froze.

A few months before 9/11, a group of senior retired US government officials had participated in an exercise known as "Dark Winter" that simulated a smallpox attack on the United States. Cheney considered it particularly significant because it concluded that within three months of a smallpox attack a million Americans would die. After 9/11 Cheney took to traveling with a full biohazard suit on hand for the biological weapons attack that he feared was likely coming, and the detection of botulinum toxin in the White House seemed to fit the bill. However, the substance that had caused the alert was tested on laboratory mice and they survived; the biohazard detectors at the White House had registered a false alarm.

Adding to the growing worries at the White House about terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction, the CIA discovered that in spring 2000 bin Laden had met with Dr. Sultan Bashiruddin Mahmood, a pro-Taliban nuclear scientist who had helped develop some of the infrastructure for Pakistan's nuclear weapons program. Mahmood's fanatical beliefs had gotten him fired from Pakistan's nuclear program a year earlier. In Kandahar over dinner, Mahmood told bin Laden what it would take to build a nuclear bomb, which he explained would be hard and expensive and beyond the resources of a group like al-Qaeda.

Unexpectedly, bin Laden interjected, "What if I already had the material?"

In fact, al-Qaeda had purchased some radioactive materials that were being sold by scam artists claiming they were selling fissile material from the republics of the former Soviet Union. These materials were not uranium suitable for a nuclear bomb but radioactive waste. Still, it was an alarming lead that had to be chased down.

On November 29 CIA Director George Tenet briefed the intelligence about Mahmood to Condoleezza Rice in the White House Situation Room while Vice President Cheney beamed in on a screen from an "undisclosed location," likely Camp David.

Cheney declared, "If there is a one percent chance that terrorists will get their hands on a nuclear weapon, we have to treat the threat as if it is a certainty in terms of framing our response."

Rice told Tenet, "You have to go to Islamabad and sort this out with President Musharraf."

CIA Director Tenet reported directly to the president. He looked somewhat miffed that Rice was telling him what to do, but clearly this was not the time to take a stand on the White House org chart.

The next day Tenet flew to Islamabad, where he met with General Pervez Musharraf, who had staged a bloodless military coup two years earlier. Musharraf was a secular-minded Muslim who was no fan of Islamist fanatics, but he was also a Pakistani nationalist through and through and he was proud of the Pakistani nuclear program.

Tenet told the general what he knew about Mahmood. Musharraf was at first dismissive about al-Qaeda's "men hiding in caves," who he said would not be able to get their hands on suitable fissile materials. But after hearing Tenet describe the scope of Mahmood's discussions with bin Laden and bin Laden's claims that al-Qaeda possessed fissile materials, Musharraf conceded that this was indeed an issue that needed to be addressed. Although Mahmood had been fired from the Pakistani nuclear weapons program, he was still traveling regularly to Afghanistan, where he was helping the Taliban through a charity he had set up. Pakistani authorities subjected Mahmood to further questioning, and he eventually provided a hand-drawn nuclear bomb design that he had shown to al-Qaeda's leaders. Al-Qaeda's interest in nuclear weapons was real, but even so, bin Laden's men could never have done much of anything with the radioactive materials they possessed.

The anthrax attacks in the United States and bin Laden's interest in atomic bomb-making tips all contributed to the fears in the White House about the existential threat posed by terrorists armed with weapons of mass destruction.

In his State of the Union speech on January 29, 2002, President Bush identified an "axis of evil" consisting of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea and

claimed they were all developing weapons of mass destruction and supporting terrorist organizations. The Bush administration's fears were particularly focused on Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq.

Four months later, in a speech at West Point, Bush outlined a new doctrine of preventive war, declaring: "We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act." Bush's concept of preventive war asserted that the United States had to destroy an enemy before they could ever become a threat. This went far beyond the traditional concept of preemptive war, which was to preempt an imminent attack by an enemy.

What the American public did not know at the time was that the Pentagon was already deep into planning the coming war against Iraq. The near certainty that the US was going to war in Iraq affected troop levels in Afghanistan. Lieutenant General John Vines, the US commander in Afghanistan, told US Army historians that the Pentagon was "under enormous pressure not to over commit resources to Afghanistan to make sure everything possible was available for Iraq."

That same top-down pressure was also applied to US intelligence agencies. Grenier, the CIA station chief in Pakistan, was appointed to a new job: Iraq Mission Manager. Throughout late 2002 and early 2003, the best CIA officers and analysts were shifted from working on Afghanistan to dealing with Iraq. Predator drones and special operations forces were also diverted to Iraq ahead of the American invasion. The diversion of military and intelligence resources and, crucially, White House attention away from Afghanistan would help lay some of the groundwork for the Taliban's resurgence in the coming years.

On October 21, 2002, Rumsfeld met with President Bush at the White House. Bush asked, "Who is General McNeill?" Rumsfeld explained that he was the general in charge of Afghanistan. "Well, I don't need to meet with him," Bush replied. It was a sign of how much White House priorities had shifted.

During the presidential campaign the Bush national security team had dubbed themselves "the Vulcans" after a giant statue of Vulcan, the Roman

god of fire, that loomed over Condoleezza Rice's hometown of Birmingham, Alabama. This nickname embodied how the Bush team saw themselves: tough-minded power players who would take the hard measures necessary to make the United States safe—measures that the liberals in the Clinton administration had purportedly not been capable of. Planning for the war in Iraq played nicely into how the Vulcans saw themselves.

The Bush administration's case that Saddam Hussein was covertly continuing his weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program is a story that is well known. CIA Director George Tenet even told President Bush the case that Saddam had WMD was a "slam dunk." That would become a byword for an epic failure of intelligence.

Machiavelli long ago pointed out the dangers "of trusting those who are in exile from their own country," but the Bush team went all-in on Iraqi exiles who were saying exactly what they wanted to hear about Saddam. In 2002 an Iraqi defector with the marvelous code name "Curveball" spun tall tales about Saddam's secret biological weapons program, and only many years later publicly admitted that he'd lied about it. The Pentagon's own intelligence service, the Defense Intelligence Agency, had warned in February 2002 that Curveball might be a fabricator but, in the rush to war, this warning was overlooked.

This was compounded by a history of distrust and miscommunication between the United States and Saddam, and by America's surprise upon discovering the advanced state of Saddam's WMD program after the 1991 Gulf War. But in the intervening years Saddam had quietly ended his WMD program, a development that even Saddam's top generals were in the dark about; in late 2002 Saddam convened them and explained that there was no WMD. They were astonished. Saddam had fought an eight-year war with neighboring Iran during the 1980s, during which an estimated half a million people had died. In Saddam's mind, not advertising the fact that he had ended his WMD program was likely to dissuade Iran from attacking Iraq. This would prove to be a fatal miscalculation since it also sent a confusing message to the rest of the world that Saddam seemed to have retained his WMD.

Even if Saddam had WMD, to make the case that the US needed to go to war to topple him you also had to make another case: that he was partnering with terrorists to whom he might give WMD that could then be used against the United States. So began a concerted effort inside the Bush administration to say that bin Laden and Saddam were allied, an effort whose back story had already been laid by Laurie Mylroie's bogus claims that the first Trade Center attack in 1993 was engineered by Saddam.

The Bush administration started pushing the FBI and the CIA to find "evidence" of the Saddam–al-Qaeda "connection." Michael Scheuer, who had founded the bin Laden unit at the CIA five years before the 9/11 attacks, together with a team of three other CIA officers reviewed some twenty thousand relevant documents, looking for any kind of connection. They came up empty.

The nugget of intelligence that seemed to prove a Saddam–al-Qaeda connection was a supposed meeting in Prague between Mohamed Atta, the lead 9/11 hijacker, and an Iraqi agent on April 9, 2001, a story that was first circulated by the Czech intelligence service.

Mary Galligan, an FBI special agent who had investigated the bombings of the US embassies in Africa and was one of the bureau's on-scene commanders in Yemen who investigated the USS *Cole* attack, led the investigation of the 9/11 hijackers. A key FBI product of that investigation, known as PENTTBOM, was a three-hundred-page day-by-day timeline of the hijackers' activities. The FBI found no evidence that Atta was out of the United States when he was supposed to have been meeting with the Iraqi agent in Prague. Instead, they found evidence that Atta was in Virginia and Florida during this period. Atta cashed a check at a bank in Virginia on April 4 and leased an apartment in Hollywood, Florida, on April 11.

Galligan met with Paul Wolfowitz at the Pentagon on August 8, 2002, to brief him about the FBI's findings. Galligan explained that there were no records of Atta either leaving the United States or coming back into the country around the time of the alleged meeting with the Iraqi agent in Prague. Wolfowitz seemed convinced that Saddam was involved in 9/11, and the meeting quickly turned unpleasant. Wolfowitz grilled Galligan, telling her the bureau wasn't doing a good job and didn't have "the full picture." Galligan left the meeting with Wolfowitz feeling like she had just been beaten up.

Because neither the CIA nor the FBI was delivering on what some senior Bush officials wanted, which was "evidence" of the Saddam–al-Qaeda axis, they decided to develop their own intelligence about "the connection." Michael Maloof, a Defense Department official—who had no expertise on al-Qaeda and whose job was to track violators of US export-control laws—was tasked by Douglas Feith, the number three official at the Pentagon, to investigate the matter.

Between October and December 2001, Maloof reviewed a decade of US intelligence community files looking for connections between Saddam's regime and al-Qaeda. Maloof thought the CIA was "missing a lot because they had a preconceived idea that secular and religious groups would not work together. Anything that didn't fit that theory was just disregarded." Once his analysis was concluded Maloof presented the findings to Feith, who seemed astonished by what he had dug up. Maloof's analysis was eventually converted into a 150-page slide presentation that concluded there was "consultation, training, financing and collaboration" between al-Qaeda and Iraq, findings that were circulated to senior Bush officials. None of this turned out to be true.

The CIA gamely put together an analysis of the supposed Saddam–al-Qaeda connection. The resulting classified paper, "Iraq and al-Qa'ida: Interpreting a Murky Relationship," was circulated on June 21, 2002. It tried to satisfy the agency's key "customers" at the Bush White House by noting that it was "purposefully aggressive in seeking to draw connections, on the assumption that any indication of a relationship between these two hostile elements could carry great dangers to the United States."

The paper assessed that there was no evidence of cooperation on terrorist operations but that there was enough intelligence on supposed contacts and training that the relationship between al-Qaeda and Saddam was troubling. The paper also had a rather important caveat: the contacts between "Saddam and Bin Ladin appear to be much like those between rival intelligence services, with each side trying to exploit the other for its own benefit." Seven months later the CIA produced another paper that was the agency's definitive take on the issue, concluding that there was no Iraqi "authority, direction or control" over al-Qaeda.

You didn't need any special access to classified materials to see that the purported Saddam–al-Qaeda axis never made sense, as I wrote two months before the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq in *The Guardian.* The piece was

headlined "This Link Between Islamist Zealot and Secular Fascist Just Doesn't Add Up," and it explained:

> In his state of the union address President Bush returned to one of his favourite themes: Saddam Hussein "aids and protects" al-Qaida. Yet the evidence for this claim is somewhere between tenuous and non-existent. Every year the US state department releases an authoritative survey of global terrorism. According to its 2000 report: Iraq "has not attempted an anti-western attack since its failed attempt to assassinate former President Bush in 1993 in Kuwait."
>
> Moreover, an al-Qaida-Saddam alliance defies common sense. Osama bin Laden is an Islamist zealot who despises secular fascists such as Saddam. I heard from Bin Laden himself that he is no fan of Saddam. When I met with the Saudi exile in Afghanistan five years ago, he volunteered that he thought the Iraqi dictator was a "bad Muslim." For Bin Laden, that's as bad as it gets.

An important witness for the Bush administration's case that Saddam and al-Qaeda were allied appeared to be Ibn al-Shaykh al-Libi, a Libyan militant captured in Pakistan in late 2001. The CIA flew Libi to Egypt, in a practice known as an "extraordinary rendition," after the CIA had received pro forma assurances that he would not be abused in Egyptian custody. In fact, this was the point of these renditions: Egypt routinely tortured prisoners and the agency's transfer of Libi seems to have been in the hope that the Egyptians would do just that. And they did so in spades. Libi told his interrogators that al-Qaeda had worked with Russian organized crime to smuggle nuclear materials into New York and bin Laden had sent his men to Iraq to learn about weapons of mass destruction. *Slam dunk!*

In a keynote speech in Cincinnati on October 7, 2002, President Bush used Libi's "confession" as a basis to make the case for the impending war in Iraq, "We've learned that Iraq has trained al-Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases." Libi's claims also turned up in Secretary of State Colin Powell's keynote speech selling the Iraq War at the United Nations. Powell was the most admired official in Bush's cabinet in

good part because, when he was still in uniform, he had overseen the successful Gulf War during which Saddam Hussein's army had been expelled from Kuwait in 1991. Powell was now handed the task of making the case to the world for the impending war against Saddam.

On February 5, 2003, Powell spoke at the UN saying a detainee had described "Iraq offering chemical or biological weapons training for two al-Qaeda associates beginning in December 2000." A year after Powell's speech, Libi, who was now back in US custody, explained that he had made up his tales of an al-Qaeda–Iraq WMD alliance so the Egyptians would stop torturing him.

Meanwhile, gullible journalists published "exposés" about the purported Saddam–al-Qaeda alliance. An Iraqi defector told *Vanity Fair* in January 2003 that he helped train "non-Iraqi Islamic fundamentalists at the Salman Pak camp near Baghdad . . . to hijack aircraft with knives." A similar lurid story appeared in *The New Yorker*, claiming that "Iraqi intelligence agents smuggled conventional weapons and possibly even chemical and biological weapons into Afghanistan." Those stories were false, but they seemed to confirm the Bush administration's most sensational claims about Saddam's links to terrorists and his possession of WMD.

Unlike the case after the 9/11 attacks, when there was broad international consensus that the United States had the right to respond militarily in Afghanistan, the looming Iraq War was unpopular around the world, sparking massive anti-war demonstrations in major European cities. The French government wanted to have nothing to do with the Iraq War, leading to a quixotic campaign in some corners of the United States to rename "French fries" as "Freedom fries."

The one American ally that wanted to play a major role in the invasion of Iraq was Britain. UK Prime Minister Tony Blair seemed to want to preserve his country's "special relationship" with the United States at any cost. The director of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, Sir Richard Dearlove, warned Blair in a secret memo in July 2002 that the policy decision to invade Iraq had already been made in Washington and "the intelligence and the facts were being fixed around the policy." Despite this warning that the facts were being "fixed," when the Americans invaded Iraq in March 2003 the British government ordered 46,000 of their troops to deploy there, 179 of whom would die in Iraq.

Vice President Cheney told NBC News in September 2003 that Iraq was "the geographic base of the terrorists that have had us under assault now for many years, but most especially on 9/11." This was indicative of one of the most successful propaganda campaigns ever waged on the American population. Senior Bush officials conflated Saddam and al-Qaeda so often that two years after the 9/11 attacks an astonishing 70 percent of Americans believed that Saddam was involved in them even though the largest criminal investigation in US history had found no evidence for this at all. In October 2002, five months before the Americans invaded Iraq, the US Senate and House passed resolutions by large majorities that authorized the use of force against Iraq.

Having made the case for the Iraq War based on the fairy tales of defectors; confessions elicited by torture; faulty intelligence; and their own lies—all of which were filtered through Bush's unshakable conviction that overthrowing Saddam was the right thing to do—the Bush war cabinet then made some deeply flawed assumptions about how the conflict in Iraq would play out.

The war to overthrow the Taliban had been something of a cakewalk. Rumsfeld believed that the US military was now so technologically superior that a large invasion force wasn't needed to invade and occupy Iraq. The month before the invasion, the Army chief of staff, General Eric Shinseki, testified to the Senate Committee on Armed Services that "something on the order of several hundred thousand soldiers" would probably be needed to stabilize Iraq after the war. The definition of a gaffe in Washington is telling the truth in public. Two days later, Wolfowitz testified that Shinseki's estimates were "wildly off the mark" and suggested that security in Iraq could be maintained with only 100,000 troops. Around 150,000 US troops deployed to Iraq for the March 2003 invasion. It turned out that Shinseki's estimates were far more accurate; within days of the American invasion Iraq was beset by a frenzy of looting that was well documented by the international media.

Rumsfeld airily dismissed the TV pictures of anarchy coming out of Iraq: "The images you are seeing on television you are seeing over, and over, and over, and it's the same picture of some person walking out of some building with a vase. . . . Think what's happened in our cities when we've had riots, and problems, and looting. Stuff happens!"

At the end of the English Civil War, in 1651, the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan*, which made a basic point: society needs an absolute ruler to avoid anarchy and the "war of all against all." And while the Americans delivered the Iraqis from the predations of a brutal dictator, instead of providing order, they brought uncertainty and chaos, which later devolved into a vicious civil war. Many Iraqis found it hard to understand how the world's most powerful military couldn't prevent the anarchy spreading in their cities.

Another flawed assumption by senior Bush officials was that the invasion would be a replay of the Allied Powers' liberation of France in 1944. General John Abizaid, a Lebanese American who spoke Arabic and was a deputy commander of US Central Command (CENTCOM), which was planning the Iraq invasion, disagreed: "I'm one of the few people in the room that spent a lot of time in the Middle East, and I can assure you, we're not going to be greeted as liberators there," Abizaid said. "First of all, Iraq is not France, 1944. It's not Catholic. It's not homogenous. And it doesn't look very kindly upon foreign occupiers, never has. Look at the British occupation [of Iraq] in the 1920s."

Rumsfeld seemed dimly aware that things could go poorly in Iraq, or at least he wrote a CYA memo for the record six months ahead of the invasion. It became known as the "parade of horribles." The memo outlined several grim possibilities that the impending war might precipitate: terrorist groups could improve their recruiting and funding; Iraq could experience ethnic strife among the Sunnis, Shia, and Kurds; the stabilization of Iraq could take up to a decade; Iran could decide to get involved in the Iraqi conflict; and WMD would never be found.

If anything, this parade of horribles understated just how horribly wrong things would go.

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CHAPTER FIVE

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

The statesman who yields to war fever must realize that once the signal is given, he no longer is the master of policy, but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events.

—WINSTON CHURCHILL

Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.

—MIKE TYSON

The heavyset old man emerging from a hole in the ground in northern Iraq looked like a forest hermit; his bushy beard was shot through with white, and his longish black hair was a tangled, matted mess.

He announced grandly in English: "I am the president of Iraq, and I am willing to negotiate."

The US special operator who pulled Saddam Hussein out of the hole told the Iraqi dictator: "That time's passed, brother."

Saddam was the ace of spades in the deck of cards made up of the fifty-two "Most-Wanted" officials of the former regime that had been distributed

to US forces.

The next day Paul "Jerry" Bremer, who was effectively the American viceroy of Iraq, held a triumphant press conference in Baghdad announcing: "Ladies and gentlemen. We got him!"

The room erupted in cheers. Saddam had lorded over Iraq for decades, killing hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and gassing his own Kurdish population. His role model was Stalin; he collected books about the brutal Soviet dictator. With Saddam in custody, many Iraqis felt that, at last, they could breathe.

The capture of Saddam on December 13, 2003, was supposed to be a turning point in the war, which hadn't gone as Bush had hoped. Nine months before the capture of Saddam, Secretary of State Powell was at the White House watching TV with Bush as US troops were pushing toward Baghdad during the first days of the war. Bush looked at the images of Iraqis in the street. He turned to Powell and said, "They're not cheering."

"No, Mr. President, they're not," Powell said.

Bush expected his troops to be greeted as liberators, and said so, repeatedly.

Instead, the Americans were being greeted with roadside bombs. Bush administration officials hoped that with Saddam now in custody it would take the wind out of the growing insurgency. In fact, it would only get worse—much worse.

The US military captured Baghdad on April 9, 2003, after only three weeks of fighting. But Bush's war cabinet seemed determined to lose the peace. Rumsfeld paid no attention to planning for the "day after," nor did CENTCOM commander General Tommy Franks, who took his cues from Rumsfeld and was in any event preparing to retire imminently. Franks was even planning on taking a Caribbean vacation the month after Baghdad had fallen before Rumsfeld nixed it.

In the run-up to the invasion, General Franks had told Pentagon officials, "You pay attention to the day *after* and I'll pay attention to the day *of*." An official US Army history of the Iraq War concluded that the planning for

“Phase IV”—US military terminology for when hostilities are finished—was “insufficiently detailed and largely uncoordinated with interagency efforts,” which was a nice bit of understatement.

Internecine interagency conflict was more the norm than interagency coordination. Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld detested each other and frequently clashed over Iraq policy. Powell thought that Rumsfeld had sent too few US troops to invade Iraq, which contradicted his “Powell Doctrine” of only going to war with overwhelming force. And after Saddam was overthrown Rumsfeld did everything possible to ensure that the Pentagon rather than the State Department called the shots in Iraq. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice proved incapable of forging a consensus between Powell and Rumsfeld, which was supposed to be part of her job. Rumsfeld was an adept Washington power player who had served in the White House more than two decades earlier as President Gerald Ford’s chief of staff. He made a point of trying to humiliate Rice by not attending National Security Council meetings when she was chairing them.

Rumsfeld wanted to turn Iraq over to Iraqi control as soon as feasible and started pulling significant numbers of US troops out of the country despite the chaos and looting then engulfing it. “Freedom’s untidy” was Rumsfeld’s flippant observation as Iraq descended into anarchy.

Within a year the force of 150,000 US troops that had invaded Iraq was reduced to about 110,000. The reduction in troops meant that there were fewer forces to secure Iraq’s cities. Six months after the invasion Rumsfeld said publicly, “I don’t believe it’s our job to reconstruct the country” and offered instead the bizarre suggestion that “tourism is going to be something important in that country as soon as the security situation is resolved.” By then thousands of Iraqis had already died in the war.

Powell had a quite different view about what the US should be doing in Iraq: “We had to put in more American troops to stabilize and secure the society. That’s what the society was expecting: ‘Saddam’s gone. Now life’s gonna be good.’ But instead, what they saw was the ministries being burned down and total disorder within the society. And we weren’t doing anything about it.”

State Department officials wanted a slower transition to Iraqi control given the chaos that followed the US invasion and the American military presence drawing down; the time hardly seemed ripe for the Iraqis to

assume control of their country. They also suspected that Rumsfeld and his number two, Paul Wolfowitz, were intent on handing Iraq over to Wolfowitz's friend, Ahmed Chalabi, a brilliant con man who was widely distrusted at the State Department and the CIA, which had banned its officers from working with him. Chalabi—who like Wolfowitz had earned his PhD at the University of Chicago—had been convicted of bank fraud in Jordan and had spent much of the past half century in exile outside Iraq. His pretensions to be the next Iraqi leader were treated with considerable skepticism by Powell and his staff. The civil war on the banks of the Potomac between the Pentagon and State may not have involved weapons, but it was nonetheless intense.

The solution seemed to be to find a US official to rule over Iraq who would be agreeable to the key players in DC. On May 6, Ambassador L. Paul "Jerry" Bremer III—like Bush, a product of Andover, Yale, and Harvard—met briefly with Bush at the White House and passed muster with the president. Bremer was not particularly well known in Washington so no one on the Bush team objected to him playing a key role in Iraq. In the normal course of things the United States would have installed an embassy to advance American interests, as it had done after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Instead, Iraq was getting a proconsul who worked for Rumsfeld.

Five days earlier Bush had staged a highly choreographed visit to the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, landing on the warship in a fighter jet and dressed in full fighter gear, a visual echo of the movie *Top Gun*, starring Tom Cruise. Bush made a victory speech while behind him flew a massive banner declaring "Mission Accomplished."

Bremer was now the leader of 27 million Iraqis. But he would quickly find that the mission was far from accomplished. In Iraq, Bremer favored a uniform of suit and tie paired with desert combat boots, but his sharp dress sense couldn't conceal that he was a disastrous choice. With no experience in the Middle East other than a stint as a junior foreign service officer during the mid-1960s in Afghanistan—a then-placid country ruled by a monarch—Bremer made three colossal blunders. Bush and Rumsfeld and his top aides at the Pentagon also shared considerable responsibility for

these blunders since they had either ordered them to happen or were inattentive to their likely effects if they had not.

First, on May 9, just before he left DC for Baghdad, Bremer received his orders from Rumsfeld, including instructions to "actively oppose" the Ba'ath Party, an Arab socialist party that had been led by Saddam Hussein for more than two decades while he was in power. Douglas Feith, the top policy official at the Pentagon, showed Bremer a draft order for the "de-Ba'athification" of Iraq that would effectively fire tens of thousands of Ba'athists. Bremer told Feith that the order was so important that he would like to issue it himself after he took up his new role in Iraq as it would help to establish his authority there.

On May 16, Bremer issued Order Number One, firing tens of thousands of members of the Ba'ath Party, many of whom were civil servants who were keeping the Iraqi government functioning. The CIA station chief asked Bremer to reconsider. "By nightfall you will have driven 30,000 to 50,000 Ba'athists underground," he told Bremer. "And in six months you will really regret this."

Before the war senior US officials had generally agreed that the top two levels of the Ba'ath Party, representing a relatively small number of Iraqis, should be prohibited from holding office. But Bremer's order fired the top four layers of the party, which cut much deeper into Iraqi society. The incoming CENTCOM commander, General John Abizaid, thought Bremer's plans were extreme and were built on the post-WWII model of de-Nazification with the Ba'ath Party cast as the Nazi Party. Abizaid told the outgoing CENTCOM commander, General Franks, that Bremer's proposals were going to cause problems. Abizaid also protested to Feith. Feith replied firmly: "Let me repeat to you what the policy of the US government is: De-Ba'athification."

As many as 50,000 doctors, engineers, university professors, and civil servants were fired. Most had joined the Ba'ath Party not out of any ideological fervor but because they needed to be party members to obtain a job. These were many of the same professionals that the US would have needed to get the Iraqi government and society functioning again.

President Bush and Prime Minister Blair had repeatedly publicly promised that power would be transferred to the Iraqis as soon as possible. Instead came blunder number two: On May 16 Bremer also established the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). This was a formal acknowledgment

that the Americans were functioning not as liberators but as occupiers, with all the executive, legislative, and judicial powers vested in the CPA. Bremer could run Iraq indefinitely until the Iraqis were deemed "ready" to govern themselves. Bremer then appointed a handpicked Iraqi Governing Council, including Chalabi, rather than holding local elections for an interim government. For many Iraqis this was a slap in the face. (When nationwide elections were finally held two years later, Chalabi won an embarrassingly minuscule share of the vote: less than 1 percent.)

Bremer's third blunder came a week later, with Order Number Two, which dissolved all the branches of the Iraqi armed forces, as well as the ministries of defense and intelligence. As Bremer admitted to Rumsfeld in a memo, "The order will affect large numbers of people. There were some 400,000 employees at the MOD [Ministry of Defense] alone." The CPA would pay stipends to career military officers (but not to senior Ba'athist officers), which softened the blow a bit. But the overall effect was to put 720,000 men out on the street, many of them armed and trained to fight. You didn't need to be Napoleon to see this was going to be a problem, especially when there was estimated to be around a million tons of unsecured arms and munitions lying around Iraq unguarded now that the military had been disbanded.

Colonel Derek Harvey, a driven intelligence officer who specialized in the Middle East, was the head of the US military "Red Cell" that was trying to get inside the minds of the insurgents. Harvey met with insurgent leaders and tribal elders across Iraq in the year after the US invasion and found that those two orders fueled the insurgency. Sunni Iraqis had dominated the Iraqi military and Ba'ath Party and their dismissal had "flipped the social, economic, and political order on its head," creating a large group of disenfranchised men.

This was an important component of a larger issue: During Saddam's rule, minority Sunnis had ruled over the majority Shia in Iraq. The American overthrow of Saddam had inverted the power pyramid in Iraq so the Shia—who made up almost two-thirds of the population—were now on top, while the Sunnis—who were just under a third of Iraqis—were now on the bottom. Bush's "freedom agenda" to bring democracy to the Middle East only served to reinforce the alienation of minority Sunnis who were never going to win at the ballot box in Iraq. This would eventually turn the

Sunni-led insurgency against the Americans into a civil war in Iraq between the Sunnis and the Shia.

Rice and Powell were blindsided by the mass firings of the Iraqi armed forces; they found out about them in the newspaper. Bush's deputy national security advisor Steve Hadley recalled that the White House was not in the loop on the decision-making about the scale of the de-Ba'athification or the dissolution of the Iraqi Army. Hadley pinned the blame on Feith, the top Pentagon policy official. Feith, of course, reported to Rumsfeld, a skilled Washington insider who knew how to cover his tracks.

Among senior US military officers on the ground in Iraq, the reaction to the wholesale purging of the Iraqi military was a mixture of bewilderment and anger. Bremer had neither informed nor consulted them. Major General David Petraeus, who was commanding the 101st Airborne Division in the region around Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, believed that "Bremer had gone beyond regime change to destroy the Iraqi state and create the military and political foundations for the insurgency." Major General Jim Mattis, who had led his Marines on the "thunder run" to seize Baghdad during the first weeks of the US invasion, had been meeting with Iraqi generals to talk about reestablishing their army under American auspices. Mattis felt that demobilizing the Iraqi Army "set the most capable group of men in the country on an adversarial course against us."

A US Army history of the war concluded, "the U.S. deep de-Ba'athification policy and decision to dissolve the entire Iraqi security apparatus effectively collapsed the edifice of the Iraqi state, creating a national governance and security vacuum that would take another 6 to 7 years to refill."

As President Kennedy observed after the Bay of Pigs fiasco, "Victory has a hundred fathers and defeat is an orphan." Those responsible for the decision to dissolve the Iraqi military later went out of their way to distance themselves from it. In 2007 Bremer wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* headlined "How I Didn't Dismantle Iraq's Army," while in his autobiography President Bush wrote, "I should have insisted on more debate on Jerry [Bremer]'s orders, especially on what message disbanding the army would send."

Bush also told US Army historians that Bremer had simply "informed" him of the decision to disband the Iraqi military without saying, "Mr. President, here are your choices." As commander in chief Bush could have

countermanded the order; Bremer was, after all, Bush's personal representative in Iraq. It surely would have been awkward to do so, but helping to engender an insurgency in Iraq was the price of acquiescing to Bremer's decision, and that would prove to be a whole lot more awkward. In his own autobiography Rumsfeld wrote, "I was told of Bremer's decision and possibly could have stopped it." Of course Rumsfeld could have stopped it: he was Bremer's boss.

Bremer and Rumsfeld later rationalized the decision by saying that the Iraqi Army had already disbanded itself so there was nothing to disband. But this was contradicted by an inconvenient fact: On the very same day that the Iraqi military was dissolved, US Brigadier General Mark Hertling was meeting with six hundred Iraqi senior army officers to discuss how they might be integrated into a new Iraqi Army. Similarly, Colonel Paul Hughes had received dozens of contacts from Iraqi officers who wanted to recall back to duty tens of thousands of their soldiers. And while de-Ba'athification may have been popular among some Iraqis who had suffered under Saddam, as a practical matter its implementation was overseen by the Shia politician Ahmed Chalabi, who used the process to punish his enemies, as Bremer himself would later admit.

All these mistakes were caused or compounded by the Americans' profound ignorance about Iraq, which had been a closed dictatorship for decades. As the US Army history of the war put it, "This ignorance included Iraqi politics, society, and government—gaps that led the United States to make some deeply flawed assumptions about how the war was likely to unfold."

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Early during the invasion of Iraq, Lieutenant General William Wallace, one of the top US generals on the ground, said that elements of the Iraqi resistance were fighting a more effective guerrilla war than expected: "The enemy we're fighting is different from the one we'd war-gamed against," Wallace told reporters. These public comments did not endear the general to Rumsfeld. Wallace was replaced by Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the most junior three-star general in the Army.

The most consequential American war since Vietnam was now commanded by a newly minted three-star. In the hierarchical military it

signaled that the conduct of the Iraq War was being relegated to a relatively junior flag officer and his inexperienced staff. General George Casey, who was the vice chief of the Army and who would later take command in Iraq, characterized this decision as a "terrible mistake."

All this brings us back to Clausewitz's astute observation that the "most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature." In the Bush White House there was a determined effort to mischaracterize the war that they had embarked upon in Iraq. A verboten word around the White House was the term "insurgency," since it seemed to confer a measure of credibility on the Iraqi guerrillas, publicly derided by Rumsfeld as "dead-enders." It also evoked the ghosts of Vietnam.

This was more than a dispute over simple nomenclature. Fighting an insurgency is quite unlike fighting a conventional war and requires a major shift in tactics. Early in the war the US military had conducted large-scale "cordon and sweep" operations that indiscriminately swept up thousands of Iraqis who were often detained. This was not going to win Iraqis' "hearts and minds," in the jargon of the Vietnam era.

When General Casey took over command in Iraq from Lieutenant General Sanchez in June 2004 it was obvious that the country was deep in the throes of an insurgency, which necessitated a change in mindset among his troops. "The American military had usually been focused on targeting a tank army and interdicting it before it could get into the battle," Casey explained. "Now you're looking to target an individual who is on the third floor of a high-rise apartment in the city of twenty thousand people."

Casey also knew that insurgencies tended to last a long time before one side prevailed; his father, Major General George Casey Sr., was the highest-ranking US military officer to die in Vietnam. Casey was a newly commissioned second lieutenant when he met his father's casket at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. He never made a decision to put American forces in harm's way without thinking about the consequences; just over two thousand American service members died under Casey's command in Iraq, a little under half of the total to die during the war.

As a result of his father's death, Casey always had the Vietnam War in the back of his mind. In the early fall of 2004, Casey asked his staff to put together a study of insurgencies in the twentieth century. They found that successful counterinsurgency campaigns lasted an average of nine years, while unsuccessful campaigns lasted an average of thirteen years.

This was a much longer timeline than the Bush war cabinet had been planning on. John Negroponte, the US ambassador in Baghdad who had served in Vietnam as a young foreign service officer, shared Casey's assessment that this would be a long war, and he cabled Secretary of State Rice in December 2004 to tell her that completing the mission in Iraq might take at least five years.

In private, senior Bush national security officials were willing to discuss the notion that there was an insurgency happening. On Veterans Day, November 11, 2003, CIA Director George Tenet and the agency's top analysts on Iraq and al-Qaeda met in the White House Situation Room to brief the president, Cheney, Rice, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and Bremer, who had just flown in from Baghdad.

Gina Bennett, an intelligence analyst who had written the first US government classified warning about a militant named Osama bin Laden back in 1993, gave an overview of the "foreign fighter" phenomenon in Iraq, which was replicating many of the past jihads she had carefully studied. Foreign fighters from around the Middle East were flooding into Iraq to fight the Americans, and many of them were volunteering to be suicide bombers. In Bennett's view the Iraq War was galvanizing the foreign fighters: There were American boots on the ground in an Arab country, which seemed to prove bin Laden's claims that the US was just out to control the region's oil and subjugate Muslims.

Bennett told Bush the Iraq War was attracting foreign militants "like flies on bull shit."

"Well, we just need to be flyswatters," Bush responded.

Bennett pointed out that the Iraq War had come along at just the right time to rescue al-Qaeda, which had taken a real beating after 9/11 but was now exploiting the conflict in Iraq to stage a comeback.

"Why are the foreign fighters doing this?" Bush asked Bennett.

An observant Catholic, Bennett knew that Bush was a born-again Christian, so she explained the phenomenon in theological terms. Bennett said that the "greater jihad" is the struggle against the temptation to deviate

from the path of God, just as in Christianity it would be resisting the temptation to sin. But bin Laden had twisted the meaning of jihad and had made it exclusively about warfare, and was promoting holy war as something that all Muslims had to engage in.

The CIA's Iraq mission manager Robert Grenier then gave an overview of what the agency was seeing in Iraq. The insurgency was taking on an "increasingly Islamist cast because they were the ones who had legitimacy," he explained, rather than the more secular Ba'athists who had lost credibility because of their connections to Saddam's regime. He also told Bush and his war cabinet that "this is a full-blown insurgency" and "sort of the functional equivalent of civil war." This appears to be the first time the term "civil war" was used in a meeting about Iraq with President Bush.

Bush turned to Bremer, who seemed glum, and asked him curtly: "What do *you* say, Bremer?"

Bremer said that the Iraqi military had dissolved itself and couldn't be recalled and Shia leaders were against any rollback of de-Ba'athification. In other words, there wasn't much to be done except stay the course with the failing policies that were already in place.

"We're not calling it an insurgency," Bush instructed his war cabinet. "So fine, within the room, we can call it what we want. But just so you all understand, we are not going to go out of here and call it an insurgency."

CENTCOM commander General Abizaid apparently didn't get the memo. At a press conference at the Pentagon on April 12, 2004, Abizaid matter-of-factly referred to the "insurgency" in Iraq and took several questions from reporters about counterinsurgency operations in the country. Rumsfeld was very unhappy with General Abizaid, and they had a back-and-forth about whether it was an insurgency or not. Finally, the general said to Rumsfeld, "Look, Mr. Secretary, we're fighting an insurgency. You can call it what you want to call it, but I have to fight it the way our troops know to fight it. And it's a counterinsurgency, and those are the tactics, techniques, and procedures we're using, and I'm not going to change how I talk about it."

In the fall of 2004 Colonel Harvey, the leader of the Red Cell examining the insurgency, received an unexpected invitation to brief Vice President Dick Cheney about what he was finding in Iraq. In Cheney's office Harvey told the vice president that the Sunni elite who were used to running Iraq would continue fighting as long as they felt that the majority Shia were

treating them unfairly. Therefore, it would be wise for the United States to start reaching out to Sunni leaders rather than endorsing the continuing de-Ba'athification of Sunnis led by Chalabi, which was fueling the insurgency.

On December 17, 2004, Colonel Harvey was summoned to brief President Bush along with Rice, Powell, and Wolfowitz. In the Oval Office there was now no pushback at the notion that the US faced a Sunni-led insurgency; that much was obvious. Harvey evoked Vietnam, telling the president and his war cabinet that the enemy was tough and was going to be in the fight for a long time.

Three days earlier President Bush had awarded the Medal of Freedom to Paul Bremer, George Tenet, and General Tommy Franks. The highest American civilian honor went to three of the people most responsible for the debacle in Iraq: Tenet had overseen the intelligence case that Iraq had WMD; General Franks had no plans for the "day after" the invasion of Iraq; and Bremer had ordered the dissolution of the Iraqi military and fired tens of thousands of members of the Ba'ath Party. During the awards ceremony Bush claimed that these men had "made our country more secure and advanced the cause of human liberty." It seemed to be President Bush's way of giving the middle finger to the critics of his Iraq War—who were by now legion.

Who were the Iraqi insurgents? At first the US government really had no idea because the CIA was overseeing a massive wild goose chase involving 1,400 American civilian and military personnel in the search for the nonexistent weapons of mass destruction. Ambassador Clayton McManaway, who was Bremer's principal deputy, observed, "The imbalance was staggering between the intelligence analysts working on weapons of mass destruction and those working on the insurgency."

Over time it became clear that the insurgents were a mix of what the Bush administration referred to as "Former Regime Elements"—meaning Ba'athists and soldiers who were now out of a job—working alongside Islamists fighting against the "infidels," a relatively small number of foreign fighters from across the Muslim world who had descended on Iraq, often with the express intention of conducting suicide attacks, and large numbers of ordinary Iraqis angered by the presence of the American

occupiers. This last group Colonel Harvey referred to as "POIs," Pissed Off Iraqis.

Ali Allawi, an Iraqi politician and historian, explained that Iraqis were set off by "the searching of homes without the presence of a male head of household, body searches of women, the use of sniffer dogs (regarded as "unclean" by many Muslims), degrading treatment of prisoners, [and the] public humiliation of the elderly and notables." This "all contributed to the view that the Americans had only disdain for Iraq's traditions."

The physical abuse and sexual humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by female and male US soldiers at Abu Ghraib prison, the photographic evidence of which became public in April 2004, confirmed many Iraqis' worst fears about their American occupiers. The images from Abu Ghraib galvanized jihadists. A Tunisian later captured by the Americans in Iraq explained: "They used to show the events in Abu Ghraib, the oppression . . . so I acted in the heat of the moment and decided to seek martyrdom in Iraq."

Another key factor in the growing resistance to the Americans was the stance of the Association of Muslim Scholars, a group of leading Iraqi Sunni clerics who early in the war declared that jihad against the American occupiers was *fard 'ayn*, an obligatory duty for all believing Muslims, akin in importance to saying the mandatory daily prayers.

Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a jihadist from the gritty northern Jordan town of Zarqa, also played a key role in the Iraqi conflict. During the mid-1990s Zarqawi was serving time in a Jordanian prison for his role in a botched Islamist terrorist plot directed against liquor stores and movie houses. He was subsequently released as part of an amnesty for thousands of prisoners that was granted by King Abdullah II, the newly crowned monarch of Jordan, in March 1999.

Like many jihadists who had spent time in prison, Zarqawi emerged more zealous and hardened. He made his way to Afghanistan, where he set up a small training camp. After the fall of the Taliban, Zarqawi fled to Iran, then moved into the Kurdish region of northern Iraq—which Saddam did not control—a few months before the American invasion in March 2003. This made Zarqawi of great interest to the CIA. Powell used the Jordanian militant as a principal exhibit in his speech at the UN in February 2003 to make the case for a supposed Saddam–al-Qaeda alliance, claiming:

> Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, an associate and collaborator of Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda lieutenants. . . . He traveled to Baghdad in May of 2002. . . . During his stay, nearly two-dozen extremists converged on Baghdad and established a base of operations there.

Like much of Powell's UN speech, none of this was true. Zarqawi ran a militant group separate from al-Qaeda, as even Rumsfeld himself admitted at a Pentagon briefing in June 2004 when he said that "someone could legitimately say he's not al-Qaeda." A little over a year later the CIA issued a report stating that before the US invasion of Iraq, Saddam's "regime did not have a relationship, harbor, or turn a blind eye towards Zarqawi."

But in one of the grimmest ironies of the war on terror, the US invasion would end up establishing Zarqawi as the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which would become al-Qaeda's most lethal affiliate. Al-Qaeda in Iraq greatly accelerated the Iraqi civil war while giving "Al-Qaeda Central" a new lease on life.

On August 19, 2003, Zarqawi's men bombed the United Nations' headquarters in Baghdad, killing twenty-two people, which precipitated the withdrawal of almost the entire UN delegation of eight hundred international staffers and the departure of multiple international aid organizations that were trying to help get Iraq back on its feet.

Zarqawi's men also started to take hostage and murder Westerners working in Iraq. Zarqawi's videotape of his beheading of twenty-six-year-old American businessman Nicholas Berg was posted on the web on May 11, 2004. Video on the internet was now becoming more widely available and the dark spectacle of his murder, titled "Sheikh Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi Slaughters an American Infidel," was viewed millions of times. When bin Laden appeared in a video, he made long-winded political-religious statements, while Zarqawi was murdering an American on camera with his own hands. Zarqawi's new nickname became "Sheikh of the Slaughterers." For young Islamist militants around the Middle East, Zarqawi was a thrilling role model, while for the rest of the world he helped to cast Iraq as a fearsome place to be avoided at all costs, further slowing reconstruction efforts.

In a statement posted online on October 17, 2004, Zarqawi pledged his allegiance to bin Laden, saying: “By God, O sheikh of the mujahideen, if you bid us plunge into the ocean, we would follow you. If you ordered it so, we would obey.”

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On March 31, 2004, SUVs carrying four US security contractors ran into an ambush in Fallujah, a conservative Sunni city in Anbar Province west of Baghdad. They were killed, their bodies set on fire, and the images of the desecrated bodies were shown around the world.

Bremer told the White House that a strong military response was required, and Bush agreed, saying it had to be “tougher than hell.” Marine Major General Jim Mattis was tasked with overseeing the operation. Mattis was an avid student of military history. He recalled the last time that the Marines had been ordered to mount a frontal assault on a city was in 1968 during the Vietnam War, in Hue, which had caused horrendous damage to the city. Mattis did not want to mount a similar frontal assault on Fallujah, a city of 300,000 residents, which he thought might hand a propaganda victory to the insurgents. Mattis later observed in his memoir: “Great nations don’t get angry; military action should be undertaken only to achieve specific strategic effects.”

Mattis was overruled. On April 3 he received a simple order: *Attack.* Attack the Marines did, killing hundreds of insurgents and Iraqi civilians. The intense urban fighting received wall-to-wall coverage on Al Jazeera, which had a reporter stationed in Fallujah’s main hospital who broadcast a constant stream of images of wounded civilians, including women and children. Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, the US commander in Iraq, recalled, “To say that the Fallujah offensive angered the Sunni Muslims of Iraq would be a gross understatement. Up to this point many had still been on the fence.”

Members of the Iraqi Governing Council threatened to quit unless the Fallujah assault was immediately stopped. The operation was halted by Bremer three days after it had begun. Major General Mattis was furious; he had been ordered to mount an attack that he thought was unwise, and just as it was achieving results he was told to stop. Mattis said to his boss, General Abizaid, “If you’re going to take Vienna, take fucking Vienna,” which was

a version of Napoleon's observation to one of his generals who was hesitating to seize the Austrian city. The insurgents seemed to have won a victory.

Six months later, the Marines went back into Fallujah, which was now controlled by thousands of jihadist insurgents. Mindful of the negative coverage that the first battle of Fallujah had received on Al Jazeera, Arab media was allowed to embed with Iraqi units and an Iraqi general was appointed to be the spokesperson for the operation.

Retaking Fallujah was costly: thousands of the city's buildings were destroyed and most of its inhabitants fled, including Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Thirty-five US servicemen had died, but Al-Qaeda in Iraq would not wage another large-scale conventional battle against the US military.

General Casey, his boss at CENTCOM General Abizaid, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld shared the same overall views about what to do in Iraq. Casey wanted to "transition" control to Iraqi security forces as soon they could be "stood up" because US forces were seen as occupiers by the Iraqis. Whenever Casey met with Iraqi leaders, they almost invariably asked him: "When are you leaving?" Similarly, Abizaid believed that the US military presence was generating "antibodies" in Iraq, while Rumsfeld frequently compared Iraqis to children learning to ride a bicycle; you had to take your hand off the bicycle so they could ride it alone.

Their strategy was to hold an election to install a legitimate Iraqi government while also bulking up the Iraqi security forces so the US military could withdraw as soon as was feasible. This, of course, all made sense; the Americans would have to withdraw at some point and the Iraqis would have to take responsibility for their own security. But the question became: Was this strategy workable while the insurgency was gathering strength and Iraq was descending into a civil war? The Iraqi security forces were mostly ineffective in combat, while the violence in the country was spiraling out of control.

During a video teleconference in spring 2005 with Bush, General Casey told the president about his staff's findings that successful

counterinsurgency campaigns lasted an average of nine years. Since it seemed unlikely that US forces would be in Iraq for almost a decade, Casey laid out for the president his plans to train the Iraqi security services, who could fill the security gaps as US forces withdrew.

To Bush this did not seem to be about defeating the insurgency. The president asked Casey, “Are we playing for a tie? Are we playing for a tie?”

“Mr. President, we are not playing for a tie. We’re fighting our asses off every day,” Casey responded sharply the second time Bush asked this question. Casey had said this with a lot more force than he had intended. General Abizaid, also attending the videoconference, later called Casey with some sage advice: “You shouldn’t yell at the President.”

In any event, President Bush publicly endorsed Casey’s approach in June 2005, saying “As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.” Bush went on to say: “We’re helping Iraqis build a free nation that is an ally in the war on terror. We’re advancing freedom in the broader Middle East. We are removing a source of violence and instability and laying the foundation of peace for our children and our grandchildren.” Bush believed that by removing Saddam from power and advancing his “freedom” agenda he was creating the conditions for peace. Instead, civilian deaths in the Iraq War would almost double, from 16,000 in 2005 to around 30,000 a year later.

Zarqawi was instrumental in dragging Iraq into a brutal civil war. Zarqawi’s strategy was to attack the Shia so they would in turn strike the Sunnis, allowing al-Qaeda to assume the role of defender of the Sunnis. Zarqawi laid out this strategy in a lengthy letter to bin Laden in February 2004, writing, “targeting and hitting [the Shia] in [their] religious, political, and military depth will provoke them to show the Sunnis . . . the hidden rancor working in their breasts. If we succeed in dragging them into the arena of sectarian war, it will become possible to awaken the inattentive Sunnis as they feel imminent danger.”

Zarqawi’s strategy worked spectacularly. Unlike bin Laden’s relatively small group of “Afghan Arabs,” who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan during the 1980s and had a negligible impact on the conduct of that jihad, Zarqawi’s terrorist group had a great impact on the Iraq War. Al-Qaeda in Iraq bombed Shia religious processions, shrines, and

neighborhoods, and assassinated leading Shia clerics. The death toll from just one suicide bombing could be massive: On February 28, 2005, in the predominantly Shia city of Al-Hilal in Iraq, a thirty-two-year-old Jordanian named Raed Banna carried out a suicide bombing that killed 130 people, many of them police recruits.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq's bombing in February 2006 of the Golden Mosque in Samarra, one of the most important Shia shrines in the world, marked a turning point in the war. Iraq was already descending into a civil war when the attack took place, but now the violence intensified. In July 2006 more than thirty new bodies a day were recorded at the Baghdad morgue alone, some bearing the signs of gruesome torture with power drills.

President Bush thought it looked hopeless in Iraq. The summer of 2006 was the worst time of his presidency. Bush thought about the war constantly. By October 2006 an average of three American service members were being killed in Iraq every day. Every morning at 6:45 in the Oval Office, Bush read "blue sheets" about what had happened in Iraq during the previous twenty-four hours; the daily deaths of American service members and the spiraling attacks on Shia and Sunni civilians were all spelled out in detail. Meanwhile, support for Bush's handling of the Iraq War had cratered among Americans, falling from around 70 percent at the time of the invasion to 30 percent within four years.

In 2005 University of Chicago political scientist Robert Pape published a much-discussed study of suicide bombing, *Dying to Win*, in which he examined a number of suicide bombing campaigns, arguing that they principally occurred "to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland."

Pape's study seemed to answer a key question about the Iraq War: What was motivating the suicide attackers who were plunging the country into civil war? More suicide attacks were conducted in Iraq between 2003 and 2007 than had taken place in every other country of the world combined since 1981. Pape told the *Washington Post* that "the connection between Islamic fundamentalism and suicide bombing is misleading," instead pointing to foreign occupation as the key motivation for the suicide attackers. If this was true, the best way to tamp down the campaign of

suicide bombings in Iraq was to withdraw more US soldiers from the country. Pape's work seemed to give some evidentiary basis for this notion.

But this overlooked the changing character of the Iraq War. In its early days it was largely a secular Ba'athist-led insurgency, but as the conflict went on it became an increasingly Sunni Islamist insurgency. And it then turned into a Sunni-Shia civil war in which the US military was something of a bystander that continued to be attacked by Sunni and Shia militias who were mostly focused on attacking each other as well as Sunni and Shia civilian targets.

Pape's diagnosis of the Iraq War as an Iraqi nationalist response to the occupation was badly out of date by the time he published his book, not least undercut by the fact that almost all the suicide bombers in Iraq were not Iraqis but jihadists from across the Muslim world very much motivated by Islamist beliefs. Mohammed Hafez, the author of an authoritative 2007 study, *Suicide Bombers in Iraq*, found that of the 139 "known" suicide bombers in Iraq, 53 were from Saudi Arabia and only 18 were Iraqi, while the rest came from other Arab countries and even Europe. The US military assessed that Al-Qaeda in Iraq's foreign recruits were responsible for between 80 to 90 percent of the suicide attacks in Iraq.

The most extensive suicide bombing campaign in history, which by the fall of 2007 had killed more than ten thousand Iraqis, was being conducted in Iraq almost entirely by foreigners who fervently believed that they had to expel the "infidel" occupiers.

In short, the Sunni suicide bombers in Iraq were not Iraqi nationalists, as Pape's work claimed. They traveled to Iraq to commit suicide and they typically said they were doing this for Allah. The suicide bombers also often attacked gatherings of Shia civilians in Iraq, which was motivated by the religious belief that the Shia were not true Muslims.

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Al-Qaeda in Iraq documents found by US forces provided a snapshot of who these suicide attackers were. Known as the "Sinjar records," they were discovered ten miles from the Iraq–Syria border and documented the foreign fighters who joined Al-Qaeda in Iraq after transiting through Syria between August 2006 and August 2007. (Up to three-quarters of foreign fighters traveling to Iraq first passed through Syria. This al-Qaeda–Syria–

Iraq nexus would many years later morph into ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.)

Like other murderous organizations, Al-Qaeda in Iraq kept good records about their new recruits' country of origin; the "work" they were volunteering for—meaning whether they wanted to be a suicide bomber or a regular fighter; and their present occupations. The Sinjar records documented that more than half of al-Qaeda's recruits who answered the question were volunteering to be suicide attackers. Strikingly, of the 576 individuals who provided their nationality, around 40 percent were Saudis, by far the largest group—a reminder, along with the fifteen Saudi hijackers who carried out the 9/11 attacks, of how deep al-Qaeda's roots ran in Saudi Arabia, despite the kingdom being at least nominally an ally of the United States.

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Elections for a transitional National Assembly and a new Iraqi government were held in 2005. They seemed like a great victory, with TV images beamed around the world of joyous Iraqis voting. But Sunnis largely boycotted the voting; in Anbar Province, the heartland of the Sunni insurgency, out of a population of more than two million people, only two thousand cast ballots in the first round of voting.

The new Iraqi government was effectively a Shia government, and the Ministry of Interior, which controlled the country's internal security, was populated by Shia death squads who were killing Sunnis. So American efforts to shore up the Iraqi government were strengthening one side in a sectarian civil war, while the US advisors who were helping to build up the Iraqi security services were, in some cases, bulking up de facto Shia militias that were dressed in police uniforms.

And just as some Sunnis came to see Al-Qaeda in Iraq as their protectors against the Shia, the Shia started setting up their own analogous groups, such as Jaysh al-Mahdi, which fought the American occupiers and attacked Sunni insurgent groups and Sunni civilians.

In many ways Iraq was a roadside-bomb and car-bomb war. The insurgents would often use shells left over from Saddam's vast arsenals to build their bombs. The shells were an explosive charge already wrapped in a steel case. When the bomb exploded, this was guaranteed to produce

plenty of high-velocity steel fragments that traveled faster than the speed of sound. By the fall of 2007 around one thousand American soldiers had been killed by these homemade bombs.

In 2005 the Shia Iranian military introduced new, highly effective bombs into the Iraqi conflict. Known as explosively formed projectiles, they could penetrate US armored vehicles by shooting a round of molten copper through their armor. It was a warning that the neighboring Iranians were now entering into the Iraq War in a serious way by providing the Shia insurgents a powerful weapon to attack the Americans. For the Iranians—who had fought a long bloody war against Iraq during the 1980s and were now threatened by the large US military presence in the country—a chaotic, weak Iraq served their interests. In the summer of 2006 Rumsfeld instructed US special operations forces to start hunting down the Shia militias in Iraq.

On August 17, 2006, a senior Marine intelligence officer in Anbar Province circulated a classified assessment saying that Al-Qaeda in Iraq was now the strongest political force in the province. This assessment leaked to one of the leading American reporters covering the war, Tom Ricks, and his story ran on the front page of the *Washington Post*, landing like a skunk at a garden party in the American capital. It seemed to confirm what many already believed: the United States was losing the Iraq War.

The Iraqi conflict increased Islamist militancy in the Muslim world and provided al-Qaeda with vastly more recruits. Some claimed that Iraq would reduce terrorism by drawing jihadists to fight US forces there, where they could be killed or captured. On July 2, 2003, Bush told reporters, “Bring ’em on.” He again put forward this so-called flypaper theory four years later, claiming: “If we were not fighting these Al-Qaeda terrorists in Iraq most would be trying to kill Americans and other civilians elsewhere—in Afghanistan, or other foreign capitals, or on the streets of our own cities.”

But this assertion was unconvincing, because it was based on the faulty premise that the world contained a finite number of jihadist terrorists who could be attracted to Iraq and killed. In fact, the pool of potential terrorists expanded quite dramatically because of the Iraq War. The National

Intelligence Estimate (NIE) on terrorism released in April 2006—which reflected the consensus views of all the US intelligence agencies—concluded that the "Iraq conflict has become the 'cause célèbre' for jihadists" and "is shaping a new generation of terrorist leaders and operatives." The NIE also found that the jihadist movement was spreading globally because of the Iraq War, while the central al-Qaeda organization was exploiting it "to attract new recruits and donors." Reading between the bland bureaucratic lines, the US intelligence agencies collectively assessed that the Iraq War had saved al-Qaeda, a spectacular self-inflicted wound by the Bush administration.

A study by New York University came to similar conclusions by comparing the period after the 9/11 attacks up to the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 with the period from March 2003 to September 2006. The study found that the rate of lethal attacks by jihadists had increased sevenfold since the invasion.

Three of those attacks were carried out in Amman, Jordan, on November 9, 2005, by Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which launched near-simultaneous suicide bombings at hotels in the capital—the Days Inn, Hyatt, and Radisson—killing fifty-seven people. Most of the victims were Jordanians celebrating a wedding, provoking a wave of revulsion against Zarqawi, who was denounced by his own tribe and family members.

By now Osama bin Laden was living in the small city of Abbottabad in northern Pakistan, about thirty miles north of the capital, Islamabad. Bin Laden was outraged that someone nominally under his command would launch attacks that killed so many Muslim civilians. Al-Qaeda's leaders sent a long letter to Zarqawi noting that these kinds of attacks on Muslim civilians were counterproductive and gently reprimanded him for the "lack of precision in the execution" of the hotel bombings in Jordan. The letter observed that "military action is a servant to policy" and urged that Zarqawi consult with "Sheikh Osama" on significant issues such as carrying out attacks outside Iraq.

Bin Laden's top deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, had sent Zarqawi a letter earlier in 2005 warning him not to do anything that would erode support for al-Qaeda among ordinary Muslims, writing, "Among the things which the feelings of the Muslim populace who love and support you will never find palatable are the scenes of slaughtering the hostages. You shouldn't be

deceived by the praise of some of the zealous young men and their description of you as the ‘sheikh of the slaughterers.’ ”

But Zarqawi largely ignored the advice coming from al-Qaeda’s leaders. It was an early sign that the jihadist movement headed by bin Laden was beginning to fracture and the issue of Muslim civilian casualties caused by al-Qaeda and its affiliates was undercutting support for them in the Islamic world.

The Iraq War was a devastating indictment of the senior Bush officials who styled themselves “the Vulcans.” During the summer of 2001 they had also disregarded multiple warnings of terrorist attacks; 9/11 happened. They linked Saddam to 9/11; there was no such connection. They said Saddam and al-Qaeda were allies; they weren’t. They said Saddam had WMD; he didn’t. They said the US would be welcomed with flowers in Iraq; US soldiers were welcomed with roadside bombs. They said that the Iraq invasion was designed to block an alliance between Saddam’s Ba’athists and al-Qaeda; the war instead created that alliance. They said they would bring freedom to Iraq; instead, they brought anarchy and civil war. They said that the Iraq War would remove a key source of terrorism; instead, the war amplified jihadist terrorism around the world. They said the war would likely pay for itself with Iraqi assets; instead, it added trillions of dollars to the US debt. They said they would bring a trusted democracy to Iraq; instead, the war greatly reduced trust in American democracy at home.

Rumsfeld was fond of his faux-profound maxim, “The absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.” Au contraire: The absence of evidence is simply the absence of evidence, and the beliefs the Vulcans held about the connections between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda had no evidentiary basis. On January 23, 2004, David Kay, who was leading the American efforts to find Iraq’s supposed weapons of mass destruction, resigned. By now it was painfully clear that Iraq’s WMDs hadn’t been found. “I don’t think they existed,” Kay admitted. *The absence of evidence is the absence of evidence.*

The Vulcans were one of the most incompetent national security teams in American history. Not since US Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his “whiz kids” during the Vietnam War was there such a disconnect

between the Vulcans' self-congratulatory self-image and the damage they did to American interests and the havoc that they wreaked in other countries.

But ultimately the responsibility for all of this lay with the commander in chief, President George W. Bush, who never asked his war cabinet—which included Colin Powell, who had overseen the successful 1991 Gulf War—a very simple question: Is invading Iraq a good idea?

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CHAPTER SIX

AL-QAEDA REVIVES

We are at war, and I am a soldier.

—MOHAMMED SIDIQUE KHAN, A BRITISH SCHOOLTEACHER, SPEAKING ON HIS AL-QAEDA "MARTYRDOM" VIDEOTAPE

After the battle of Tora Bora, al-Qaeda's leaders and bin Laden's family scattered. Some of the family, together with key al-Qaeda operatives, traveled south to the megacity of Karachi, Pakistan, while others fled to Iran. Members of al-Qaeda well understood how much damage had been inflicted on their organization by the Americans. After the fall of the Taliban one of them wrote to bin Laden, "The weakness, failure and aimlessness that befell us were harrowing."

During the summer of 2002 bin Laden's youngest wife, Amal, aged nineteen, traveled from Karachi to the city of Peshawar in western Pakistan, where she soon reunited with her husband. Bin Laden and Amal—who hailed originally from the bin Laden family's ancestral homeland of Yemen—traveled by van to the green mountains of the Swat region in northern Pakistan. There, in the "Switzerland" of Pakistan, they conceived their second child.

Fugitives typically don't have children while they are on the run, since they tend to slow you down, but bin Laden had four children with Amal while they were hiding in Pakistan after the 9/11 attacks. When Amal gave birth to two of their babies in Pakistani hospitals, she did so with false identity papers, and pretended she was deaf to avoid any questions about why a Yemeni woman was delivering her children in Pakistan. Bin Laden must have believed that the US had no clue about where he was, so he could take the risk of enlarging his family.

In early 2003 Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, also known as KSM, the operational commander of the 9/11 attacks, stayed with bin Laden in Swat for a couple of weeks. KSM likely briefed bin Laden about the ambitious plans he had for new anti-American operations. Weeks after his visit KSM was captured on March 1, 2003, in the city of Rawalpindi, a little over one hundred miles from bin Laden's hideout in Swat. KSM told his Pakistani interrogators that bin Laden was alive, but he also tried to mislead them by saying that bin Laden was probably living in Kunar in Afghanistan—information that was now quite dated.

In the closely contested 2004 US presidential campaign, the question of bin Laden's escape became an issue—specifically, the failure to capture or kill him at Tora Bora three years earlier. The Democratic nominee, Senator John Kerry, attacked President Bush for letting bin Laden escape at Tora Bora. Vice President Cheney called Kerry's criticisms "absolute garbage" while Bush asserted that Kerry would say "anything it takes to get elected." As we have seen, Kerry was telling the truth.

Only four days before Americans went to the polls to vote in the presidential election, bin Laden himself unexpectedly appeared on a video that aired on October 29, 2004. During an election in which terrorism was a major concern for voters, the bin Laden videotape reminded Americans about the threat posed by al-Qaeda. In the video bin Laden gave almost a parody of a US presidential address; he was sitting behind a desk dressed in ceremonial gold robes and without any of the guns that typically accompanied his other videotaped appearances. Bin Laden mocked President Bush's frequent claim that the United States was attacked on 9/11 because of its freedoms, pointing out that if it were really about Western

freedoms, he might better have attacked Sweden. The big message of the tape: bin Laden was not only alive; he was also doing well.

Bush's national security advisor Condoleezza Rice was sitting in the presidential motorcade when White House press secretary Dana Perino ran up, saying, "There's a bin Laden tape! There's a bin Laden tape!" Rice thought, *Saying what?* Rice was worried that the bin Laden videotape would remind Americans that the Bush administration still hadn't brought al-Qaeda's leader to justice. Bush's top political advisor, Karl Rove, had a different take, telling an aide, "This has the feel of something that's not gonna hurt us at all."

Even though bin Laden had escaped at the battle of Tora Bora, President Bush performed much better in polls than Senator Kerry did on the issue of combating terrorism. Rove was right: Bush won the close election. But clearly bin Laden was still out there.

With US support the Pakistanis had captured several key al-Qaeda operatives such as KSM who were hiding out in Pakistan's bustling cities. Their use of cell phones and the internet in those cities provided crucial clues to the locations of some of al-Qaeda's leaders. The CIA started using novel link analysis programs such as Analyst's Notebook and working with the data analytics company Palantir to track down suspected terrorists through their cell phone, text, and internet communications and combining that information with their "digital exhaust" from mundane transactions such as the use of money machines.

Three years after bin Laden and other members of al-Qaeda had escaped from Tora Bora, the terrorist organization started trying to regroup. Realizing that Pakistan's cities were no longer safe places to hide, the bulk of al-Qaeda's operatives migrated to northwestern Pakistan's border with Afghanistan known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. This name was something of a misnomer: the tribal areas may have been technically administered by the Pakistani government and military but they left local rule to the tribes, some of whom were involved in drug-running and selling weapons. A remote, mountainous region about the size of Belgium, it was a perfect place for al-Qaeda to begin to rebuild itself largely unmolested by Pakistani authorities. As they built up their operations again, al-Qaeda's

operatives began accepting recruits from the West who wanted to be trained as terrorists.

During the morning rush hour on July 7, 2005, four men, each carrying backpacks, arrived at King's Cross station in North London. Hugging each other, the men appeared euphoric. They split up to board three trains on the London Underground and a double-decker bus, where they detonated the bombs hidden in their backpacks, killing themselves and fifty-two commuters. It was the most lethal terrorist attack in the United Kingdom since Libyan agents had blown up Pan Am Flight 103 flying over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, killing 270 people.

The London bombers' ringleader was Mohammed Sidique Khan, a well-regarded teacher known as "Sid" who taught disabled children at a school in the northern city of Leeds. Khan and two of his co-conspirators were second-generation British Pakistanis who seemed utterly ordinary but had secretly adopted militant Islamist beliefs. They often met at an Islamic bookshop in Leeds, where they watched videos of atrocities committed against Muslims in Chechnya and Iraq.

After he had become radicalized in Britain, Khan traveled to Pakistan in mid-November 2004 where he met up with a British Pakistani member of al-Qaeda, Rashid Rauf, who arranged for Khan to travel to Pakistan's tribal regions. There Khan was taught how to make hydrogen peroxide–based bombs. In the post-9/11 era, purchasing large quantities of hydrogen peroxide—which has several innocuous uses, such as in dyeing hair—wouldn't attract the attention of law enforcement, unlike the purchase of more conventional bomb-making ingredients such as ammonium nitrate.

In February 2005 Khan returned to England, where he made his first bulk purchases of hydrogen peroxide and started to build the bombs. Rauf, the Pakistan-based al-Qaeda member, provided Khan additional bomb-making advice over the phone. The four bombs that detonated in London on July 7, 2005, were all hydrogen peroxide–based devices.

British authorities at first were clueless, claiming that the London bombings were carried out by disaffected British Muslims with no connections to al-Qaeda. Two months after the bombings al-Qaeda's propaganda channel released a "martyrdom" videotape of Khan, who

described bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri as “today’s heroes.” Zawahiri himself appeared at the end of the videotape, lending his support to the London attacks. On the first anniversary of the London bombings, al-Qaeda’s propaganda arm released a new videotape, featuring another of the suicide bombers, who railed against the British government and its support for the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq.

By the summer of 2005, al-Qaeda had regrouped sufficiently to carry out bombings in the United Kingdom using British suicide bombers, which was a real shock to the British public. “Homegrown” British suicide bombers were also a surprise to the British intelligence services. It appeared inconceivable to them that British citizens would carry out suicide attacks in the United Kingdom, something that you could expect in Baghdad, not on the streets of London.

At the same time, as we have seen, al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Iraq was conducting the most lethal suicide campaign in history and killing many thousands of Iraqis. The US invasion of Iraq had radicalized a new generation of militants, many of whom believed that it confirmed bin Laden’s claims that the United States was at war with Islam.

During the summer of 2006 hydrogen peroxide–based bombs would again be the weapons of choice for a group of British Pakistanis trained by al-Qaeda who plotted to blow up passenger jets flying to the United States and Canada from London. Five of the plotters made “martyrdom” videotapes. Their plan was to bring hydrogen peroxide–based liquid explosives disguised as soft drinks onto the targeted planes, assemble the bombs onboard the flights, and detonate the devices using the flashes from disposable cameras. The outlines of the plot became known to US and British investigators in part because of intercepted phone calls and emails between the British plotters and their al-Qaeda handler in Pakistan, Rashid Rauf, who had helped to orchestrate the London bombings a year earlier.

Senior White House officials were worried: the fifth anniversary of 9/11 was looming and the planned attacks on several American passenger jets could kill more than a thousand people. For Frances Townsend, Bush’s homeland security advisor, the “planes plot” was profoundly alarming: the plotters had a bomb-making factory in East London, and they had links to

al-Qaeda in Pakistan. The plot also posed a dilemma, because investigators wanted to see who was involved in the conspiracy and how far they could trace the conspiracy up al-Qaeda's chain of command. As they began to understand the contours of the plot—liquid explosives made from hydrogen peroxide, multiple simultaneous explosions targeting American airliners—Townsend had to wrestle with the question: How long can we let the investigation of the plotters proceed and still have planes continue flying from London to the US?

Each day White House officials had to decide if they were going to continue to allow those planes to fly. National Security Advisor Steve Hadley's daughter was on one of those flights from London, returning from a summer-abroad program. Bush officials were prohibited by law from telling loved ones to delay their flights because there was a "no double standard" rule; they could not personally act on secret intelligence that was not available to the public. For Townsend the daily decision about whether or not to let the transatlantic flights continue to fly weighed on her heavily. President Bush checked in with her twice a day asking, "Are you comfortable letting the planes fly?"

American, British, and Pakistani officials had differing views about how best to investigate the "planes plot" case. Rauf was living in Pakistan and was communicating with the would-be bombers in the United Kingdom. The Pakistanis felt that if they followed Rauf and lost him and a passenger jet later blew up, they were going to get blamed for the disaster.

From the British point of view, if the Pakistanis found Rauf and took him into custody, then it was going to be apparent to the suspects in the United Kingdom that the authorities were on to them. British authorities told the Pakistanis that they wanted the investigation to continue for as long as feasible because they wanted to develop the best possible court case against the UK-based plotters.

Bush officials told the Pakistanis that they wanted Rauf arrested as soon as they found him. In the end, the Pakistanis arrested Rauf and British police quickly took the plotters in the UK into custody. At the apartment that served as the plotters' bomb factory, police found components for HMTD, a high explosive made from concentrated hydrogen peroxide.

The British police weren't thrilled that their case against the plotters was not as strong as it might have been if the investigation had been allowed to

play out for longer. Townsend's view was, "I don't give a shit if it blows their case." The bombers' targets, after all, were American planes.

During the trial of the men accused in the planes plot the prosecution argued that some 1,500 passengers would have died if all of the targeted planes had been blown out of the sky.

The case resulted in rules limiting the quantities of liquids that passengers could bring on to planes to prevent liquid-based explosives being carried onto flights.

Another arena of jihad where al-Qaeda started resurging was in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis had long turned a blind eye to the Islamist extremists who had colonized its Ministry of Islamic Affairs and their clergy. This changed after al-Qaeda launched three simultaneous car bombings in Riyadh, on May 12, 2003, targeting compounds that housed Westerners, killing twenty-six people, which initiated a sustained terrorist campaign by al-Qaeda in the kingdom. The Saudi government finally started removing the religious extremists on its payroll. Within a year the Saudis had suspended 1,357 religious officials from their duties.

A year after the attacks in Riyadh, bin Laden incited further terrorist operations in his birthplace, saying in an audiotape, "One of the most important reasons that led our enemies to control our land is the theft of our oil. Be active and prevent them from reaching the oil and mount your operations accordingly." Al-Qaeda's Saudi affiliate attacked the offices of a contractor for Exxon Mobil on May 1, 2004, killing six Westerners. The same month, al-Qaeda attacked the residential compounds and offices of Western oil firms. Twenty-two were killed. In February 2006, the group unsuccessfully attacked the Abqaiq facility, through which approximately 10 percent of the world's oil supply flowed. Facing something closer to a domestic insurgency than simply a small group of terrorists, Saudi forces killed or arrested hundreds of militants.

Around the world groups affiliated with al-Qaeda carried out many other terrorist attacks: In 2002 in Bali they killed 202 people, mostly Western tourists, and murdered twenty-one at synagogue in Tunisia. The same year, al-Qaeda operatives, directed by bin Laden, attacked an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, Kenya, killing thirteen, and simultaneously tried to bring

down an Israeli airliner with a surface-to-air missile. The following year suicide bombers in Istanbul targeted the British consulate, two synagogues, and a bank, killing fifty-nine people, while suicide attackers bombed the JW Marriott hotel in Jakarta, killing twelve. In 2004 one of the most lethal terrorist attacks since 9/11 killed 191 commuters in Madrid.

These attacks fed into an academic debate about terrorism trends that became so intense that it spilled onto the pages of the *New York Times*. On one side was Dr. Marc Sageman, a psychiatrist and former CIA officer, who asserted that al-Qaeda was largely contained and the new terrorist threat was from "leaderless jihadis" who self-organized and had little or no connection to formal terrorist groups. On the other side of the debate was a leading terrorism scholar, Georgetown University professor Bruce Hoffman, who laid out the case that al-Qaeda was far from contained and that training from groups like al-Qaeda was a crucial factor that made "homegrown" self-radicalized militants particularly lethal.

The 2005 London suicide bombings were indicative of how this debate played out in practice. Initially the British police treated the attacks as the work of homegrown militants—leaderless jihadis with no connections to an overseas terrorist group. But as the investigation progressed it became obvious that al-Qaeda had had a role in training the bombers and had also filmed propaganda videos with two of the bombers ahead of their attacks.

The Madrid terrorist attacks a year earlier were less clear-cut. They were carried out in part by common criminals who had no connection to a terrorist organization, while some of the terrorists were affiliated with a known jihadist organization, the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group.

Hoffman and Sageman were both right: some terrorist attacks were the work of self-radicalizing militants with few or no connections to formal groups, while others were directed by al-Qaeda or one of its affiliates. Yet, the debate about the character of the threat was more than merely academic: If Sageman was correct, the right policy prescription was more local law enforcement directed at homegrown self-radicalized militants. If Hoffman was correct, it made sense to use a range of military tools against terrorists, whether it was armed drones aimed at members of al-Qaeda hiding out in Pakistan's tribal regions, or special operations raids to battle Al-Qaeda in Iraq. It turned out, of course, that both approaches were needed to manage the threats from terrorists.

One of al-Qaeda's key successes after 9/11 was in spreading its ideas globally. In 2010 al-Qaeda's media production arm, As-Sahab ("the Clouds" in Arabic), released more audio- and videotapes than in any year in its history: more than one hundred. Mustafa Abu al-Yazid, an al-Qaeda commander, in a video released to Al Jazeera, praised the "success" of bin Laden and his "plan to globalize the ideology of Jihad."

This globalization of the concept of holy war was a genuine innovation enabled by the wide dissemination of bin Laden's video and audio statements on the internet, which were then in turn picked up by conventional media outlets. After 9/11, bin Laden issued more than thirty video- and audiotapes. These messages reached millions of people, instructing al-Qaeda's followers to continue to kill Westerners and Jews, while some also issued specific instructions. In 2003, for instance, bin Laden called for attacks against members of the coalition in Iraq, and terrorists then bombed a British consulate in Turkey and commuters in Madrid.

Even though bin Laden was in hiding and largely out of touch with members of al-Qaeda, he successfully managed to propagate his ideology of "Binladenism" around the world. This was the belief that a fundamentalist Sunni caliphate should be installed across the Muslim world, and that the United States and its allies such as Israel were blocking this dream and that therefore the proper response was to attack America.

Most Muslims didn't buy into this ideology. Still, favorable views of bin Laden remained relatively high even a decade after the 9/11 attacks, with around a third of Indonesians viewing him favorably, and over a third of Pakistanis. Put another way: in the world's two most populous Muslim countries, around 130 million Muslims looked favorably on bin Laden.

In July 2007 the US intelligence agencies issued a joint National Intelligence Estimate concluding that "the radical and violent segment of the West's Muslim population is expanding including in the United States," enabled by the "spread of radical . . . Internet sites."

Al-Qaeda was back, particularly its virulent affiliate in Iraq. The question was: What to do about it?

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CHAPTER SEVEN

“WE ARE OUT OF SCHLITZ”

Wars begin when you will, but they do not end when you please.

—MACHIAVELLI

An enormous monument of General Robert E. Lee on his horse looms over the quiet Pennsylvania valley outside the town of Gettysburg where one of the most crucial battles of the American Civil War was fought. On the Confederate side General Lee led 72,000 soldiers fighting 94,000 Union soldiers led by General George Meade. Neither side had chosen these wheat fields on which to do battle; the two armies had been chasing each other around Pennsylvania for weeks. Now, on June 30, 1863, they had come face to face.

During a three-day battle in the heat of early July the Confederate and Union armies fought each other without quarter, using cannons, rifles, and bayonets, leaving some 40,000 men dead or wounded strewn across the battlefield. General Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia would never venture into the North again. The Civil War would still be fought for two more years before the Confederacy finally surrendered, but the battle at

Gettysburg had significantly diminished the possibility of a Southern victory in the war.

It was to Gettysburg in June 2005 that Major General Stanley McChrystal summoned his top commanders to discuss the war in Iraq. McChrystal commanded Joint Special Operations Command, known as JSOC, which included the Army's Delta Force and the Navy's SEAL Team Six.

McChrystal thought that Iraq had become like Gettysburg: neither the US military nor al-Qaeda would necessarily have chosen Iraq as the place to do battle, but failure in Iraq would have dire consequences for whichever side did not prevail.

In Gettysburg, in a green and tranquil setting far removed from the desert war they were waging in Iraq, McChrystal believed his commanders could step back from that conflict and assess how they might fight more effectively against the insurgent groups that were dragging Iraq into a brutal civil war.

McChrystal had the strong backing of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Rumsfeld had made a series of blunders after the 9/11 attacks: he was inattentive to the fact that bin Laden could escape from Tora Bora; his lack of plans for the "day after" the invasion of Iraq helped to produce anarchy in the country; and his publicly stated position that the US was not facing an insurgency in Iraq delayed the United States' recognition of the kind of war it was fighting. But he did implement an important innovation: he had been enormously frustrated by how quickly the CIA was able to deploy its officers into Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, compared to how long it took for the US military to get boots on the ground. He fired off a stiff note to the incoming chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Richard Myers: "Given the nature of our world, isn't it conceivable that the Department ought not to be in a position of near total dependence on CIA in situations such as this?"

Two months after 9/11, Rumsfeld visited Fort Bragg, North Carolina, the headquarters of JSOC, where he was treated to an impressive display of the capabilities of the special operations forces, from a live-fire hostage rescue scenario to a demonstration of superlative marksmanship using .50-caliber rifles. Rumsfeld decided that special operation forces would be his CIA, able to deploy fast to fight terrorists around the world covertly. He sent a memo to his top policy advisor, Douglas Feith, asking, "How do we

organize the Department of Defense for manhunts?" Rumsfeld bolstered JSOC's legal authorities so that his special operators could, with some caveats, hunt al-Qaeda and its allies in fifteen countries—including Pakistan, the Philippines, Syria, and Somalia—giving JSOC the green light to effectively go global.

During his tenure as secretary of defense Rumsfeld also doubled the budget for special operations to $7 billion. Rumsfeld's fixation on ensuring that the Pentagon's global counterterrorism force was properly resourced meant that JSOC grew from 1,800 to 4,000 service members. It became a small army within the "conventional" military. JSOC acquired its own drones, helicopters, and small aircraft so it could maintain an "unblinking eye" 24/7 over targets.

McChrystal took command of JSOC in the fall of 2003 at a time when its existence was a tightly held secret. JSOC hid behind a shifting set of anodyne code names such as "TF (Task Force)-121" and "TF-714." Task Force 714 had played the leading role in the capture of Saddam Hussein, but this was carefully concealed from the media and the public. McChrystal would spend the next five years almost entirely in Iraq, with occasional side trips to Afghanistan, seeing his wife, Annie, and son, Sam, back at home only for a month every year.

McChrystal was an ascetic long-distance runner who ate only one meal a day. When he secured a prestigious Army fellowship at the Council on Foreign Relations in 2000, he ran to work every day, twelve miles from his quarters in Brooklyn to the council's headquarters in Manhattan. When asked about the first thing that came to his mind about McChrystal, Les Gelb, who ran the council, replied, "no body fat."

In Iraq, McChrystal would routinely go out on missions with his men to capture or kill insurgents, which gave him considerable credibility among his special operators. He was also well-read, with a large library of history books at home that helped inform his strategic thinking.

Six months into his tenure as JSOC commander, McChrystal gathered his commanders and senior enlisted officers together in Afghanistan. At West Point he had studied the French war against the Algerians fighting for their independence from 1954 to 1962. He had also watched *The Battle of*

Algiers several times. Shot in black and white with the feel of a vérité documentary, the film showed French paratroopers torturing Algerian insurgents to help them locate their targets. The torture sometimes worked, but the use of such tactics by the French military eroded support for the war in France. Eventually, the French granted independence to the Algerians.

McChrystal screened the movie for his team leaders in Afghanistan because he knew they were facing a serious insurgency in Iraq and possibly also one in Afghanistan. From his study of history McChrystal also knew these insurgencies were going to be hard on the counterinsurgents; these conflicts were going to last a long time, and it would be tempting to resort to actions like torture. McChrystal believed that if his force allowed itself to stray beyond values enshrined by the Geneva Conventions, which bars the inhumane treatment of prisoners, at some point, they could also lose the larger war.

McChrystal was right to worry. In the first year of the Iraq War, Delta Force operators who were part of JSOC were abusing prisoners at the Camp Nama detention facility at Baghdad International Airport, subjecting them to extreme cold, beatings, sleep deprivation, and stress positions. When McChrystal toured the facility, he was appalled; some of the prisoners were being kept naked. He told fellow officers, "This is how we lose. This is our Achilles' heel." To address the issue, McChrystal ended the career of the colonel in charge at Camp Nama and handed out administrative punishments to more than forty task force personnel.

By the spring of 2005 McChrystal worried that the United States wasn't winning the Iraq War and might even be losing it. "Losing" was not a concept that the alpha warriors in JSOC were accustomed to thinking about. Now the questions McChrystal and his top commanders were grappling with were not simply "Could we lose?" but also "Have we already lost?"

McChrystal convened his team leaders at Gettysburg to think through how JSOC could quickly adapt itself to win against Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the thicket of other Iraqi insurgent groups such as the Islamic Army in Iraq. McChrystal believed that the battle against al-Qaeda could be critical in Iraq, just as the battle of Gettysburg was for the Union, but if his special operators were to prevail, it meant that JSOC had to rethink how it fought.

His force was a well-oiled killing machine; when JSOC targeted a militant, they generally carried out the operation with precision, but no matter how many targets they captured or killed, the insurgency kept growing. Something needed to change.

So, McChrystal changed the metrics of success for JSOC. Success was no longer about how many insurgents they captured or killed, but the extent to which his special operators were destroying the enemies' networks. That meant taking out not just the leaders of the insurgency such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi but also the midlevel managers, the financiers, lower-level operatives, and bomb-makers.

While middle-level militants were demoralized if their leaders were captured or killed, McChrystal reasoned, they got a whole lot more demoralized if the guys to their left or right disappeared into an American prison or were killed. Suddenly they realized: "Tomorrow that's me."

Grinding down the insurgent groups also meant doing many more raids "to get inside the enemy's decision cycle," military jargon for constantly knocking them off balance. In April 2004, JSOC mounted ten operations in Iraq, around a couple of raids a week; two years later it was averaging three hundred operations a month, or *ten raids every night*. McChrystal framed this as not giving the enemy any chance to breathe.

McChrystal also reconceptualized what the JSOC raids were for: no longer about simply "taking terrorists off the battlefield," they were meant to gather intelligence to enable the next set of raids, sometimes that very same night. McChrystal's special operators fought at night because their night-vision goggles gave them a considerable edge over the insurgents.

McChrystal teamed with an obscure US military agency, the National Media Exploitation Center, to turn the large volume of "pocket litter," phones, and computers his operators were picking up on those raids into "actionable intelligence." He also recruited civilian analysts from the CIA and FBI special agents who brought their considerable analytical and forensic skills to JSOC.

It would take "a network to defeat a network," in McChrystal's words. To operationalize that network McChrystal hosted a video teleconference call every day with partners such as the CIA and embassies around the world. This global conference call grew until there were two thousand American officials participating.

Operating like a traditional hierarchical military unit would be moving too slowly to defeat the insurgents. McChrystal realized that JSOC would have to become more like al-Qaeda if it were to defeat al-Qaeda. McChrystal pushed down to his teams all the intelligence he was receiving as the commander, so they had the same picture of the battlefield that he did as a two-star general.

With these new tactics and strategy, JSOC put Iraq's insurgent groups on the defensive. JSOC's biggest target was Zarqawi, the psychopathic leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq who personally beheaded his victims on video. But Zarqawi was proving elusive.

Nada Bakos, who grew up on a cattle ranch in Montana and had applied to work at the CIA on a whim at the suggestion of her stepfather, was assigned to be the main agency analyst on the Zarqawi "account" and later the lead targeting officer hunting him. Bakos believed the United States owed it to the people of Iraq to capture or kill Zarqawi, the most brutal of terrorists, who had become who he was in response to the American invasion. Bakos embedded a CIA officer from her team with JSOC in Iraq.

In 2004 Bakos read a letter that US forces had recovered in Iraq between Zarqawi and bin Laden's top deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri. It discussed negotiations their two organizations were having about the terms under which Zarqawi might join al-Qaeda. Bakos sat in a classified vault at CIA headquarters reading the letter over and over, astonished at Zarqawi's tone. Zarqawi wasn't deferential. He argued with Zawahiri about what he thought was the right strategy to wage jihad in Iraq. Al-Qaeda's leaders were accustomed to blind obedience from their followers; Zarqawi was doing whatever he wanted to do.

Bakos felt like she knew Zarqawi too well; some colleagues even joked he was her boyfriend. In reality, for two years she had no personal life, and it got to the point where she was thinking about Zarqawi 24/7. It wasn't pleasant. The calls would come in from CIA colleagues, often at two or three o'clock in the morning, every time Zarqawi's men set off a car bomb or targeted a mosque.

Bakos created a database of every shred of intelligence known about Zarqawi, culled from CIA cables, interrogations of detainees, satellite imagery, and reports from Iraqi sources. On February 20, 2005, Bakos received a promising tip that Zarqawi would be driving a white truck down

a highway north of Baghdad during a particular window of time late at night.

She alerted JSOC. A team set up a roadblock on the highway to ambush the truck, but the special operators couldn't get a positive ID on who was in the vehicle, so they didn't shoot at it. A few miles past the roadblock, the white truck stopped, and the driver jumped out and started running through a heavily wooded area that covered his escape. Left behind in the truck was a computer, which was encrypted. Once the encryption was broken Bakos and her team found many of Zarqawi's contacts and a giant stash of porn.

By May 2005 seven of Zarqawi's lieutenants were dead and thirteen were captured, while only one was still at large. The noose was tightening around Zarqawi, but his men were still able to pull off the Golden Mosque attack in Samarra in February 2006, which acted like a giant can of kerosene poured on the already smoldering Iraqi civil war.

McChrystal had watched the videotape of Zarqawi's murder of the twenty-six-year-old American Nicholas Berg. Dressed in an orange jumpsuit—mimicking the detainees who were held at Guantánamo—Berg was laid on his side and held down while Zarqawi cut his head off. McChrystal concluded that Zarqawi's willingness to wreak violence on civilians was limitless.

One of Zarqawi's detained lieutenants told his US Air Force interrogator—who used standard rapport-building, noncoercive interrogation techniques—that Zarqawi's spiritual advisor was Sheikh Abd al-Rahman. The advisor seemed to be the only person who had regular face-to-face contact with Al-Qaeda in Iraq's leader. JSOC monitored Abd al-Rahman's movements in the hopes that Zarqawi would eventually pay the spiritual advisor a visit. They were not disappointed.

On the afternoon of June 7, 2006, the spiritual advisor left his house in Baghdad, switching vehicles frequently as a countersurveillance technique. The advisor eventually drove up to a house and a man came out who was dressed all in black. The man looked left and right to see if anybody was around and then he went back into the house with the advisor. Sitting in the back of his Joint Operations Center in Iraq—known as "the Death Star"—McChrystal was watching this all unfold on a screen. He recognized Zarqawi, who was wearing his signature all-black Johnny Cash look.

The assault force was alerted immediately. It would be a daylight assault, but one of the helicopters broke down, a rare occurrence.

The ground force commander said, “Okay we’re going to drop a bomb.”

A plane dropped two 500-pound bombs on the house where Zarqawi was located, killing him. McChrystal wasn’t happy—he wanted to capture the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

President Bush took a victory lap, issuing a statement praising “this remarkable achievement.” But just like the capture of Saddam, the killing of Zarqawi didn’t halt the spiraling insurgency. The violence in Iraq continued to increase, peaking in mid-2007, which demonstrated the limits of so-called decaptitation strikes.

Bin Laden publicly mourned Zarqawi’s death, releasing an audiotape saying, “Our Muslim nation was devastated by the death of its courageous knight, the lion of jihad.” Privately, bin Laden may have been relieved; Zarqawi’s indiscriminate use of violence was tarnishing al-Qaeda’s “brand,” which was the subject of lengthy memos that bin Laden exchanged with other al-Qaeda leaders.

Finally, two years after Zarqawi’s death, McChrystal and his commanders had reason to think Al-Qaeda in Iraq was beginning to crack. By early 2008, US military officials said they had killed an estimated 2,400 members of the terrorist group and captured almost 9,000. JSOC had decimated the insurgent groups in Iraq, but since the unit operated in secret, its role was not widely known.

Another closely held secret was the evolving signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities of the National Security Agency. NSA’s buildings sprawl over a 5,000-acre campus outside of Washington in suburban Maryland named Fort Meade, after the Union general who had won the battle at Gettysburg. Known as “No Such Agency” because of its determinedly low profile, the NSA developed the Real Time Regional Gateway program. This bland name, known by its acronym RT-RG, was a breathtakingly ambitious effort to try to suck up pretty much every phone call in Iraq. Its goal was to ingest 100 million “call events” a day in Baghdad, meaning the phone numbers called and the times and durations of those calls, as well as one million “voice cuts,” meaning the content of the phone conversations themselves.

In mid-2006 insurgents were blowing up an astonishing 1,000 roadside bombs every week. They were the leading killers of US service members. Officials using RT-RG prioritized trying to dismantle the insurgents' bomb-making networks. The system homed in on the bomb-makers using a process termed "Find-Fix-Finish." Real Time Regional Gateway gave the American military the ability to scan multiple databases to first "find" the enemy and then "fix" him in a small radius using location data derived from cell phones where he could then be "finished" by US forces.

Real Time Regional Gateway also ingested "Blue Force Tracker" information, which showed the current location of all US troops in Iraq so they could be alerted to insurgent communications and activities that were happening nearby them.

While JSOC and RT-RG did much to decimate Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent groups, this all happened covertly in the shadows. At the same time, out in the open, US military efforts to combat the insurgents used localized experiments to implement counterinsurgency tactics. One of the most successful of those was led by Colonel Herbert Raymond "H.R." McMaster in Tal Afar, a city of around 200,000 people, that had been taken over by Al-Qaeda in Iraq in 2005.

When he was a major, McMaster had written *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*. Well-known in US military circles, the book was a devastating portrait of the Pentagon brass working for President Johnson. McMaster charged that these generals simply went along with the president's failing military plans for the Vietnam War rather than providing their best military advice about how to wage the conflict.

Years later, McMaster planned to speak his mind when it came to Iraq. The overall US strategy at the time was to hand over control to the Iraqi Army and withdraw most American soldiers to forward operating bases known as FOBs. FOB-dwellers—known derisively as "fobbits"—could enjoy coffee shops selling cappuccinos, dining facilities with groaning buffets that advertised "lobster night," and big-screen TVs to watch football games. The FOBs meant that most of the American service members living on them had only the foggiest notion of what was going on "outside the wire."

McMaster believed this was not the way to wage an effective counterinsurgency campaign, a key doctrine of which is to protect the local

population by having your forces living among them. Of course, this might mean assuming more risk for your soldiers in the short term, but it would be far more effective at keeping the population safe and generating effective intelligence about the enemy than living on vast US bases and occasionally commuting to the fight in armored Humvees.

McMaster was already something of a legend in the Army, a bald rugby player with a PhD in military history and the energy level of a hyperactive pit bull. During the 1991 Gulf War then-Captain McMaster had commanded a tank troop in a battle that lasted only twenty-three minutes, during which his forces destroyed some thirty Iraqi tanks while taking no American casualties. McMaster was awarded the Silver Star for this action.

Despite his own success against Saddam Hussein's tank army, McMaster believed that the US military had learned the wrong lessons from the Gulf War, during which Saddam's tanks were visibly arrayed in the desert. This was exactly the kind of war that the US military had trained for, since this was the type of conflict that the Pentagon anticipated fighting against the Soviets in Europe if the Cold War were to turn hot. But the insurgents in Iraq were not fighting a conventional war with tanks; instead, they were fighting an "asymmetric" guerrilla war, which was not the sort of conflict the Pentagon preferred to fight or had even planned for.

In September 2005 McMaster led a full-scale battle against Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had turned Tal Afar into a ghost city. The people of Tal Afar were living in abject fear not only of al-Qaeda but also of the local police, who operated like a Shia death squad. All the schools and marketplaces were closed, there was no power, and the sewage system didn't work. Raw sewage collected in the southern part of the city in an area that US soldiers called "Shitwood Forest."

It was the kind of place where al-Qaeda terrorists killed a twelve-year-old boy, cut open his body in a hospital, inserted a bomb, then threw his body into a traffic circle and waited for his father to come to claim the body —killing the father as well. "The greatest privilege of a professional soldier is to have the opportunity to kill these people," McMaster told a reporter who was covering the Tal Afar battle.

McMaster set up twenty-nine small combat outposts for his soldiers dotted around the city and partnered with tribal leaders to combat Al-Qaeda in Iraq. McMaster's soldiers killed or captured hundreds of the enemy, and within a few months Al-Qaeda in Iraq had retreated from Tal Afar. In days, marketplaces were open. Schools that had been closed for over a year and a half were opened. People were literally dancing in the streets. (Sectarian violence would return to Tal Afar the following year after McMaster's regiment had pulled out of the city, but Al-Qaeda in Iraq was shut out of the city for years—that is, until 2014, when a brutal offshoot of the terrorist group known as ISIS seized Tal Afar.)

What McMaster had done in Tal Afar caught the eye of Philip Zelikow, an international relations scholar who had co-authored the book *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis.* It told the story of how President John F. Kennedy was able to defuse the crisis in 1962 that could have led to a nuclear war with the Soviets. Zelikow was serving as counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and he would play a role in President Bush's decision to launch a countrywide counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq. While it didn't have the existential stakes that Kennedy faced, it was nonetheless a decision that Bush made against the advice of many of the leaders of his own party and the sentiments of much of the American public, which had largely turned against the Iraq War.

In September 2005 Zelikow toured Iraq on a fact-finding mission for Rice. On his return he briefed her that the US needed a new counterinsurgency approach along the lines of how McMaster had pacified Tal Afar using counterinsurgency tactics in which US forces would protect the Iraqi population, clear al-Qaeda from their strongholds, and then hold those positions so that Iraqis could rebuild. Ultimately this would become the "clear, hold, and build," strategy, a phrase that Zelikow drafted for congressional testimony that Secretary Rice delivered on October 19, 2005.

Zelikow's proposed strategy was also the work of Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, who was Rice's military assistant at the State Department and who had led the 4th Infantry Division in Iraq during the first months of the war. Odierno's division had launched numerous aggressive raids that had swept up many ordinary Iraqis during 2003. Two years later Odierno understood that the heavy-handed conventional tactics of his division had been counterproductive, and he was now a convert to counterinsurgency tactics.

At this point “clear, hold, and build” was largely an aspirational slogan; the Bush administration’s policy being implemented by the Pentagon was “standing down” the US troop presence and replacing them with Iraqi forces. When Rumsfeld watched Rice’s congressional testimony, he was furious that Rice had gotten out of her bureaucratic lane and had publicly outlined what, after all, would be a military strategy in the “clear” and “hold” phases. Rumsfeld fired off an enraged memo complaining that the State Department had announced that the Department of Defense has a new strategy of “clear, hold and build, or something to that effect. I don’t know what that is.”

General George Casey, the US ground commander in Iraq, called Rice privately and complained that he had been blindsided by her testimony: Why was the State Department weighing in on military strategy? Rice fired right back at the general, saying, “Let me apologize that you were blindsided, but don’t ever call me the ‘State Department’ again. I’m the Secretary of State, and that means I’m the president’s principal advisor and I say whatever I want!”

For his part, General John Abizaid, the CENTCOM commander who oversaw US military operations in the Middle East, felt that he had received very clear instructions from President Bush to keep the number of American casualties as low as feasible. “Clear, hold, and build” would produce more casualties, not fewer. Abizaid’s son-in-law was seriously wounded in Iraq and once he had recovered enough, President Bush had invited him and his family to the White House. Abizaid knew how much the president cared about the issue of American casualties; Bush would often ask him: “Why aren’t the Iraqis doing enough to defend their own country?”

The Pentagon’s opposition meant that nothing much came from Rice’s congressional testimony in the short term, but now the notion of a sustained counterinsurgency approach to Iraq was gaining some currency in official Washington circles.

Senator Joe Biden, who was the top Democrat on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, chimed in with his own solution for ending the Iraq War in May 2006. In a well-publicized op-ed in the *New York Times*, Biden advocated giving autonomous regions to the Shia, Sunnis, and Kurds. For many Iraqis this concept was a nonstarter, and the notion withered.

Around the time that Senator Biden published his op-ed, Steve Hadley, Bush’s new national security advisor since Rice had gone over to run the

State Department, was in the Oval Office with Bush, who told him: "Hadley, this strategy is not working."

"Mr. President, it is not," Hadley agreed.

Bush replied, "Well, we need to find a new one."

President Bush asked Meghan O'Sullivan, who had worked in Iraq for the Coalition Provisional Authority and was now detailed to the National Security Council, how her friends in Baghdad were faring. "Mr. President, they've never been so frightened," O'Sullivan replied. "I have never seen or heard them this concerned about what's happening in Iraq." This observation seemed to make the president even more determined to try to find a new approach to the conflict. Bush's goals in Iraq were to create an ally in the war on terror and a functioning democracy. For the moment, these goals seemed unattainable.

In May 2006 Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia politician, announced the formation of a new Iraqi government, and the following month Zarqawi was killed by US forces. These developments seemed to suggest some progress in Iraq. But in reality, they masked the fact that the civil war was gaining in intensity. When a US team conducted a no-notice inspection of an Iraqi police facility in May—run by the largely Shia police forces—they found widespread evidence of torture, including the systematic rape of juvenile detainees by the guards.

General Casey believed that the visible American troop presence was fueling the insurgency. He favored the gradual withdrawal of US troops, but he also understood that there was an insurgency going on in Iraq, which meant that the US military needed to learn about counterinsurgency tactics. These kinds of lessons were not taught at West Point, where the cadets typically learned more about the American Civil War than they did about counterinsurgency. After the Vietnam War the US Army had wanted to put insurgencies in the rearview mirror, hoping that it would never get sucked into a similar conflict.

In early 2006 Casey inaugurated the COIN (counterinsurgency) Academy outside of Baghdad, which he mandated for incoming US commanders so they received some baseline understanding of counterinsurgency principles during a one-week course. Colonel McMaster

was one of the first lecturers at the academy. It was a harbinger of change, but still a very long way from a countrywide counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq.

The US military runs on "doctrine," and the doctrinal manual for counterinsurgency hadn't been updated in two decades, even though the US military was losing dozens of soldiers every month to the insurgency in Iraq. During 2006 the counterinsurgency manual was updated at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, by a team led by General David Petraeus. The effort was also directed by Marine Lieutenant General Jim Mattis, the US commander during the first battle of Fallujah and the officer who had led the insertion of some one thousand Marines into Kandahar Province early in the Afghan War.

The new counterinsurgency manual was influenced by the work of David Galula, a lieutenant colonel who had fought in the French colonial war in Algeria and wrote a book about his experiences, C*ounterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Galula's central principle was that "the counterinsurgent cannot achieve much if the population is not, and does not feel, protected against the insurgent." As a result, the "center of gravity" for a counterinsurgency force wasn't destroying the enemy's armed forces, as it tended to be in a conventional war, but winning over the local population.

The *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (official title *FM 3-24*) was published in December 2006. It was downloaded 1.5 million times and received a respectful review in the *New York Times*, a first for a US military manual. But the manual was a manual; it wasn't a strategy to win the Iraq War. It offered several commonsense tactical recommendations about isolating insurgents from the population while underlining that "unsuccessful practices" included concentrating "military forces on large bases for protection," which was precisely what much of the US military—the "fobbits"—were currently doing in Iraq. The manual also advocated for exercising restraint during military operations so as not to kill innocents, which could turn the population against the counterinsurgents. Another key goal was to win the trust of the local population because it gave the government legitimacy and undercut the insurgents' base of support.

Still, counterinsurgency had its limitations. Galula was writing about COIN in the context of the anti-colonial post–World War II insurgencies in Algeria and Indochina that the French had ultimately *lost*.

A counterinsurgency approach—while it could be successful on a tactical and operational level and was certainly preferable to "search and destroy" missions that alienated the locals—could not solve the larger strategic questions in Iraq, such as the civil war between the Shia and Sunnis that the 2003 invasion of Iraq had helped precipitate. Nor could it fix the fact that the Iraqi government and security services were often taking the Shia side in the civil war and in some cases were killing Sunnis. The US trainers who were building up the Shia-dominated Iraqi Army and police—regarded by the Americans as their "ticket out" of Iraq—were sometimes inadvertently adding to the fire of the civil war. If a key goal of American counterinsurgents was to persuade the local population to trust the Iraqi government and military, did that make sense when they sometimes functioned like Shia death squads?

While the counterinsurgency manual was being updated at Fort Leavenworth, a group to study the Iraq War was secretly convened at the Pentagon in September 2006 by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Peter Pace. This idea was first floated to Pace by the former vice chief of the Army General Jack Keane, who had served in Vietnam and was advocating for a change in strategy in Iraq. Keane suggested setting up a small task force with some of the best and brightest in the military. Pace asked if he had any recommendations as to who should be part of the task force. Keane suggested Colonel McMaster.

This group, informally known as the "Council of Colonels," consisted of sixteen members—Army, Air Force, and Marine colonels and Navy captains (equivalent in rank to colonels)—who were gathered to assess how the war was going. In the hierarchy-conscious Pentagon it was quite unusual for a group of relatively junior officers, some of whom had recently served in Iraq, to be grading the homework of the four-star generals who were running the Iraq War.

On November 3, 2006, the Council of Colonels met with General Pace and the service chiefs in "the Tank," the conference room in the bowels of the Pentagon reserved for the most sensitive discussions. They presented three options for next steps in Iraq, which they called "Go Big," "Go Long," and "Go Home."

McMaster led the briefing on the Go Big option, which envisaged a large ramp-up of American troops, while Go Long envisioned a smaller presence of US troops in the tens of thousands staying in Iraq for around a decade, and Go Home was obvious. The overall message the colonels delivered was the last slide of their briefing. It said simply, in all capital letters: "WE ARE NOT WINNING, SO WE ARE LOSING."

None of the service chiefs quibbled with this conclusion and the normally even-keeled General Pace looked pained. For the moment, the service chiefs stayed with their existing strategy of continuing the drawdown of American forces from Iraq, but the briefing had introduced the idea to the most senior officers in the Pentagon that the war was being lost and that one option to help turn it around was a surge of troops.

At the same time there was a public effort by the congressionally authorized Iraq Study Group led by former Republican Secretary of State James Baker and former Democratic Representative Lee Hamilton, who had co-chaired the 9/11 Commission, to make recommendations about what to do in Iraq. The Baker-Hamilton team recommended the gradual withdrawal of American troops from the country. That meant withdrawing all combat troops by the first quarter of 2008, while adding American advisors to increase the capabilities of Iraqi forces and increasing US diplomatic efforts focused on Iraq's neighbors, Syria and Iran, to help stabilize Iraq.

President Bush ignored those recommendations; he wasn't about to take directions from a congressional study group, and he was furious that it gave cover for those calling for a US withdrawal. In private Hadley referred to the report as a "dog's breakfast," since it seemed to have a little bit for everyone, including the possibility of adding some additional troops as advisors.

While these assessments of the war were taking place in Washington, DC, during the summer of 2006 General Casey launched two military operations in Baghdad, optimistically named Together Forward I and Together Forward II. These operations were supposed to reduce the out-of-control violence in the capital and showcase how the growing Iraqi military could hold its own. The operations failed; while Iraqi military units could "clear" neighborhoods of insurgents, they couldn't "hold" them. After operation Together Forward II wound down, the violence in Baghdad actually went up by more than 40 percent over the next few months.

Meanwhile, the Shia-dominated Iraqi security services were killing civilians in the Sunni neighborhoods of Baghdad.

Even Rumsfeld began to be skeptical of the strategy that he had long championed: the drawdown of US troops and the transition to Iraqi control. During a videoconference with General Casey on November 1, 2006, Rumsfeld asked pointedly what the point had been of committing an additional 3,000 to 4,000 American troops to support Together Forward if the violence had only increased.

Hadley visited Rumsfeld at the Pentagon to tell the secretary of defense that the president had tasked him to review the strategy for the Iraq War. Rumsfeld was very cold, saying, "If you and the president have lost confidence in the ability of this building to do military planning then you should get yourself a new secretary."

In fact, the White House *had* lost confidence in the Pentagon's military planning, though Hadley, an unfailingly courteous lawyer who seemed to have been born wearing a suit and tie, would never have said this out loud. The planning around the surge of troops into Iraq and the adoption of a large-scale counterinsurgency campaign would not involve the senior generals who were nominally running the war, an extraordinary development.

Hadley knew that the president had made up his mind about the necessity of a new strategy that likely involved more troops, so Hadley made sure that the review of Iraq strategy contained a surge option. Hadley was also convinced that US troops had to position themselves between the Sunnis and the Shia to quell the growing civil war. He had to quietly persuade the State Department and the Pentagon to go along with this new approach, which was far more radical than anything they had in mind. Hadley performed this bureaucratic end run with admirable aplomb, leaving few of his fingerprints.

Bush was tiring of Rumsfeld, and he started discreetly making inquiries about appointing a new secretary of defense who would inject fresh thinking into the Pentagon. Bush alighted on Robert Gates, a former CIA director and longtime DC insider. Bush's political guru, Karl Rove, who knew Gates, sounded him out about running the Defense Department. Gates was then the president of Texas A&M University, and he told Rove he felt that he had to remain in his present job.

A group of retired US generals were now publicly pushing for Rumsfeld to be fired. Bush, who could be quite stubborn, didn't want to be seen to be giving in to them, and it made him less inclined to dump Rumsfeld, which would surely be interpreted as giving in to the public pressure from the retired flag officers.

In the fall of 2006 Zelikow met with Major General Douglas Lute, the director of operations at the Pentagon, to discuss the numbers of troops that might be available to deploy to Baghdad if there was to be a surge there.

Lute told Zelikow flatly, "Philip, we are out of Schlitz."

This was a reference to a TV commercial from the early 1970s with the tagline, "When you're out of Schlitz, you're out of beer."

Lute meant there were no new troops to send given the United States' all-volunteer forces and their constant deployments to both Afghanistan and Iraq. To pacify Baghdad, you'd likely need six to eight additional brigades: up to 40,000 troops. The unsaid subtext was that if the Pentagon ordered that many more troops to Iraq, it could break the force.

James "Jim" Jeffrey, Rice's special advisor on Iraq, was a veteran diplomat who had served as an Army officer in Vietnam. He was mystified by the Pentagon's response. At the time there were, according to Jeffrey's calculations, 1.3 million active-duty and reserve soldiers and Marines, with 130,000 deployed in Iraq, up to 40,000 in Afghanistan, and 28,000 in South Korea. Jeffery thought, "What the fuck are the rest of them doing?" In Jeffrey's view if the commander in chief wanted to put more troops in the field, you saluted and got the job done.

Lisa Disbrow, a detailee from the Pentagon who was working at the National Security Council at the time, had expertise in the arcane art of "force generation"—the calculations about how many service members were available for a particular deployment. Disbrow was asked to discreetly find out what the total number of troops was that the Pentagon might reasonably generate if there were to be a surge. She came back with the answer: five combat brigades; 25,000 troops.

Bush's Iraq advisor Meghan O'Sullivan traveled to Iraq in the fall of 2006, where she spoke to a group of American battalion and brigade commanders in Baghdad. She asked all of them, "How do the Iraqis react to

you when you and your guys come into their neighborhoods?" Often, they replied along the lines of: "They welcome us, and they are desperate for us to stay when it comes time for us to hand over to Iraqi Security Forces." This contradicted what the Pentagon brass was saying, namely that the American military presence was amplifying the violence and that the solution was to transition security to Iraq's army and police forces.

The midterm elections on November 7, 2006, delivered what Bush accurately described as a "thumping" to the Republican Party, which lost control of both houses of Congress for the first time in a dozen years. It was a stinging rebuke by American voters, many of whom had concluded that the Iraq War was a fiasco. The day after the election, the White House announced Donald Rumsfeld's resignation.

Robert Gates was now willing to take the job of secretary of defense. Before he accepted, Gates met with Bush privately, who told him about the likely surge of troops; Bush didn't want Gates to have to publicly defend a policy he didn't support. Gates, who had served on the Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group, had sent an email to Baker and Hamilton recommending a surge of 25,000 to 40,000 troops in Iraq. He was on board with the plan.

In early October 2006 Rice paid a surprise visit to Iraq. She met with Sunni leaders who showed her pictures of beheaded children, telling her, "This is what the Shia are doing to us." Then she met with Shia leaders, who showed her pictures of headless children, and said, "This is what the Sunnis are doing to us."

Rice, who was normally perfectly composed, was horrified and furious. She told the Sunni and Shia leaders that they needed to settle their differences, invoking a saying used in the United States: "You can hang together, or you can hang separately." Rice added, "As far as I can tell, you're all going to be swinging from lampposts the next time I come."

Rice looked over at the translator and asked: "Did that translate?" He said, "Oh, yes!"

Her visit to Iraq left Rice with no faith that the Sunni and Shia leaders could resolve their differences. Back at the White House she told Bush, "You know it may just well be if they're determined to kill each other, we just let them do it."

Bush and Rice were so close that the president sometimes told foreign leaders, “She’s like my sister.” This was the only time that Bush was furious with Rice, dressing her down, saying angrily, “So, your view is, they’re just going to kill each other, and we are going to stand by and watch?”

On December 11 Bush met privately with several outside experts, including retired General Jack Keane. “We have run out of all options to succeed in Iraq but one: change our strategy and begin to protect the people,” Keane told the president. “You have to understand that right now the United States military strategy is not designed to defeat the insurgency because it is designed to train Iraqi security forces, so they can eventually defeat the insurgency, but we are not protecting the people.”

Keane wanted Bush to visualize what he meant, saying: “Right now we have these large forward operating bases with towers and watch-guards. We would take all of those troops out of those bases, and we would put them into all the neighborhoods in Baghdad and they would live there 24/7. They would eat and sleep there and patrol there day and night and they would do that in groups of thirty to fifty to sixty and they would protect themselves as best they could.”

Keane explained to Bush that this would fundamentally change the character of the war “because the people would be protected for the first time. They would be our security: Why? Because once they see the fact that we are willing to die and yes, we will, and get wounded to protect them, they in turn will give us information on the enemy because one thing they don’t want us to do is leave. They want their children to be able to go to school, they want to be able to go to market, they want their spouses to be able to work, all of those things would be happening as a result of the fact that for the first time in three plus years we are protecting the people and we are living in the neighborhoods.”

When the topic of a potential successor to General Casey to implement this strategy came up, Keane said the best choice was General David Petraeus. Petraeus was already talking privately on a regular basis about a surge of troops and a counterinsurgency campaign with Meghan O’Sullivan. Petraeus was going around his chain of command when he had these discussions. Even more than a decade later, General Abizaid, who ran CENTCOM, said, “I still take great umbrage at that to this day. I thought it was very unprofessional.”

Much of what Keane said to Bush validated what Hadley and O'Sullivan were already formulating in the White House, but it was useful for Bush to hear from a widely respected retired general that counterinsurgency operations were the way forward in Iraq. Keane could also defend this approach publicly as a credible independent voice if the surge was implemented.

But Bush needed to sell the surge to his generals. On December 13 Bush traveled across the Potomac River to the Pentagon, where he met the service chiefs in the Tank, where three weeks earlier the Council of Colonels had delivered the news that the war was being lost. Bush needed to get his generals on board with his plan to surge troops. He couldn't afford any daylight between himself and the Pentagon for a move which was likely to be opposed by much of the Congress and the American public, which had soured on the war.

General Pete Schoomaker, the chief of staff of the army, told the president he was worried that political support in the US for the war was evaporating. Bush replied, "Thank you very much for your political advice, General Schoomaker. That's my job. I'll handle that. I'll make the presentation to the public. I'll manage the Congress."

The service chiefs pushed back on the surge of troops. The commandant of the Marine Corps, General James Conway, said, "I don't know if the Army and the Marine Corps can handle this. It could break the Army; it could break the Marine Corps." By now they had been at war in Afghanistan for five years and in Iraq for three years. The Pentagon had tried to satiate the intense demands for troops caused by these wars by calling up ever larger numbers of National Guard and reserve units and extending some deployments for up to fifteen months. Now Bush's top generals were genuinely worried that their forces might crack under the pressure of a surge in Iraq.

This was a line of argument that Bush had prepared for. The president said, "Look, I get it. I talk to the Gold Star parents. But there's nothing that would break the Army more than having them come home from Iraq with their tail between their legs because we lost this war, so I'm going to do what I think is right to win this war."

That argument seemed to settle the matter with the service chiefs. They agreed: We can't lose.

The service chiefs said they needed to recruit more soldiers and Marines to give their troops some hope that they wouldn't be ordered to go on long deployments ad infinitum into the future. Bush knew that this request was coming; General Pace had briefed the president two days ahead of the meeting to expect this ask for an expanded force. In exchange for his top generals' support on the surge, Bush said he would help to expand the size of the Army and Marine Corps.

In late December Rice visited Bush at his ranch in Crawford, Texas. Early one morning they were walking around the property discussing the possible surge. Rice felt she was probably the biggest skeptic of the surge who had the president's ear. She told the president that if the additional forces in Iraq were just going to do the same thing they had been doing before, it wasn't going to work. Rice said twice, for emphasis: "It's your last card. It's your last card."

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By now the security situation in Iraq was rapidly deteriorating, so General Casey asked for two more brigades to deploy to Iraq. If he was going to double down, Bush was going to deploy as many troops as he could. On December 28 Bush told his war cabinet gathered at his Texas ranch: "Let's give them everything we've got." Bush ordered five combat brigades to Iraq.

Bush believed the US could win not only because of its superior military might, but also because in his mind Americans had a "superior philosophy to those we're fighting." He also did not want to make a decision that "enabled defeat." Bush had met too many family members of dead American soldiers; he felt he couldn't look at a mother and tell her that her son had died for nothing. Bush believed the Americans and Iraqis who had died in the war were owed one final push. Above all, he did not want Iraq to be his Vietnam, according to his close confidant, Rice.

As he was finalizing his decision on the surge Bush asked his national security advisor, "Hadley, do you think this surge strategy can succeed?"

"Mr. President, I think it can succeed," Hadley said.

"That's good," Bush replied, "But if you ever think we cannot succeed in Iraq, you need to come tell me because I can't look these mothers and

fathers in the eye and send their kids off to war and maybe to their death if we don't think that we can succeed."

Up until this point Bush had been reluctant to get into the Pentagon's lane. As someone who had come of age during the Vietnam War, Bush was mindful of how President Lyndon Johnson had tried to micromanage the conduct of the war, personally picking targets to bomb. Bush had hoped not to be that kind of commander in chief, but he had also done a lot of thinking about President Abraham Lincoln. Bush read many biographies of Lincoln while he was president; Lincoln would fire generals who he thought were underperforming. As he moved to implement the surge, Bush would remove General Casey, his ground commander in Iraq, and Rumsfeld, his secretary of defense.

On January 10, 2007, President Bush spoke to the American people from the White House library, saying, "It is clear that we need to change our strategy in Iraq." He announced a surge of 20,000 more troops (which, in fact, would become 30,000 troops).

Many Americans were baffled by Bush's surge decision. Prominent Republicans, such as Senator Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, a Vietnam veteran, said publicly that the surge was "the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam, if it's carried out."

The junior senator from Illinois, Barack Obama, told MSNBC, "I am not persuaded that 20,000 additional troops in Iraq is going to solve the sectarian violence there. In fact, I think, it will do the reverse. I think it takes pressure off the Iraqis to arrive at the sort of political accommodation that every observer believes is the ultimate solution to the problems we face there." Senator Joe Biden similarly told reporters, "I totally oppose this surging of additional American troops into Baghdad. It's contrary to the overwhelming body of informed opinion, both inside and outside the administration."

With only the tepid support of his top generals and against the opposition of key leaders in his own party, Bush ordered the surge of troops to Iraq. Two-thirds of Americans now thought that the Iraq War was not going well. The surge just seemed to be doubling down on a bad bet.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

SURGE

I regret that on my arrival in Mesopotamia I was too much occupied with military matters, and too ill-informed regarding the political problem to go among the people with advantage.

—LIEUTENANT GENERAL SIR AYLMER HALDANE, COMMANDER OF BRITISH FORCES IN IRAQ, 1920

Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.

—NAPOLEON

In early 2007, the United States started deploying the surge of troops to Iraq—President Bush's "last card," in the words of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Most of the 30,000 troops were deployed to Baghdad, where the violence was the worst, but two Marine battalions were also sent to Anbar Province, the Sunni heartland in western Iraq and a stronghold of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The arrival of around 2,000 Marines in Anbar coincided

with a fortuitous development there: a Sunni tribal uprising against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The incoming US ground commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, was fond of quoting the maxim attributed to the Roman philosopher Seneca: “Luck is when preparation meets opportunity.” This time, luck was with the Americans.

As the Iraqi civil war had accelerated over the past three years, Al-Qaeda in Iraq had positioned itself as the defenders of Sunnis. But the Sunni tribes in Anbar began to see the group as a threat to their leadership role in the province as well as to their lucrative smuggling rackets. Also, the ultra-fundamentalist religious beliefs of Al-Qaeda in Iraq clashed with the more moderate Sunni Islam practiced by the local tribes.

At the beginning of the American occupation of Iraq the top US official in the country, Paul Bremer, had made a point of not reaching out to Iraqi tribal leaders; they weren’t seen as part of the “modern” democratizing Iraq that he was trying to create. Even a year after the US invasion, when it was obvious that not all had gone according to plan in Iraq, Bremer resisted suggestions from Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that he try to work with Iraq’s tribal leaders.

Yet tribes were central to the identities of many Iraqis. A Pentagon study in June 2006 concluded that if the US military allied with the tribes in the Sunni heartland in Anbar Province, this would result in “significant support” for US operations.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq had made what would turn out to be a critical error in Anbar Province when the terrorist group killed the father and two of the brothers of Sheikh Abdul Sattar al-Risha, a tribal leader. Under the tribal code, their deaths had to be avenged.

During the summer of 2006 Anbari tribesmen began killing members of al-Qaeda, placing signs on their bodies saying, “This is what you get when you work with al-Qaeda.” US military officers were puzzled by this admittedly welcome development, wondering: Who was behind it?

On September 14, 2006, forty Anbari tribal sheikhs led by Sheikh Sattar went public with their plan to ally with US forces to try and destroy Al-Qaeda in Iraq, naming their movement *Sahwa*, or “the Awakening.” This declaration came just a month after the secret US Marine intelligence assessment that found that Al-Qaeda in Iraq was the “dominant organization” in Anbar had landed on the front page of the *Washington Post*. Just around the time that the American public was learning about the

ascendancy of Al-Qaeda in Iraq in Anbar, the Awakening movement was forming, which would prove to be a mortal danger for the terrorist group.

At the time Iraq's most dangerous city was Ramadi in Anbar, where insurgents were mounting twenty attacks a day. Al-Qaeda in Iraq had largely taken over the city of some 200,000 people in January 2006, in part by killing local Sunni tribal leaders. General Casey ordered Colonel Sean MacFarland, the US commander in the area, to "fix Ramadi but don't do a Fallujah." He meant don't try and take the city in a frontal assault as the Marines had done in Fallujah two years earlier. This was a sound decision, but how best then to dislodge Al-Qaeda in Iraq from Ramadi?

MacFarland established small combat outposts for his soldiers in Ramadi as Colonel McMaster had done in Tal Afar the previous year. MacFarland also made the risky decision to embrace Sheikh Sattar, the whiskey-drinking head of a relatively minor tribe who was leading the Awakening movement. Sheikh Sattar and his tribal allies seemed to know everything about the insurgents, which meant American soldiers no longer made big sweeping raids in Ramadi but carried out targeted strikes against al-Qaeda's fighters.

Sheikh Sattar became a regular swaggering presence on Al Jazeera TV, appearing with a large revolver strapped to his hip and boasting how he was attacking Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Here was a Sunni tribal leader willing to condemn the terrorist group publicly in Arabic, not some US military public affairs officer spouting carefully crafted talking points. (Sheikh Sattar's increasingly high profile eventually led to his assassination by Al-Qaeda in Iraq in September 2007, but his brother Sheikh Ahmad immediately took over as the leader of the Awakening movement.)

Where Ramadi once had only one hundred policemen who would show up to work, the tribes provided thousands of police recruits. MacFarland poured funds into construction projects so that Ramadi could start functioning again; clearing the rubble from the streets of Ramadi alone cost $13 million.

In January 2007 President Bush and his national security team had authorized the surge of 30,000 American troops to Iraq who would supplement the 130,000 service members already in-country. This was an important political and psychological signal to the Iraqi government and the Sunni tribal leaders that the Americans were staying in Iraq, so if you allied with them you might live to fight another day.

On February 10, 2007, General Petraeus arrived in Iraq as the new US commander to oversee the surge. The handover ceremony from General Casey to Petraeus, in one of Saddam Hussein's gaudy marble palaces, was an awkward affair since it was well known that Petraeus was being appointed to oversee a new strategic direction in Iraq. When photographs were taken of the ceremony, Petraeus suggested that Casey might smile for the camera. Casey told him, "I'm smiling inside, Dave."

Casey had served for almost three long years in Iraq, implementing what he believed to be the correct policy: building up Iraqi security forces so the US could gradually withdraw, which, until recently, had also been the policy of the Bush administration. Casey was given a promotion to chief of staff of the Army, but it was clear that he was being promoted out of commanding the most significant American war since Vietnam.

The day after Petraeus arrived in Baghdad, he toured neighborhoods that he had known from his previous deployments. He remembered them as well-to-do and manicured; now they were ghost towns.

The White House gave no instructions about how to put the surge into practice, which was left up to General Petraeus and his top deputy, Lieutenant General Ray Odierno. The biggest mindset change for US troops was to look at Iraqis as not the enemy but as people who needed protecting. Petraeus and Odierno moved American troops off their big bases and put them on new combat outposts living among the population, seventy-seven of them in the Baghdad area alone. How the surge of US troops was operationalized and the new tactics they used was more important than the simple fact of a larger number of American troops in Iraq.

In December 2006 a US patrol north of Baghdad had captured a map and memos that revealed Al-Qaeda in Iraq's plans to control the capital city. The cache of documents showed that Al-Qaeda in Iraq planned to control the "belts" of territory surrounding Baghdad. It was in those belts that the terrorist group hid its car-bomb factories and safe houses. General Odierno put two brigades of the surge forces into Baghdad's most dangerous neighborhoods and three brigades into the belts surrounding the capital.

One of the first things Petraeus did when he assumed command was to visit Ramadi to examine how Colonel MacFarland and his soldiers had pacified the city. Petraeus wanted to expand the local ceasefires and alliances with Sunni insurgents that had paved the way for the pacification of Ramadi. Soon twenty thousand Anbari tribesmen made ceasefires with

US forces or were put on the American payroll, and by the end of 2007 Anbar was one of the safest regions in the country.

The US alliances with Sunni tribal militias who had once been fighting their troops initially made some American commanders nervous. An officer asked Petraeus: “Sir, you want us to sit down across the table from this guy who’s got our blood on his hands?” But the US alliances with the Sunni insurgents were a reminder of Clausewitz’s dictum that war is a continuation of politics by other means, an addendum to which is that simply because you are fighting a war doesn’t mean that the politics stops. Allying with the Sunni tribes fighting Al-Qaeda in Iraq was the savviest political move the Americans made during the Iraq War.

Al-Qaeda in Iraq was now reeling under pressure from the US military allied with the forces of the Sunni Awakening, so much so that bin Laden took the rare step of issuing a statement that aired on Al Jazeera in October 2007 acknowledging that “mistakes” had been made and calling for unity among the Sunni militant groups in Iraq. In public bin Laden was almost invariably a cheerleader for al-Qaeda and its affiliates around the world, but in this statement, titled “Message to the People of Iraq,” he conceded that the outlook for Al-Qaeda in Iraq was bleak, saying, “the darkness has become pitch black.”

The Awakening movement began spreading across other provinces of Iraq. By 2008 there were local ceasefires between the US military and 779 militias in Iraq, each of whom had between ten and eight hundred men. Many of these Sunni militiamen were put on the US payroll in a program known initially as the “Concerned Local Citizens,” which suggested a neighborhood watch committee in a quiet American suburb rather than gun-toting tribal fighters itching to kill al-Qaeda’s fighters. They later came to be known by a more muscular name, “The Sons of Iraq.”

By the spring of 2009 the Sons of Iraq program had grown to around one hundred thousand men and also included Shia militiamen employed to protect their communities. Many of these gunmen used to fight the Americans; now they were fighting Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent groups. This was itself an enormous surge of manpower in the effort to restore a semblance of order in Iraq.

The US surge was also supported by the substantial growth in the Iraqi security services. By 2009 there were around six hundred thousand Iraqi soldiers and policemen.

The surge of American soldiers resulted in a sharp increase in American combat deaths. In May 2007, 120 American soldiers died, the deadliest month in two years. The rising number of American combat deaths worried key Republican leaders. Senator Richard Lugar, the top Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, spoke on the Senate floor urging Bush to change course in Iraq "very soon" because "the costs and risks of continuing down the current path outweigh the potential benefits that might be achieved."

Yet there were other factors at play in Iraq that were not as visible as the steady stream of caskets arriving at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. Much of the sectarian cleansing that had taken place during the civil war subsided not because of the surge of US troops, but because Sunnis and Shias had already abandoned neighborhoods where they might be vulnerable to attacks. Those who remained benefited from Petraeus's order to construct large numbers of enormous concrete walls that physically separated Sunni and Shia neighborhoods. Petraeus sometimes joked that he was creating "gated communities," but that's pretty much what they were; you couldn't access those neighborhoods unless you could prove you lived there. This reduced the ability of Al-Qaeda in Iraq and its Shia counterparts to carry out their attacks on civilians. Civilian deaths started dropping sharply: In late 2006 there were around three thousand a month, a year later around one thousand civilians were killed each month.

On July 30, 2007, two prominent national security experts based at the liberal-leaning Brookings Institution think tank in Washington, Michael O'Hanlon and Kenneth Pollack, published an op-ed in the *New York Times* headlined "A War We Might Win." The authors had recently traveled around Iraq and wrote, "As two analysts who have harshly criticized the Bush administration's miserable handling of Iraq, we were surprised by the gains we saw and the potential to produce not necessarily 'victory' but a sustainable stability that both we and the Iraqis could live with."

Secretary of State Rice thought that the O'Hanlon-Pollack piece was "manna from heaven"; here were two leading national security experts writing in the *New York Times* that progress was happening in Iraq. Petraeus also thought the piece could play an important role in swaying public opinion. Like McMaster, Petraeus had written his PhD dissertation about

the Vietnam War, and he was keenly aware of the role that the erosion of the American public's support for that conflict had played. Petraeus wrote, "Vietnam was an extremely painful reminder that when it comes to intervention, time and patience are not American virtues in abundant supply."

Petraeus understood that the key center of gravity of the Iraq War was public opinion in the States and the "Washington clock." If you could influence US public opinion enough to generate some hope about Iraq, you could then put additional time on the Washington clock so that the new strategy in Iraq had time to play out before American losses became politically unsustainable and the Bush administration would be forced to cut its losses.

Nine months after the first surge troops had arrived in Iraq, Petraeus and the US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, a veteran Arabic-speaking diplomat who enjoyed a close working relationship with Petraeus, were summoned to Washington to testify about the Iraq War. The testimony took place on September 11, 2007, the sixth anniversary of 9/11, before hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services committees. Five of the senators questioning the two witnesses were running for president that year: Joe Biden, Hillary Clinton, Christopher Dodd, John McCain, and Barack Obama. Only McCain supported the surge, while the other four senators opposed it.

There were rumblings that Congress might take legislative action to end the surge. Given the stakes of these hearings the media coverage of Petraeus's and Crocker's testimony was intense. The senators each had only about five minutes for their round of questions for the witnesses, so these kinds of hearings were well understood in Washington to be more about the senators delivering a crisp soundbite for cable news rather than any deep exploration of the issues at hand.

Petraeus and Crocker testified giving a caveated, somewhat optimistic view about the progress of the war, which included a discussion of the expanding "Awakening" movement in Iraq.

Clinton had voted yes on the Iraq resolution authorizing the US invasion, while Obama hadn't been a senator at the time, so he hadn't had to cast a vote on the war, although he was an early opponent of the conflict. Clinton was not going to be outflanked on the Iraq War issue at this hearing. Clinton told Crocker and Petraeus, "You have been made the de facto spokesmen

for what many of us believe to be a failed policy. . . . I think that the reports that you provide to us really require the willing suspension of disbelief," a semi-polite way of saying that she regarded their testimony as total nonsense.

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By 2008, the Sunni insurgent organizations in Iraq were decimated, but American commanders had another enemy to contend with, the Shia Jaysh al Mahdi, known by its initials JAM, which had grown to some sixty thousand men. In August 2007, JAM started fighting another Shia militia in the holy city of Karbala, in central Iraq, during the busy pilgrimage season when more than a million pilgrims had made their way to the city. These clashes killed fifty-two people, many of them pilgrims; horrified Iraqis saw the violence play out on television. The leader of JAM, Muqtada al-Sadr, ordered his militia to stand down in a six-month ceasefire, which also significantly—if temporarily—reduced the violence in Iraq.

In the spring of 2008, JAM fired mortars and rockets aimed at the heavily secured "Green Zone" in Baghdad, which was home to government ministries and embassies. Prime Minister Maliki decided to launch an attack on the southern Iraqi port city of Basra, which had been largely taken over by JAM.

National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley was in the Oval Office as President Bush heard about Maliki's surprise attack on Basra. Bush hoped that this would transform Maliki from a Shia politician into a truly national leader, telling Hadley: "He will become a nonsectarian leader of his country. That's what I've been looking for ever since we toppled Saddam Hussein. So, not only are we going to support Maliki in this, but the Pentagon and the military better get some people down there and help get control of this operation and make it a success." US advisors and air support soon arrived in Basra and the Shia militias were decimated.

General Petraeus left Iraq for his next assignment as CENTCOM commander in mid-September 2008. During his tenure as the US ground commander in Iraq, around 1,100 American service members were killed during the surge while some 7,700 were wounded. Meanwhile, the numbers of Iraqi civilians dying in the war dropped dramatically from around 3,000 a month before the surge to around 600 a month by the time Petraeus went

back to the United States, and during the following couple of years they trended down even further, to around 300 a month.

In late November 2008 a “status of forces” agreement was negotiated between the Bush administration and the Iraqi government and ratified by the Iraqi parliament. This agreement provided the basis for the incoming Obama administration to plan for the withdrawal of all US service members from Iraq by the end of 2011. It seemed that the Iraq War was, at last, winding down.

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Bush’s decision to surge troops to Iraq was a gamble that paid off, at least in the short term; the violence in Iraq greatly diminished over the next years. Yet, the surge was only one factor among several that accounted for the dramatic reduction in violence in Iraq. The widespread adoption of counterinsurgency tactics put more American soldiers onto the streets of Iraq protecting the local population, who interposed themselves between the Shia and Sunni militias that were tearing Iraq apart. There were also changing conditions on the ground; Al-Qaeda in Iraq wore out its welcome with the Sunni tribes of Iraq, who largely turned against the terrorist group. In the shadows JSOC, aided by the NSA’s Real Time Regional Gateway, continued to decimate the Shia and Sunni insurgent leaders and midlevel operatives who were driving the civil war.

Viewed through the longer lens of history, the surge didn’t heal the political wounds in Iraq between the Shia and the Sunnis; you couldn’t just kill your way to peace. The conflict between Shia and Sunni would lead to the rise of ISIS, the Sunni terrorist army that seized much of Iraq seven years after the surge troops had deployed there. In that sense Generals Casey and Abizaid were right; Iraqis needed to make the political accommodations necessary to tamp down the civil war. At the same time Bush and Hadley were correct that without reducing the violence, there was little chance that political reconciliation could happen in the middle of a civil war.

And through an even longer lens, the original sin was Bush’s decision to invade Iraq in the first place. President Bush wrote letters to the families of every service member who died during the time he was commander in chief. By the end of his time in office he had written almost five thousand

letters, the bulk of them to the families of the men and women who had been killed in his war of choice in Iraq.

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CHAPTER NINE

THE RETURN OF THE TALIBAN

The typical 21-year-old Marine is hard-pressed to win the heart and mind of his mother-in-law; can he really be expected to do the same with an ethnocentric Pashtun tribal elder?

—FORMER US AMBASSADOR TO AFGHANISTAN, RETIRED LIEUTENANT GENERAL KARL EIKENBERRY

Your Marines live in tents; that's how I know you won't be here long.

—TRIBAL ELDER TO MARC CHRETIEN, STATE DEPARTMENT ADVISOR TO THE MARINES IN HELMAND PROVINCE, SOUTHERN AFGHANISTAN

In 2008, for the first time, more American troops were dying in Afghanistan than in Iraq. As Iraq began to stabilize, senior Bush administration officials became alarmed by Afghanistan, which the White

House had mostly neglected because the Iraq War was so all-consuming. Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee in December 2007, "In Afghanistan we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must." As a result, the Afghan War was treated as an "economy of force" operation, Pentagon terminology for saying that the US military would do the minimum that was necessary in Afghanistan.

The result of this strategy was that for years the Taliban had been gathering strength while al-Qaeda was regrouping in Pakistan's tribal regions along the Afghan border. These two problems were related, since the Taliban's leadership and al-Qaeda's leaders were both based in Pakistan.

The first years after the overthrow of the Taliban had seemed so hopeful. Millions of Afghan refugees returned home from neighboring Pakistan and Iran to a country that had been largely destroyed by more than two decades of war. Kabul resembled Dresden after World War II; the city was largely deserted, and packs of wild dogs roamed the streets at night. Government ministries had no computers, and the phone system didn't work.

Afghanistan had to start entirely from scratch, even down to deciding what the new flag of the country would look like. Ryan Crocker, the top US diplomat in Afghanistan, met with the Afghan leader Hamid Karzai almost daily in early 2002. At one of these meetings Karzai took out a napkin and started sketching out the future flag of Afghanistan. Karzai observed, "We got to accept that we are the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, so we need to work in God somewhere." The new flag of the country portrayed a mosque on a striped black, red, and green background, the traditional colors of the Afghan flag.

At that time, Karzai was lionized in the West. He wasn't some Afghan warlord with copious amounts of blood on his hands, but rather a patrician, multilingual leader habitually dressed in a colorful cape and fur hat whom the American designer Tom Ford dubbed the "chicest man on the planet."

Despite all the warm feelings about Karzai, Ambassador Crocker understood there wasn't any high-level interest in Washington in what happened next in Afghanistan. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in particular, did not want to see the United States get involved in nation

building. What would follow would be a policy of "calculated neglect" of Afghanistan, according to Ambassador James Dobbins, the lead US negotiator at the conference in Bonn that had installed Karzai as Afghanistan's interim leader. "The strong antipathy towards large-scale reconstruction and governance efforts at high levels of the U.S. government persisted through 2002 and into 2003," according to an official US military history of the Afghan War.

It was during this period that the best CIA officers and analysts shifted from working on Afghanistan and Pakistan to focusing on Iraq. Beginning in March 2002 CENTCOM started diverting personnel working on the Afghan War to prepare for the impending invasion of Iraq, which was still a year away.

The initial deployment of some 7,000 American soldiers to Afghanistan following the fall of the Taliban in December 2001 was paltry given that the size of the population was around 20 million people. Public security outside Kabul was left entirely to the Afghans, even though Afghanistan had no army and no police force. There was also little effort to build up the Afghan Army and police in the years immediately after the fall of the Taliban. By January 2003 only 1,800 troops had been produced by the US-led effort to grow the Afghan army and throughout 2003, no Afghan military units could operate independently.

By mid-2005 the Afghan Army had only some 24,000 soldiers trained and equipped, significantly less than the size of the police force in New York City, in a country roughly the size and population of Texas. Three years later the US Government Accountability Office assessed that only 2 percent of Afghan Army units were fully capable. The slow buildup of Afghanistan's army was a missed opportunity during a time when the Taliban were weak and disorganized.

Given the lack of US, NATO, or Afghan troops, Karzai often turned to local warlords to provide security. In Helmand Karzai installed Sher Mohammed Akhundzada as governor. In June 2005, US Drug Enforcement Administration officials and Afghan police raided Akhundzada's office and found nine tons of opium, the precursor to heroin. Governor Akhundzada was subsequently removed from office.

One of the most notorious of the warlords was Gul Agha Shirzai, who became the governor of Kandahar with US support in December 2001. Yet Karzai, at least during his first years in office, seemed unwilling or unable

to rein in warlords like Shirzai. “Instead of protecting the people from the warlords, curbing them, or removing them from office, Karzai seemed to be waltzing with them,” observed American journalist Sarah Chayes, who lived in Kandahar for four years after the fall of the Taliban and who came to see Karzai’s reliance on the warlords as a critical failure that reduced ordinary Afghans’ support for the government.

But as the Afghan Army and police gradually grew and Karzai’s own confidence as a leader increased, the Afghan president started to sideline some of the most powerful warlords. Karzai forced Ismail Khan, the governor of the western province of Herat, to resign. Karzai also dropped Field Marshal Mohammad Fahim from his post as minister of defense, and led an effort to partially demobilize the warlords’ private armies; between 2004 and 2005 some 60,000 militiamen were disarmed.

While Karzai was building up a nascent Afghan state, the American commander in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General David Barno, and the US ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan American, enjoyed a close working relationship. This meant that the American military and civilian leaders had real “unity of command” and they worked together to achieve common goals. Barno’s living quarters, which consisted of one-half of a shipping container, were just yards away from Khalilzad’s multi-container residence. Khalilzad, who spoke Dari and Pashto, also met daily with President Karzai, often talking with him late into the night.

This all paid off with what was in retrospect the high-water mark of the post-Taliban era in Afghanistan: the Afghan presidential election held on October 9, 2004. Karzai won 55 percent of the vote in an election that was widely regarded as reasonably fair, and eight million Afghans voted, a more than 70 percent voter turnout. The first election in Afghanistan in many decades was a day of great celebration, and images of long lines of voters flooded Afghan media. Women voted in large numbers, even in conservative regions of the country.

There were other positive developments: dozens of newspapers, radio, and TV channels were established, replacing the Taliban’s dour Radio Shariat. Where once the streets of Kabul were largely silent, they were now clogged with traffic and thriving small businesses. During the reign of the Taliban the female population had little access to basic health care. A few years after their fall, access greatly increased. As a result, maternal

mortality fell by 80 percent, while per capita income for women doubled between 2001 and 2013.

But there were festering problems below the surface; the Taliban hadn't gone away, and their views were representative of conservative rural Pashtun Afghans. Pashtuns were the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, living mostly in the south and east.

The Americans and their NATO allies were also quite ignorant regarding basic facts about the Taliban. There were, for instance, only a handful of photographs of the Taliban's reclusive leader, Mullah Omar. And US intelligence couldn't answer simple questions about him: Was the Taliban's supreme leader based in Pakistan or Afghanistan? How did Mullah Omar communicate his orders, and to whom? Where and when did he eventually die? Was it in a hospital in Pakistan, as some US officials believed? Or had he been hiding out all along in Zabul, an obscure Afghan province, as claimed by knowledgeable members of the Taliban? The United States had little clue, which underlined how sketchy its knowledge was about the enemy it was fighting.

Another indicator of this lack of good intelligence: In late 2010 a man saying he was Mullah Mansour, a senior Taliban leader, appeared in Kabul offering to negotiate a peace deal with the Karzai government. Except it turned out he wasn't Mullah Mansour but rather a shopkeeper who scammed significant sums from naïve British officials who believed that he was an important Taliban leader interested in making peace.

This Western ignorance was compounded by the way the war was fought. Most American soldiers and diplomats served one-year tours—known as the "annual lobotomy"—which were not sufficient to understand a complex country. The one-year tours did have an important rationale: the all-volunteer force would have had trouble sustaining itself if the tours were significantly longer. But as a result, too often the Afghan conflict was a one-year war that was fought twenty times over.

Even at the level of the top American commanders and ambassadors, who would often remain in their positions for longer than one year, there was still considerable churn. In the two decades of the conflict, fifteen top US commanders and a dozen American ambassadors rotated in and out of Afghanistan. One of those commanders was Lieutenant General David Barno, who observed, "No successful enterprise could function under those levels of turnover."

A tiny number of Americans stationed in Afghanistan spoke Dari or Pashto, the two key local languages. After almost a decade of war, the Pentagon developed an "AFPAK Hands" program for officers to learn the local languages who then would serve in Afghanistan or Pakistan for multiple tours. For the one thousand or so service members who joined the AFPAK Hands program, it was often career suicide since it didn't tick any of the boxes that moved them up the conventional promotions ladder.

As in Iraq, the US military had entered Afghanistan with little knowledge or interest in counterinsurgency. The Army's field manual, published just months before the 9/11 attacks and running more than three hundred pages long, had only a couple of pages about counterinsurgency operations. In the early years of the Afghan War some enterprising officers resorted to ordering books online about how best to fight an insurgency and had them shipped to Afghanistan.

The short-term thinking and lack of any deep knowledge of Afghanistan also reflected a certain aspect of American culture. The United States was founded as an anti-empire project, so anything that resembled imperialism —such as long-term postings for officials with the relevant language skills, as was the case for the British in India—was not embraced.

Then there was the problem of Pakistan. The Pakistani Army had long wanted a pro-Pakistan Afghan state on its western border to balance its Indian neighbor to the east, against which it had fought three major wars, all of which Pakistan had lost. If there was a pro-Indian government in Kabul, Pakistani generals feared they would be encircled and so would do anything in their power to try to make sure this didn't happen.

The Pakistani military termed this policy "strategic depth" and had long believed that Pashtun Islamist leaders running Afghanistan, such as the Taliban, were their best bet to curtail any Indian influence in Afghanistan. Nothing the Americans could do either with carrots or sticks would ever get the Pakistani military to shift this strategic calculus despite the many years of American officials begging or berating the Pakistanis to sever their links to the Taliban.

US policymakers consistently misdiagnosed this issue, either believing that they could get the Pakistanis to change their strategic calculus about Afghanistan, or that they were double-dealing when they continued their support for the Taliban. In fact, the Pakistanis were simply prioritizing what

they believed was best for their own national interests, just as the Americans prioritized their own national interests.

The Pakistani military *would* act against militant jihadists when it was in their own interests. Between 2008 and 2009 the Pakistani Taliban imposed a reign of terror on the northern Pakistani tourist destination of Swat, beheading policemen and burning down girls' schools. This took place only one hundred miles from the capital, Islamabad. The Pakistani military launched operations against the Pakistani Taliban in Swat, which ended their draconian rule there. After 9/11 more than nine thousand Pakistani soldiers and policemen died fighting jihadist militants based in Pakistan, which undercut the charge that some US officials made that the Pakistanis weren't fighting the militants.

The Taliban had deep ties to Pakistan. Many of them had grown up in Afghan refugee camps there. Others had attended religious schools known as madrassas in Pakistan, in particular the Darul Uloom Haqqania, located outside the city of Peshawar in northwestern Pakistan and known to inculcate a very conservative brand of Islam. Two graduates of that madrassa, Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son Sirajuddin, led a particularly effective military branch of the Afghan Taliban with long-standing ties to Pakistan's military intelligence agency, the ISI. The Haqqanis enjoyed a stronghold in the Pakistani tribal region of North Waziristan. Many hundreds of foreign militants, including members of al-Qaeda, settled in North Waziristan and neighboring South Waziristan from 2004 onward. One of those foreign militants emailed an associate to tell him that the local bazaar was "bustling with Chechens, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Russians, Bosnians, some from EU countries and of course our Arab brothers."

The Haqqanis were responsible for large-scale attacks in Kabul that did much to undermine confidence in the capabilities of the Afghan government and the US-led coalition to defend against such operations in the capital. In January 2008 a suicide bomber attacked the five-star Serena Hotel, killing six staff and guests, including an American. Three months later Karzai himself narrowly avoided being assassinated at a military parade in Kabul. And in July, a massive car bomb exploded outside the Indian embassy, killing fifty-eight people and wounding many more.

The war, which had once been waged in largely remote rural districts, had now arrived in Kabul. The capital once had a bustling restaurant scene where decent French wine was discreetly served to foreigners. Now restaurants were guarded by armed men, and hotels built bomb shelters.

By 2006 the Taliban were back in the south and east of Afghanistan. They had learned from the tactics of the insurgents in Iraq: suicide attacks, which were virtually unknown in Afghanistan, went up more than sevenfold from seventeen in 2005 to 123 a year later, while IED attacks went up 400 percent between 2006 and 2008. The Taliban attacks became increasingly ambitious, including a failed attempt by a suicide bomber to kill Vice President Cheney when he was visiting Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in early 2007.

Foreign militants, often veterans of the Iraq War, helped the Taliban become a more effective military force. "The Arabs taught us how to make an IED by mixing nitrate fertilizer and diesel fuel and how to pack plastic explosives and to connect them to detonators and remote-control devices like mobile phones," a Taliban fighter explained. "We learned how to do this blindfolded so we could safely plant IEDs in the dark."

After 9/11 US officials often urged their Pakistani counterparts to "do more" about the militants based in their country. When it came to al-Qaeda the Pakistanis were more than happy to oblige; after all, al-Qaeda was an enemy of the Pakistani state. On two occasions in 2003 members of the terrorist group had tried to assassinate General Pervez Musharraf, the Pakistani leader. The United States was also funding the Pakistani military to the tune of about one billion dollars a year to attack jihadist groups on their territory. But when it came to Afghanistan and the Taliban, Pakistan's interests and American interests diverged, sharply. The Americans wanted to defeat the Taliban, while the Pakistanis wanted to keep the Taliban card available to play should the US leave Afghanistan.

The Pakistani military was under no illusions about the likely staying power of the Americans in Afghanistan. During the 1980s war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the CIA funneled billions to the Pakistani military, who distributed the funds to a variety of Afghan warlords fighting the Russians. But in 1989, after the Soviets withdrew, the US shuttered its

embassy in Kabul and walked away. The Pakistani military knew all this history in their bones.

When the US ambassador to Pakistan, Ryan Crocker, delivered the usual American talking points about the threat posed by the Pakistan-based Afghan Taliban leadership to General Ashfaq Kayani, the head of Pakistan's military intelligence agency, the general was direct in his reply, saying: "One day you'll be gone again. It'll be like Afghanistan the first time, you'll be done with us, but we're still going to be here because we can't actually move the country," the general observed. "And the last thing we want with all of our other problems is to have turned the Taliban into a mortal enemy, so, yes, we're hedging our bets."

That hedging by the Pakistanis became more pronounced as the Iraq War dragged on, and the US got increasingly bogged down. The Pakistanis calculated, correctly, that the US wouldn't be able to successfully manage two wars simultaneously and that Afghanistan would end up getting shortchanged by Bush officials, consumed as they were by Iraq. That's when the Pakistan military discreetly began increasing its support to the Taliban, who would likely be the winning horse in any post-American Afghanistan.

On December 19, 2005, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld ordered three thousand US soldiers, a sixth of the force then in Afghanistan, to pull out of the country. Because of the worsening security situation, in the end that didn't happen, but the commander of US forces in Afghanistan, Lieutenant General Barno, worried that the Pakistanis would interpret this as a sign that the Americans were planning to leave Afghanistan.

The fact that the Taliban enjoyed a real sanctuary in Pakistan did not bode well for American counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan. A RAND study of eighty-nine insurgencies fought around the globe since World War II found that insurgents who enjoyed a sanctuary in a neighboring country won almost half the conflicts where there was a clear victor, while without a sanctuary they had only prevailed in one in seven cases. A case in point was the Vietnam War, which often hovered like a ghost over the Afghan conflict: North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces enjoyed sanctuaries in both neighboring Cambodia and Laos, and they eventually won the conflict. Even closer to home, the Afghan mujahideen fighters who defeated the Soviets had benefited from a considerable sanctuary in Pakistan during the 1980s.

There were also tensions within American counterinsurgency practice, which was predicated on the notion that success came from "protecting the population." But what about protecting Afghans from predatory local police chiefs and warlords allied with US forces, who were often more of a problem for ordinary Afghans than the Taliban?

Tens of billions of dollars of aid gushed into Afghanistan during President Karzai's tenure, which fueled the chronic corruption in his country. Karzai tolerated the insatiable greed of his family members, who became extraordinarily rich. His brother Ahmed Wali Karzai was estimated to be making $250 million a year from his various businesses.

The Taliban had banned poppy growing in 2000, but now they were profiting handsomely from the opium trade. Opium and heroin production, which by 2007 was equivalent to around half of Afghanistan's licit economy, funded the Taliban and also fueled Afghanistan's endemic corruption. By 2008 Afghanistan was rated one of the most corrupt countries on the planet, alongside failed states such as Somalia.

A survey commissioned by the British government found several reasons that people joined or supported the Taliban: the central government was corrupt; the state failed to provide security and justice; and the behavior of American and other NATO forces sometimes offended Afghan cultural sensibilities, particularly during house searches at night.

Civilian casualties also damaged Afghans' perception of the US/NATO presence in their country. President Karzai repeatedly urged NATO and the US military to act with greater restraint. "Our innocent people are becoming victims of careless operations of NATO and international forces," Karzai said at a press conference in June 2007. "Afghan life is not cheap," he declared. Despite Karzai's public warnings, US airstrikes on August 22, 2008, killed as many as ninety-two civilians in Herat Province.

The Taliban profited from the grievances many Afghans had with foreign forces and the Afghan government, but they also offered a real service: rough-and-ready justice for ordinary Afghans. In Taliban courts rural Afghans could receive swift verdicts about disputes over land and water rights, which was not the case in the glacial Afghan judicial system. By 2008 the Taliban were running two dozen law courts in southern Afghanistan.

The Taliban also benefited from a narrative that resonated with many Afghans: It was an Islamic duty to fight the foreign infidel invaders. For the

Afghan soldiers and police fighting the Taliban, the thinner narrative of defending the newly reestablished Afghan state would prove to be a less inspiring rallying cry.

Afghans also hadn't seen much return on the tens of billions of dollars of well-advertised international aid that had supposedly been given to their country. Only around 20 percent of international aid that was given to Afghanistan ended up being spent on local Afghan projects, according to a 2008 study by Integrity Watch Afghanistan, while Afghanistan remained one of the poorest countries in the world.

Two of the most high-profile reconstruction projects in the country were the Kabul-to-Kandahar road and the Kajaki Dam. The three-hundred-mile road that connected Kabul and Kandahar cost around $200 million to build, much of which went to the US construction company Louis Berger Group. The company also won an even bigger contract to restore the massive Kajaki hydroelectric dam in Helmand for $736 million. Louis Berger's involvement in the road reconstruction was a "debacle," with "shoddy work" and large cost overruns, while the Kajaki Dam contract "failed to meet construction milestones or budget estimates," according to a US Army history of the Afghan War. The Kajaki Dam never produced the large amounts of electricity it was supposed to. Eventually the CEO of Louis Berger pled guilty to conspiracy to defraud tens of millions of dollars from the US government.

Chemonics, a Washington, DC–based international development corporation, received more than $430 million from the US government to provide "alterative livelihoods" for Afghan poppy farmers. Much of this money was simply wasted, and Afghanistan remained the key supplier of heroin globally.

Virginia-based DynCorp won contracts worth $1.7 billion to train Afghan police forces. A Pentagon audit found that $322 million in invoices "were approved even though they were not allowable, allocable, or reasonable." DynCorp, which also trained Iraqi police forces, paid a $21 million fine for falsifying billing for its services in Iraq.

Too often US funding for Afghanistan ended up employing large numbers of well-paid Americans in the guise of helping Afghans. Speaking

to a US government investigator, a senior American official explained how this worked: "We would buy American products, American grain, American consultants, American security experts, and they would implement our aid programs. . . . The Afghans used to tell me that somewhere between 10 to 20 percent actually shows up in Afghanistan, and less than 10 percent ever gets to a village. You [the US] hire a big contractor and inside-the-Beltway consultant, who then hires 15 subcontractors. The first guy takes 20 percent, the next level takes 20 percent."

Before 9/11 only two of the ten richest counties in the United States were in the Washington area. A decade later, there were seven. While correlation is not causation, vast amounts of money flowed into the Washington, DC, region because of the many hundreds of billions of dollars that were spent in Afghanistan and Iraq.

A smarter approach would likely have been to funnel international aid through Afghan institutions with as many safeguards as possible, anticipating, of course, that some of the funds would be skimmed off. That would have helped build up those Afghan institutions and likely a lot more money would have ended up funding local projects on the ground.

Another significant diversion of American funds was to . . . *the Taliban.* That was because the trucking companies that serviced US bases in Afghanistan had to pay off the Taliban not to attack their convoys when they were traveling through their territory. A forensic accountant working on a US military task force examined $106 billion of Pentagon contracts in Afghanistan and concluded that 18 percent went to pay off the Taliban or other insurgent groups.

The Afghan conflict became a classic "self-licking ice cream cone": The United States helped to fill the coffers of the Taliban through a contracting system that funded contractors and subcontractors who then paid off the insurgents not to attack their convoys or projects. The US also helped to fund the Pakistani military in its fight against terrorists, while the Pakistanis turned a blind eye to the Taliban on their territory who were killing American soldiers in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the Pentagon needed Pakistan's help to wage its war against the Taliban in landlocked Afghanistan. Without the "land bridge" that brought supplies from the Pakistani port city of Karachi overland into Afghanistan and the "air bridge" for flights over Pakistani territory that supplied Kandahar Airfield in southern Afghanistan, it would have been difficult to bring in all the

supplies needed for the tens of thousands of American troops in Afghanistan.

By 2006, NATO, at least theoretically, had taken over military operations in Afghanistan. The British fought hard in Helmand, as did the Canadians in Kandahar. But of the twenty-six countries that made up the alliance, few would fight. The joke about the multinational International Security Assistance Force, known as ISAF, was that it stood for "I Saw Americans Fighting." Ultimately, of course, it was America's war, and other NATO countries did put their troops in harm's way: around a thousand European and other allied forces died in the conflict. As Churchill observed, the only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them.

In July 2007, the sixteen agencies that made up the US intelligence community released a National Intelligence Estimate warning that al-Qaeda "has protected or regenerated key elements of its Homeland attack capability, including a safe haven in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas." As we have seen, two of the suicide bombers in the July 7, 2005, attacks in London, which killed fifty-two people, had trained in Pakistan's tribal regions.

The tribal regions were never fully under any government's control. In 2003 and 2004 the Pakistani leader General Musharraf launched military operations in the tribal regions against the militants based there, which were defeats for the Pakistani Army. That approach was followed by "peace" agreements with the militants in 2005 and 2006 that allowed al-Qaeda and allied groups to establish even greater sway in the tribal regions.

By the summer of 2007 Bush officials had grown skeptical of General Musharraf's ability to combat the militants. Instead, the White House backed former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to wage an election contest against Musharraf. Bhutto had been Pakistan's first female prime minister at the young age of thirty-five, at a time when the Pakistani military was supporting the Taliban's campaign to seize power in Afghanistan during the mid-1990s. Now, two decades later, Bhutto was an

experienced politician who wasn't about to get railroaded by Pakistan's generals to make nice with the Taliban.

During her 2007 election campaign, Bhutto, a graduate of Oxford and Harvard, said publicly that she would crack down on the Taliban. Those threats were taken seriously by the militants and on October 18, 2007, two suicide bombers targeted the former prime minister in Karachi, killing some 140 bystanders and almost succeeding in killing her.

Two and a half months later, Bhutto's enemies struck again. This time they killed her. The government quickly fingered the head of the Pakistani Taliban, Baitullah Mehsud, as the mastermind of the assassination. If Bhutto had survived and won the election, she likely would have taken stronger steps than other Pakistani leaders to curtail the Taliban and other jihadist groups based in Pakistan.

Throughout 2008 CIA Director General Michael Hayden was becoming increasingly alarmed by al-Qaeda's training camps that were springing up in Pakistan's tribal regions. In his view, some of the Western trainees at these camps wouldn't raise any eyebrows if they were going through passport control at Dulles Airport, outside Washington, DC. Hayden used his regularly scheduled Thursday morning meetings with Bush to warn the president about how al-Qaeda was reconstituting to the point it might be able to carry out an attack on the United States. The clear implication of what Hayden was telling Bush was "knowing what we know now, there's no explaining our inaction after the next attack takes place." Bush was persuaded, declaring to his advisors, "These sons of bitches are killing Americans. I've had enough."

The Bush administration deployed armed Predator drones to target suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders. This lowered the risk for American forces as well. Marty Martin, who ran the CIA's counterterrorism operations, said that in a choice between a drone or deploying half a dozen Americans to try and capture or kill a suspected al-Qaeda leader in Pakistan's mountainous tribal regions, "I'll take the Predator, any day."

Bush ordered the CIA to expand its drone attacks during the summer of 2008. The drones were operated by pilots stationed in Nevada and were equipped to launch Hellfire missiles and drop bombs. Between July 2008

and when he left office in January 2009, President Bush authorized thirty Predator and Reaper strikes in Pakistan's tribal regions, five times more than the six drone strikes that the CIA had launched during the first half of the year.

Those drone strikes killed at least ten mid- and upper-level leaders within al-Qaeda or the Taliban. One of them was Abu al-Layth al-Libi, who had overseen the 2007 suicide attack targeting Vice President Dick Cheney while he was visiting Afghanistan. Rashid Rauf, the key al-Qaeda operative who had overseen the London Underground bombings in 2005 and who had later escaped from Pakistani custody, was also killed in a drone strike.

During his second term, President Bush rarely uttered bin Laden's name in public, but during the last six months of his administration, at his regular weekly meetings with his CIA director, Michael Hayden, the president often started the meeting by asking a simple question: "So, where are we, Mike?" The CIA director knew that the president was asking him about the hunt for bin Laden. Bush would then remind Hayden about how many days he had left in office.

Meanwhile, Barack Obama was campaigning for the presidency. Obama said publicly that if bin Laden was hiding in Pakistan and the Pakistanis weren't doing anything about it, he would send American troops in to find him. This seemingly anodyne statement provoked a storm of criticism. Obama's Democratic primary challenger, Senator Hillary Clinton, said, "He basically threatened to bomb Pakistan, which I don't think was a particularly wise position to take." Obama's Republican rival for the presidency, Senator John McCain, also piled on, saying, "We risk the confused leadership of an inexperienced candidate who once suggested invading our ally, Pakistan."

In December 2008, as Bush's presidency was in its final weeks, Hayden briefed the president about a promising lead: the CIA had identified a man named Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti as a key bin Laden courier. Still, where al-Kuwaiti might be, and even whether he was still working for bin Laden, were mysteries.

Alarmed by the rise of the Taliban, toward the end of President Bush's second term a group of senior Bush administration officials began traveling

to Afghanistan regularly, including Eliot Cohen, who was counselor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. During the summer of 2007 Cohen examined United Nations maps of Afghanistan going back several years showing areas where it was safe for aid organizations to work. The safe green areas had shrunk significantly, and the red areas were growing rapidly. A US Army history of the Afghan War did not mince words: “By 2008 the entire mission faced the possibility of strategic failure.”

The growing alarm about Afghanistan precipitated a soup-to-nuts review by senior Bush officials during the fall of 2008. President Bush told his team: “I want you to look at two issues. One, things I have to do now, as president, which are urgent. And secondly, what are we handing off to the next administration, and how do we help them understand the issue?” After Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election, his new national security team was briefed about the Bush review that recommended some of the policies that the Obama administration would later adopt, including an expanded counterinsurgency mission in Afghanistan.

The United States’ neglect of Afghanistan was another missed opportunity and an issue that Bush officials only began to take seriously seven years after the American victory over the Taliban.

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CHAPTER TEN

THE GOOD WAR

I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars.

—ILLINOIS STATE SENATOR BARACK OBAMA
AT A RALLY IN CHICAGO IN OCTOBER 2002,
SPEAKING ABOUT THE IMPENDING IRAQ WAR

You can't step into the same river twice.

—HERACLITUS

What was the US trying to accomplish in Afghanistan?

In early January 2009, Vice President–elect Biden and his national security advisor, Antony "Tony" Blinken, visited Afghan President Hamid Karzai. Karzai and Biden had a tense relationship, and this visit was an attempt at a reset. A year earlier, then-Senator Biden had stormed out of a formal dinner in Kabul with Karzai and his cabinet because the Afghan president didn't seem to be taking the issue of corruption in his government seriously enough. Afghans put a tremendous premium on providing hospitality to their guests, so blowing off a formal dinner was quite the insult.

When he returned to the States in January 2009, Biden briefed Obama, saying: “You know, Mr. President, I talked to a lot of people. And I asked everyone, what’s our mission here? And I got ten different answers,” Biden said. “So, the first thing we really have to do is decide what is it that we’re still trying to accomplish in Afghanistan.” Effectively, Biden was asking Clausewitz’s question: What kind of war was the United States embarking on in Afghanistan? Obama replied that was why he was going to order a strategic review of Afghanistan as soon as he assumed office.

Bruce Riedel, a three-decade veteran of the CIA, led the review. It had a two-month timeline for completion because the Afghan presidential election scheduled for the summer of 2009 was fast approaching, and that meant having to deploy more US troops to protect polling stations from the Taliban.

During the review, Riedel warned Obama of the risks that Pakistan’s nuclear weapons could end up in the hands of militants. Obama told Riedel that he had just left a meeting with Treasury officials dealing with the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis, who had told him that virtually every bank in the United States could fail before the end of the month. Obama observed: “Now that’s *really* scary.” This was the economic environment Obama was operating in as the decision to send more troops and resources to Afghanistan was being debated by his war cabinet.

On March 27, the Riedel review came out, recommending a fully resourced counterinsurgency campaign in southern and eastern Afghanistan to disrupt “terrorist networks in Afghanistan and especially Pakistan to degrade any ability they have to plan and launch international terrorist attacks.” But the large number of American boots on the ground that were needed to execute such a counterinsurgency campaign was not well understood by many senior Obama administration officials, who came into office with scant understanding of military planning.

The Pentagon was ordered to develop a counterinsurgency campaign plan, a job that fell to the US commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan. Gates and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, Admiral Mike Mullen, were worried that General McKiernan was not well-suited to lead a complex counterinsurgency campaign. They decided to replace him with General Stanley McChrystal, who had greatly increased the effectiveness of US special operations in Iraq. Officially McKiernan resigned from his post on May 10; he was, in fact, fired.

Meanwhile, political support for the Afghan War was evaporating. Polling in March 2009 showed that more than 40 percent of Americans felt it was a mistake to send military forces to Afghanistan, up from only 6 percent seven years earlier. In May, fifty-one House Democrats voted against continuing to fund the Afghan and Iraq wars.

Early in President Obama's first term he delivered a speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009, that was billed as a "reset" with the Islamic world. President Bush was widely disliked for the invasion of Iraq and many Muslims hoped that the first Black American president, who had spent part of his childhood living in Indonesia, would bring warmer relations between the United States and the Muslim world.

In Cairo Obama declared, "America is not—and never will be—at war with Islam." Obama told his audience that as a boy living in Indonesia, he remembered the call to prayer rising from every mosque. His speech was occasionally interrupted by people in the crowd shouting "I love you."

While Obama was offering an olive branch to the Islamic world, he also said in his Cairo speech that as US commander in chief his first responsibility was to protect Americans, and he vowed to "relentlessly confront violent extremists who pose a grave threat to our security." Obama was putting the world on notice that he was no peacenik when it came to fighting jihadist terrorists.

In December Obama went to Norway to accept the Nobel Peace Prize. When he accepted the award, Obama likely confounded the expectations of some in the audience in Oslo by making a forceful speech about the necessity of just wars, saying: "A nonviolent movement could not have halted Hitler's armies. Negotiations cannot convince al-Qaeda's leaders to lay down their arms. To say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism—it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man, and the limits of reason."

Just nine days earlier Obama had ordered a surge of US troops into Afghanistan, replicating Bush's surge of troops into Iraq two years earlier, even down to the same number of service members: 30,000 troops. During Obama's surge American troop levels reached their peak in Afghanistan: 110,000 by 2011.

The differences between Bush and Obama were far less pronounced than either their critics or their cheerleaders believed when it came to waging war on jihadist groups. Obama authorized military operations of various kinds in seven Muslim countries: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

Obama had campaigned on the issue of ending the "dumb" Iraq War that his Democratic primary challenger Senator Hillary Clinton had voted for, as had his presidential challenger, Republican Senator John McCain. Just as Iraq became "Bush's war," so what some believed was the "good war" in Afghanistan was now "Obama's war."

When Obama assumed office in January 2009, the good war was going badly: 40 percent of Afghanistan was now either under direct Taliban control or a high-risk area for insurgent attacks. In 2005 eleven of the thirty-four Afghan provinces had "shadow" Taliban governors, who oversaw the administration of harsh Taliban justice and collected taxes. By the time Obama was in office, the Taliban had shadow governors in all but one of Afghanistan's provinces.

Obama came into the debates about how to turn things around in Afghanistan with scant knowledge about the US military. His tight-knit set of advisors who had worked with him on his campaign were equally unfamiliar with the ways of the Pentagon. This would seed the ground for considerable tensions between senior officials in Obama's White House and his top generals.

During Obama's first months in office, the Pentagon kept making requests for more soldiers to secure the upcoming Afghan presidential election, which was scheduled for the summer of 2009. Those troop requests varied anywhere from 17,000 to 30,000 soldiers, which created suspicion at the White House that the generals were trying to box in the new president with ever-larger troop requests while he was still figuring out what exactly to do about the Afghan War.

Obama eventually agreed to send in 17,000 more troops to help secure the Afghan election, which was in addition to the 4,500 service members President Bush had already ordered to deploy to Afghanistan at the end of his administration. In total 21,500 additional American forces would deploy to Afghanistan in the first half of 2009, almost doubling the US military presence in the country.

To try to bridge the cultural gap between the Pentagon and Obama's inner circle, who now had senior White House jobs, Obama appointed as his national security advisor retired Marine General Jim Jones, the former Supreme Allied Commander Europe. Obama also "held over" two of Bush's top advisors, the secretary of defense, Robert Gates, and Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, the senior director on the National Security Council for Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama's vice president, Joe Biden, also had experience dealing with the Pentagon as the longtime chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Obama's secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, had served on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Obama created a new diplomatic post, appointing Richard Holbrooke to be the US special representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Holbrooke was a storied diplomat who had masterfully led the negotiations to end the wars in the Balkans at a peace conference in Dayton, Ohio, in 1995. Holbrooke's appointment seemed to presage at least the possibility that negotiations with the Taliban might help end the war.

For an administration that prided itself on being "No-Drama Obama," the Afghan War debate became increasingly acrimonious behind closed doors, a debate that eventually spilled out into public view. Perhaps that wasn't surprising given the stakes involved: the prospect of sending tens of thousands of additional US service members to fight in a war that wasn't going well at a time when the United States was still recovering from the aftershocks of the deepest recession since the Great Depression.

A key counterinsurgency doctrine emphasized that winning against the insurgents hinged in good part on "unity of command" between civilian leaders and the generals. Instead, many of the key players overseeing the Afghan War despised each other. Secretary of Defense Gates thought that Biden—who as a senator had voted against the successful 1991 Gulf War and who had voted for the disastrous Iraq War—had been wrong on just about every major foreign policy issue for the past four decades. For his part, Biden believed that the Pentagon was trying to hustle Obama with ever larger troop requests for Afghanistan while waging a very public campaign to force the president's hand. The US ambassador in Afghanistan, Karl Eikenberry, was skeptical that a counterinsurgency campaign would work in Afghanistan, which clashed with General McChrystal's pro-counterinsurgency stance.

Meanwhile, Obama largely tuned out Holbrooke, finding his bombastic reminiscences of his time serving as a foreign service officer during the Vietnam War annoying and irrelevant to the question at hand: What to do in Afghanistan? At a meeting during the Afghan review Holbrooke portentously declared, "Not since Clark Clifford counseled Lyndon Johnson on the Vietnam War has a commander in chief faced such a momentous decision." Obama cut him off, saying: "Richard, do people really *talk* like that?" Holbrooke came to have no friends in the Obama White House and was constantly at odds with Lieutenant General Lute, the senior director for Afghanistan on the National Security Council, who Holbrooke thought was just a paper pusher compiling data about how the war was being lost.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai couldn't stand Holbrooke, who he believed, rightly, was maneuvering to have him replaced in the upcoming 2009 Afghan presidential election. Holbrooke thought that Karzai was going to lose the war because of his government's corruption. Ambassador Eikenberry had an equally poor relationship with the Afghan president and also wanted to try to engineer the election of an alternative to Karzai. These multiple conflicts between senior officials at the White House, Pentagon, State Department, and the Afghan presidential palace didn't bode well for a successful counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.

When Gates brought General McChrystal to meet with Obama for the first time, the president cracked a small joke. McChrystal remained stiff and unsmiling in the presence of his commander in chief. After McChrystal left the Oval Office, the president observed to Gates with a smile: "He's very . . . focused."

McChrystal wanted the men and women under his command to get serious about the war they were fighting in Afghanistan: he banned alcohol at NATO headquarters and ordered the closure of the fast-food restaurants that had proliferated on the "boardwalk" of the vast American base at Kandahar Airfield. Burger King, Dairy Queen, and Pizza Hut were all banished.

McChrystal assessed the situation in Afghanistan and found that the Taliban were running a de facto government in the south of the country. To counter this, McChrystal advocated for a "comprehensive

counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign" to protect key population centers and for increasing the size of the Afghan army and police forces to 400,000 men. He also warned that "inadequate resources will likely result in failure."

At the end of August 2009, McChrystal forwarded his assessment to Gates, who passed it on to the president together with a separate paper by McChrystal arguing that a counterterrorism strategy by itself wouldn't get results in Afghanistan. Obama read McChrystal's assessment with some skepticism since it seemed to be advocating for a large-scale US troop commitment for many years with no clear exit strategy. That said Obama had to take the assessment's contents seriously as they reflected the considered views of experienced generals who Obama felt had managed to turn things around in Iraq. Obama also believed that the status quo was untenable: the Taliban couldn't be allowed to return to power, while more time was needed to train the Afghan Army and to extirpate al-Qaeda and its leaders. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda continued to train militants in Pakistan's tribal regions for terrorist attacks in the West, including in the United States.

The Pentagon brass started publicly promoting the arguments that General McChrystal was making in his secret assessment. General Petraeus, now commander of CENTCOM, advocated for a "fully resourced" counterinsurgency strategy in an interview with the *Washington Post*, while Admiral Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, made similar comments at a congressional hearing. And then came the real bombshell: on September 21, McChrystal's assessment, which was so closely held that there were only around ten copies, landed on the front page of the *Washington Post*, under Bob Woodward's byline with the headline "McChrystal: More Forces or 'Mission Failure.' "

On October 1, McChrystal gave a speech in London at a leading think tank. McChrystal had spent much of his recent career running JSOC, the most secretive unit in the US military, so he wasn't used to the fact that as the commander of all US and NATO forces in Afghanistan he now had a job that involved politics as well as military strategy. During his speech McChrystal said he believed that a policy in Afghanistan that focused largely on counterterrorism would result in "Chaosistan." The *New York Times* ran a story about McChrystal's remarks under the headline "McChrystal Rejects Scaling Down Afghan Military Aims." The Pentagon

now seemed to be publicly staking out a firm position about what to do in Afghanistan ahead of Obama's final decision.

Biden told Obama, "It's fucking outrageous."

Obama was furious. He summoned Gates and Mullen to the Oval Office, telling them he wanted "to stop having my military advisers telling me what I *have* to do on the front page of the morning paper." Obama told Gates and Mullen he was "exceedingly unhappy" and that he wanted to hear from them "here and now" if they would be on board with his decisions on Afghanistan. They assured the president they would be and told their top flag officers to stop talking publicly about the Afghan deliberations.

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McChrystal's downbeat assessment about Afghanistan leaked at an inopportune moment for the Obama administration. A month earlier Afghans had voted for the first time in five years to elect a new president. Supporters of the incumbent president, Hamid Karzai, were credibly accused of large-scale electoral fraud. The flawed election raised a question that potentially undercut the whole American project in Afghanistan: Was there a legitimate Afghan government for the United States to support?

The problems with the election were compounded by Holbrooke, who had worked to undermine President Karzai's campaign. During the election campaign Holbrooke had publicly met with Karzai's main challenger, the former foreign minister Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, and he also had promoted the candidacy of former Afghan finance minister Ashraf Ghani. Holbrooke even suggested that Bill Clinton's top political advisor, "the Ragin' Cajun" James Carville, work on Ghani's campaign. (Ghani garnered less than 3 percent of the vote, but Holbrooke was right to see him as a future leader of Afghanistan; Ghani would become president of Afghanistan five years later.)

The day after the election Holbrooke met with Karzai. The American diplomat confronted the Afghan president about the credible allegations of large-scale ballot stuffing. The meeting descended into an explosive shouting match.

In October the United Nations released data showing that election fraud was so widespread that almost a quarter of all the votes were invalid. As a result Karzai faced a runoff election with his main challenger, Dr. Abdullah,

but Karzai refused to participate. Holbrooke felt that Karzai's refusal would trigger a constitutional crisis.

Unlike Holbrooke, Senator John Kerry had a cordial relationship with Karzai. Kerry was the head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and met with Karzai in Kabul for a marathon twenty hours of talks, persuading him to go to a second round of voting for the election. Dr. Abdullah didn't have the votes to win a second round, and announced he was standing down on November 1, leaving Karzai the clear winner of the presidential election.

But President Karzai felt deeply betrayed because he knew that Holbrooke and Ambassador Eikenberry had worked actively against his reelection bid. The new leader of Afghanistan, who had just been elected for another five-year term, now had good reason to despise the Americans who were propping up his government. Gates thought the effort was a clumsy, failed coup.

It was a self-inflicted wound by Eikenberry and Holbrooke and a reminder that if you come at the king, you best not miss.

On September 13, 2009, President Obama presided over the first meeting of his war cabinet in the Situation Room to discuss how to reverse the Taliban's recent gains. It was the first of nine lengthy meetings of his war cabinet that Obama would convene to discuss the way forward in Afghanistan. President Bush had never considered any of the possible downsides of the Iraq War before plunging into it, while Obama and his team, to a fault, painstakingly considered the issues around ramping up the Afghan War. The process dragged on so long that former Vice President Dick Cheney publicly accused Obama and his team of "dithering" over Afghanistan, the irony of which was quite rich since the Bush team had let the Afghan War effort atrophy for many years in service of their war in Iraq.

Before the White House meetings to discuss what do in Afghanistan, Obama would often coordinate with Biden, the leading skeptic in his cabinet about what could be achieved there. Obama urged the vice president, "Joe, push on this." This would allow Obama to sit back during the meetings and not show his hand.

Biden was skeptical that the Taliban and al-Qaeda were as close as many in the US intelligence community portrayed them, noting that "they're

actually very distinct." Yet, at the time, much of what remained of al-Qaeda was then harbored in Pakistan's tribal regions by the Haqqani Network, a wing of the Taliban.

Biden argued for a less ambitious approach than a counterinsurgency campaign, advocating using US special operations forces to fight al-Qaeda and its Taliban allies and building up the Afghan Army, while avoiding a large-scale ramp-up of US troops and counterinsurgency efforts. This approach became known as "counterterrorism plus."

General James "Hoss" Cartwright, the vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs, worked up numbers for Biden's national security advisor, Tony Blinken, showing that it would take an additional 20,000 soldiers to execute "counterterrorism plus."

On October 9 there was another White House meeting during which McChrystal outlined what a counterinsurgency campaign would take to execute. McChrystal presented three options for the additional troop deployments—a common Pentagon ploy where a range of seeming choices were presented, but the middle option was always the preferred outcome. On the low-end McChrystal requested 11,000 soldiers, in the midrange he asked for 40,000 additional soldiers, and at the high end, an additional 80,000 troops. An additional 11,000 troops were obviously not going to make a big difference in Afghanistan, while adding 80,000 was never going to fly politically at the White House.

Under Obama's watch 33,000 additional American troops had already deployed to Afghanistan. Now the Pentagon was asking for 40,000 more troops—and McChrystal said they should remain there for four years, until 2013. This caused some real sticker shock in the Situation Room.

When Obama discussed this surprisingly large request for more troops, it was clear from his body language that he was irritated. Obama asked, "If I approve the McChrystal recommendation for an additional 40,000 troops, who can tell me how much this is going to cost on an annual basis?" The officials in the Situation Room shifted and looked uncomfortable, averting their gaze from the president. Nobody could readily answer the president's question. Eventually, a guesstimate was proffered: $120 billion a year.

Obama, who was trying to manage the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, said: "Well, this is my point. I just spent several hours this morning working with the budget team, trying to find several billion for early childhood education as an add-on to the budget, and frankly, I failed."

Obama then pulled himself up closer to the long table in the Situation Room, saying, “Okay, so now let’s talk about $120 billion a year in Afghanistan.”

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As Obama’s war cabinet mulled over the Afghan war effort, always at the back of their minds was what had happened to Lyndon Johnson, a Democratic president whose ambitious domestic agenda was undercut as he expanded US involvement in a conflict on the other side of the world. A book that started making the rounds among top officials at the White House was *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, by Gordon Goldstein, which recounted how a president and his advisors were sucked into an ever-widening war by making a series of short-term decisions without ever stepping back to review the bigger picture.

Meanwhile, at the Pentagon a revisionist history of the Vietnam War was being passed around. *A Better War* by Lewis Sorley argued that in the later years of the conflict a new US commander, General Creighton Abrams, had some real success because he did more to protect the local population—seemingly echoing what American counterinsurgency tactics in Iraq had recently achieved.

Yet comparisons to Vietnam only took you so far. There were many differences between the two conflicts, not least that 154 American service members of the all-volunteer force and around 2,100 Afghan civilians had died in 2008 in Afghanistan. In 1968, the deadliest year of the Vietnam conflict, the same number of conscripted US servicemen had died *every four days*; more than 16,000 servicemen and many tens of thousands of Vietnamese civilians over the course of the year. History was not repeating itself, even if you could hear an occasional rhyme or two.

The “surge” in Iraq was the more proximate ghost that hovered over the Afghanistan deliberations. Obama said, “I’m not saying it’d be the exact same plan as Iraq, but I am looking for something that is a surge to create the conditions for a transition”—meaning a transition from US forces providing security to the Afghan Army and police and ultimately an American withdrawal from Afghanistan.

While the success of the surge in Iraq was front of mind for the officials in the Situation Room debating what to do next in Afghanistan, left unsaid

in many of their discussions were the quite significant differences between the two conflicts. Vali Nasr, an expert on Pakistan and Iran who was brought on by Holbrooke to be a senior advisor, observed that Obama's war cabinet thought of the Taliban as insurgents not too dissimilar from those recently largely routed in Iraq.

In fact, there were key differences: In Iraq, the Sunni and Shia militias fighting the Iraqi civil war were generally located in cities, such as the vast Sadr City Shia neighborhood in Baghdad and the largely Sunni city of Fallujah, while the Taliban were a more dispersed, rural-based insurgency. The most violent Iraqi Sunni terrorist group, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, was led by foreigners such as the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, while the Taliban were an indigenous movement, which gave them considerable credibility. There was also nothing like the Iraqi "Awakening" movement in Afghanistan that would allow large numbers of America's enemies to change their orientation and ally with the US military.

Also, Obama's war cabinet largely framed the Afghan War as a Taliban insurgency that was supported by Pakistan. In reality, it was more like a three-tiered conflict: inter-tribal, inter-ethnic, and inter-state. The conflict pitted some Pashtun tribes against each other, between those who had enjoyed the spoils of the past decade since the fall of the Taliban and others who had not, such as the largely rural-based Ghilzai tribe and the more urbanized Durrani tribe, who had lorded it over their fellow Afghans since the eighteenth century. The Taliban leader Mullah Omar was a Ghilzai, while President Karzai was a Durrani.

Above that intra-tribal conflict festered another: the ethnic competition between Pashtuns and the other, smaller minority groups—Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks. The Pashtuns—who made up almost all the leadership of the Taliban and who constituted around 40 percent of the Afghan population—had long regarded themselves the rightful rulers of the country. And swirling above that ethnic conflict was a regional proxy war in which Pakistan had sided with the Pashtun Taliban against the other minorities, who had traditionally received assistance from India, Iran, Russia, and the United States.

In other words, it was . . . complicated.

Almost a decade into the Afghan War this was poorly understood by the US intelligence community, according to Major General Michael Flynn, the top intelligence officer in Afghanistan. He caused a minor sensation in

Washington when he co-authored a report on the issue in 2010 that was published outside of normal government channels by a DC-based think tank. Flynn's report was damning: "The U.S. intelligence community is only marginally relevant to the overall strategy. Having focused the overwhelming majority of its collection efforts and analytical brainpower on insurgent groups, the vast intelligence apparatus is unable to answer fundamental questions about the environment in which U.S. and allied forces operate."

This lack of on-the-ground knowledge was baked into the American way of war in Afghanistan. "Force protection" tended to trump everything else. As the war progressed the US embassy retreated behind massive concrete walls. The embassy was hard to access for almost all Afghans and even for the aid workers and journalists who often had the best feel for what was going on. The walled-off American embassy itself was cocooned inside a fortified "Green Zone" in the middle of Kabul that was also increasingly cut off from the rest of the country. Few US embassy personnel ever left the Green Zone. They might as well have been working back at "Main State" in Washington.

In early November 2009, Ambassador Eikenberry—who had spent five years on the ground in Afghanistan—filed a blistering cable to his boss, Secretary of State Clinton, and the other key participants in the Afghan review. The cable described Karzai as "not an adequate strategic partner" and pointed out that the United States was overestimating the capabilities of the Afghan Army and police to take over the security of the country. On a previous tour in Afghanistan—during which Eikenberry had served as an Army major general—he had been in charge of building up that army, so when he pointed out that the army's high attrition rate and its low recruitment of Pashtuns were "crippling," these were well-informed positions. Eikenberry also criticized General McChrystal's counterinsurgency plan, which he pointed out had little chance of success if the Taliban continued to enjoy a safe haven in Pakistan. Eikenberry ended the cable by saying that he couldn't support the Pentagon's recommendation "for an immediate Presidential decision to deploy another 40,000 troops."

Eikenberry's cable came as an unwelcome surprise to McChrystal, while Secretary of State Clinton, who was in favor of significantly ramping up US forces in Afghanistan, saw it as a betrayal by one of her own ambassadors. For Biden and Blinken the cable was a gift; they had been pushing Eikenberry to make his unvarnished views about the surge known. Of course, Eikenberry's dissenting cable leaked to the *New York Times*.

In retrospect, it would have made much more sense for the military review to have been done in tandem with the US embassy in Kabul since the cliché about successful counterinsurgency operations was that they were 80 percent political and 20 percent military. Instead, the Afghan review was being largely driven by the military, a situation that Obama had let happen despite his growing skepticism about the Pentagon. CIA Director Leon Panetta told other senior Obama administration officials working on the Afghan review: "No Democratic president can go against military advice, especially if he asked for it."

Vice President Joe Biden enjoyed spending down time with his close-knit family, but on Thanksgiving Day, November 26, 2009, he spent a good chunk of the holiday writing out a twenty-page letter by hand to President Obama. He felt strongly that he needed to, in his own words, "save Obama's ass" when it came to the Afghan War. Obama was ten months into his first term and didn't yet have much in the way of foreign policy experience. Biden felt that his decades of service on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and the four trips that he had made to Afghanistan since the 9/11 attacks made him uniquely qualified to deliver the strongest case against the surge of 40,000 more troops that the Pentagon was now requesting to deploy to Afghanistan following the apparent success of the surge in Iraq.

Biden believed in his bones that the much younger president was being misled about what was really going on in Afghanistan and the generals were trying to publicly box Obama in so that he would order tens of thousands of additional troops to Afghanistan in service of a "fully resourced" counterinsurgency campaign that Biden thought was folly.

Biden's opposition to the surge was predicated on several strongly held beliefs. Foremost, that the United States shouldn't get sucked into an open-

ended, expensive, long-term counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan that aspired to build a new nation. Biden believed the focus should be on defeating al-Qaeda, making sure that neighboring Pakistan's nuclear weapons didn't fall into the hands of militants, and limiting the numbers of any additional troops that Obama might send to Afghanistan.

Biden also believed that you couldn't defeat all of the Taliban—they were part of the fabric of Pashtun society in Afghanistan, and, in any event, they were not an existential threat to the United States any more than the Shining Path terrorist group in Peru was. If they were to return to power in some form, he believed, they wouldn't invite al-Qaeda back into Afghanistan, as they were distinct groups with different goals. In Biden's view the Taliban had shown no interest in al-Qaeda's agenda of international jihad or any intent to attack Americans living in the United States.

The letter that Biden sent Obama was highly confidential. He didn't want to embarrass the president with his greater foreign policy experience. This was the first and only time during his eight years as vice president that Biden wrote this kind of memo to the president. Biden faxed the letter to Obama and held on to the original for posterity, along with several classified documents related to the debates in Obama's war cabinet about what do in Afghanistan. Biden believed that his opposition to the Afghan surge was one of his proudest moments in public service.

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Secretary of Defense Gates offered a solution to the proposed troop buildup in Afghanistan that he thought the Pentagon could live with and that might also satisfy Obama and his top White House advisors. The Pentagon would deploy 30,000 more US troops to Afghanistan, not the 40,000 that McChrystal was requesting, and the difference would be made up by an additional 10,000 soldiers to be provided by NATO allies. Gates also proposed to surge the troops for only eighteen to twenty-four months, which translated into a withdrawal date for some of them by July 2011. That was much faster than the 2013 pullout envisaged by McChrystal. This was a shift: Gates had previously been resistant to any kind of timetable that might signal to the Taliban that they could wait out the United States.

Obama discussed this concept with Biden, and they accepted the compromise.

CENTCOM commander General David Petraeus received a call at his Tampa headquarters telling him he should fly up to Washington immediately to attend a meeting in the Oval Office at 5 p.m. on Sunday, November 29. At the meeting were the president, vice president, Gates, and Admiral Mullen. Obama informed the group that he would authorize a buildup of 30,000 US troops, but they would start coming home in eighteen months, a timetable that he would announce publicly in two days.

The withdrawal announcement was a complete surprise to General Petraeus, who was the overall theater commander for the Afghan War. Obama asked each of the senior officials in the Oval Office: "Are you all okay with that?" It was a take-it-or-leave-it moment. Everyone said yes. Petraeus's view was that there was nothing wrong with a tentative timeline, but a public announcement of a withdrawal date was only going to signal to the Taliban that they could hunker down and wait out the surge.

Then, with lessons of "mission creep" in Vietnam in mind, the president did something unusual: he asked everyone at the meeting to sign a memorandum memorializing their agreement about the size of the surge and the timing of the withdrawal date. It was an extraordinary step for a president to take, but the lessons of Vietnam lingered on. Obama added: "I am giving an order." Gates found the order unnecessary and insulting. Of course, the military was going to salute and carry out whatever their commander in chief directed. Obama himself later admitted that this memorandum between the White House and the Pentagon was a heavy-handed move that he regretted almost immediately. But the president also believed that it put an end to "Pentagon freelancing" for the rest of his presidency.

Despite all the Sturm und Drang that surrounded the process, in the end, the US military was getting almost everything it wanted in Afghanistan, other than an unlimited amount of time to carry out its counterinsurgency plans. The 30,000 additional US troops deploying to Afghanistan were not too far off the 40,000 troops that were advocated by the Pentagon, especially given the fact that there were more than 60,000 American troops already stationed in Afghanistan.

Obama announced the new surge of troops at West Point on December 1, 2009. Before he walked out onstage to make his speech, Obama looked out

over the thousands of cadets arrayed in the audience in their gray dress uniforms. “They’re so young,” he said. Obama’s close aide, Ben Rhodes, sensed that his boss was unusually nervous. Four of those cadets would later be killed in Afghanistan, while many more would be wounded.

Obama told his West Point audience that the goal of the surge was “to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and to prevent its capacity to threaten America and our allies in the future.” Obama had concluded that the kind of war that the United States would embark on should focus on the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks and prevent attacks on the “homeland,” while not enlarging its objectives to the Bush administration’s excessively ambitious global war on terror. It also paralleled what Obama had been privately telling his CIA Director Leon Panetta: Find bin Laden.

During his West Point speech, Obama announced that 30,000 troops would be sent to Afghanistan and said that some of those troops would be coming home in July 2011. News accounts seized on the return date and glossed over a caveat inserted in the speech: This drawdown would be based on conditions on the ground. But this was lost in a tsunami of criticism that Obama was telling the enemy the plan.

The Pentagon brass were happy that the withdrawal would be “conditions-based”—it seemed obvious that conditions in Afghanistan in the summer of 2011 would not justify a significant withdrawal of US troops—while Vice President Biden assured journalists, “In July of 2011 you’re going to see a whole lot of people moving out. Bet on it.” As the journalist Bob Woodward drily observed: “July 2011 was a date with some meaning and none at all.”

The withdrawal date was designed by Obama officials to send a signal to the Pentagon that their commitment to Afghanistan was not a blank check, while also signaling to Karzai government officials that they needed to get serious about rooting out corruption and start governing effectively. But the gambit backfired: For ordinary Afghans and the Taliban, the headline of Obama’s West Point speech was not the surge of new troops but their withdrawal date.

In the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, policy advisor Matin Bek listened carefully to Obama’s speech. Bek believed the announcement of the withdrawal timeline was a mistake that undercut the Afghan government. “Man, things are going to get bloody,” Bek thought. This was also the

reaction of US military officers watching the speech at their headquarters in Kabul. Barnett Rubin, a leading American expert on Afghanistan working for Holbrooke who was no Pentagon champion, was "stupefied." Rubin thought that the counterinsurgency plan had scant chance of success with this kind of publicly announced withdrawal timeline.

The surge and counterinsurgency tactics in Iraq seemed to have produced an almost-miraculous decline in civilian deaths just as the deliberations in Obama's war cabinet about what to do in Afghanistan were in full swing. As a result, a surge and counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan were believed to be close to a panacea among the top US generals and in some Washington policy circles. But as we have seen, there were significant factors beyond the increased size and new tactics of the US troops in Iraq that had contributed to the striking decline in violence.

The goal of the surge in Afghanistan was to create the necessary conditions so the US could move its troops out and hand over the security of the country to the Afghan armed forces. Building up an effective Afghan military was viewed as the best "ticket out" of Afghanistan for the United States, but eight years into the war, the training of the Afghan Army remained very much a work in progress. Holbrooke told Lieutenant General William Caldwell IV, who was overseeing the buildup of the Afghan Army, "You're really going to have to take on the literacy issue." Caldwell replied, "Ambassador, with all due respect, I'm a soldier. I don't do literacy training." Caldwell soon realized he was quite wrong; 86 percent of the recruits for the army couldn't read, write, or even count. In spring 2010, Caldwell mandated literacy training for incoming recruits.

While the Afghan Special Forces generally performed well, the conventional Afghan Army was hobbled by high rates of desertion and extremely low levels of Pashtun recruitment in a country where Pashtuns made up a little under half of the population. Also, the US military created an Afghan Army in its own image, with brigades and divisions that were highly dependent on complex American-made jets and helicopters. To combat the Taliban insurgency, the Afghan Army could have operated more like . . . the Taliban, rather than taking on all the trappings of a conventional army.

Across the border, the Pakistanis would not tolerate American boots on the ground in their country, and as a result, the war effort against the Taliban was consistently undercut by the Pakistani haven for the Taliban.

While a counterinsurgency approach in Afghanistan could help at the tactical and operational levels, it wasn't a strategy that was going to dramatically change the course of the war. At the strategic level, Pakistan continued to be a haven for the Taliban, while the Afghan government remained corrupt and incompetent, and its armed forces were largely ineffective without substantial US support. A surge of American troops using counterinsurgency tactics was not going to solve these strategic issues, but the lengthy meetings of Obama's war cabinet about the Afghan War, powered by plenty of stale coffee, often devolved into discussions about troop numbers rather than these larger strategic problems.

McChrystal, who had built up Joint Special Operations Command to be a very efficient killing machine, brought a quite different sensibility to his new role as the commander in Afghanistan. McChrystal was a careful listener and an erudite student of the history of warfare, and he thought it was important to listen to what President Karzai was saying. Karzai knew his own country far better than any American could. He had long criticized heavy-handed US military tactics such as the searches of Afghan homes made without any permission, which were a cultural taboo, and, above all, Afghan civilian casualties caused by the US-led coalition. In May 2009 in the village of Granai in western Afghanistan, US planes bombing suspected Taliban positions accidentally killed as many as 147 men, women, and children, the worst instance of civilian casualties of the war.

Karzai felt so deeply about the civilian losses that he wept about them on Afghan television. Some Western diplomats put this down to nationalistic grandstanding by Karzai, while Obama administration officials dismissed the Afghan president as a "terrible ally." Secretary of Defense Gates felt Karzai was correct about the civilian casualty issue, which the Afghan president often raised in his private meetings with US officials months before he finally went public with his criticisms.

If the key tenet of counterinsurgency was "protecting the population," bombing them was clearly not the right approach. During one of their

regularly scheduled morning updates General McChrystal told his commanders bluntly, “We are going to lose this fucking war if we don’t stop killing civilians.” McChrystal imposed a new policy of “courageous restraint” that required his soldiers and Marines to refrain from using artillery or airstrikes if civilian casualties were likely, particularly when targeting residential compounds. McChrystal personally wrote a directive to his troops in early July, saying, “We must avoid the trap of winning tactical victories—but suffering strategic defeats—by causing civilian casualties or excessive damage and thus alienating the people.” As a result, airstrikes fell by a quarter during McChrystal’s tenure as commander in Afghanistan.

On February 12, 2010, McChrystal was preparing to launch a major military operation in the southern province of Helmand using some of the newly arrived surge forces. Before he gave the order to launch McChrystal visited Karzai’s modest home inside the presidential compound. Karzai, who was nursing a cold, asked, “You’re getting me out of bed. What is it?” McChrystal replied, “We got this operation ready to go. I can’t launch it without you approving; you’re in command.”

Karzai said, “You’ll have to forgive me. I’ve never been asked to approve a mission before.” Karzai said it was fine for the Helmand operation to proceed.

Karzai had led Afghanistan now for almost a decade, and no US or NATO commander had ever bothered to ask the president for his permission to carry out a military operation in his own country. It was astonishing.

As the initial focus of the surge, Helmand was an odd choice. The key doctrine of counterinsurgency was to “protect the population,” yet only 1 percent of the Afghan population lived in southern Helmand, so this was a strange location to kick off the surge. But the decision to begin the surge in Helmand was one that McChrystal had inherited from the previous US commander. The Helmand decision was, as McChrystal put it, an artillery shell that had already been fired. Still, attacking the Taliban in Helmand did make some strategic sense: if Helmand Province were a country, it would be one of the leading countries in the world producing poppy and opium, all of which was helping to fund the Taliban.

The British had been fighting in Helmand since 2006. It was a mission that they initially believed would be more of a peacekeeping operation, but one that had turned violent quickly. The British were also an odd choice to be leading the fight in Helmand, given the long memory of many Afghans.

In 1880, a local girl named Malalai had rallied Afghan troops to defeat the British at the battle of Maiwand in Helmand. More than a century later, Malalai was still a popular girl's name in Afghanistan.

The British—who had prided themselves on the successes of their counterinsurgency and counterterrorism tactics in Malaya in the 1950s and more recently in Northern Ireland—negotiated with the Taliban a humiliating retreat of their forces from the town of Musa Qala in Helmand in late 2006. The British military was still living on the vapors of empire and was much weaker than many assumed; their military weaknesses were also exposed around the same time in Basra in southern Iraq, where British forces handed over the city to Shia militias and hunkered down on their bases.

The British lobbied for assistance in Helmand and handed the overall operation there over to the US Marines in 2009 who for their own operational reasons wanted to fight in Helmand because they could "own" the entire battle space there—from their infantry on the ground to their own air support and logistics. This was the Marines' preferred way of fighting; some joked the province should be renamed "Marineistan."

In early July 2009, 4,500 US Marines and hundreds of Afghan soldiers launched offensives against the Taliban in Helmand, and within a couple of months the Taliban fully controlled only one of the thirteen districts in the province. But the Taliban's defeat in Helmand underlined the problem with the "clear, hold, and transition" strategy that was key to the overall counterinsurgency campaign design. The Marines could clear Taliban-held territory relatively easily and hold on to what they had cleared, but when it came to transitioning security to the Afghan military, there often wasn't much of anything to transition to.

This problem was also mirrored on the Afghan civilian side. Before they launched an attack on Marjah, a Taliban stronghold in Helmand, US officials had engaged in happy talk about a "government in a box" that would be ready to go when the Taliban had been cleared from the town. Ambassador Eikenberry noted dryly, "The FedEx package labeled 'government in a box' was delivered to Marjah but when we unpackaged it, there was nothing inside." The Afghan institutions for a government of Marjah to somehow miraculously rise from the ashes simply didn't exist.

Eikenberry visited Marjah a couple of weeks after the initial operation by the Marines and was told by locals that they were not worried about the

Taliban, but they were worried about a corrupt police chief allied with the Karzai administration. This was a reminder that for many Afghans, local warlords and corrupt police were often more of a problem in their daily lives than the Taliban.

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Obama's tense relations with the Pentagon brass took a turn for the worse when *Rolling Stone* ran a story on June 21, 2010, with the headline "The Runaway General," featuring several unflattering anonymous comments about Obama's war cabinet by McChrystal's staff. Biden was derided as "Bite Me," while National Security Advisor General Jones was called a "clown." Obama told Gates that McChrystal "got played" by *Rolling Stone*. McChrystal called Gates to apologize.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" Gates asked the general.

"No excuses, sir," McChrystal replied.

After a day of deliberation, Obama decided McChrystal had to go. Obama was the commander in chief, and this episode undercut his command of the military. In Obama's mind, getting control of the generals would prove to be one of his greatest accomplishments, especially given the blank check that he believed they had received during the Bush administration.

McChrystal flew back to Washington to meet with Obama and offer his resignation, which the president accepted. Obama had already discussed with Gates the idea of General Petraeus assuming command in Afghanistan. When he arrived in Kabul, Petraeus reversed McChrystal's "courageous restraint" directive to try to avoid civilian casualties; as a result, US airstrikes in Afghanistan increased. Petraeus was supported in this by CENTCOM commander General Jim Mattis, who thought that the policy of restraint was hobbling American troops in Afghanistan and losing their confidence in the process.

There was a certain irony here: Mattis and Petraeus had both overseen the counterinsurgency manual that advocated avoiding civilian casualties that might help to fuel an insurgency, while McChrystal was the "direct action" general who had vastly increased the number of raids by US special operations forces.

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During Obama's first year in office, he authorized 63,000 additional troops to deploy to Afghanistan, a surprisingly large number given the misgivings about this surge among so many of Obama's key advisors. Lieutenant General Douglas Lute, the senior director for Afghanistan at the National Security Council under both presidents Bush and Obama, didn't think the counterinsurgency campaign had much chance of success. Nor did the US ambassador to Afghanistan, retired Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, who had served two previous tours in Afghanistan, including one as the overall ground commander. Eikenberry and Lute had spent more time working on Afghanistan than pretty much anyone else in the Pentagon or the Obama administration, so their skepticism about what was possible in Afghanistan warranted attention. Their skeptical views were shared by Biden and Blinken. Of the president's war cabinet, on the civilian side only Gates and Clinton enthusiastically embraced a large increase of US forces in Afghanistan.

Holbrooke's experience in Vietnam taught him that if the insurgents had an effective sanctuary, a counterinsurgency campaign was likely doomed. Also, he believed that the Afghan review had been overly focused on troop numbers and not on political issues such as the Karzai administration's corruption and illegitimacy. Holbrooke also favored talking to the Taliban's leaders about some kind of peace agreement, an idea that was never on the table during the Afghanistan strategy review.

The percentage of Afghans who described corruption as a major problem in their daily lives climbed from around 40 percent in 2006 to over 60 percent almost a decade later. Corruption undercut the legitimacy of the Karzai government, particularly emblematic of which was the failure of the Kabul Bank in 2010. The bank was the country's largest, and many ordinary Afghans entrusted their savings to it, but it was also a money machine for the Afghan elite, who took out "loans" that were, for all practical purposes, embezzled. President Karzai's brother Mahmood owed the bank more than $30 million but paid back only about $5 million. Mahmood told the *New York Times* this was false.

The Afghan Central Bank bailout of the Kabul Bank cost $825 million, a vast sum for impoverished Afghanistan. *Washington Post* reporter Joshua

Partlow, who covered the Kabul Bank meltdown, aptly described it as "a glaring example of how the greed of a small cabal of relatives and political and business cronies had stolen from both poor Afghans and the U.S. government." Partlow also observed, shrewdly, that "after the Kabul Bank fiasco, it was harder to make the case that we were fighting for something worthwhile."

On December 13, 2010, Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, aged sixty-nine, died of a tear to his aorta. Within the administration, Holbrooke had been the leading advocate for trying to reach out to the Taliban, quietly beginning discussions with Taliban leaders through an aide of Mullah Omar in 2009.

A significant shift in the Obama administration's position on negotiations with the Taliban was soon signaled by Secretary of State Clinton when she gave the Richard Holbrooke memorial lecture at the Asia Society in New York on February 18, 2011. Clinton said that previous American conditions for talks with the Taliban—that they disarm and reject al-Qaeda—were no longer preconditions that the Taliban had to meet before any talks could begin. A year earlier the Afghan government had also adopted "reconciliation" with the Taliban as its policy, setting up a "High Peace Council" to negotiate with them.

As a result of the surge of US troops in Afghanistan the Taliban lost some of their key safe havens in southern Afghanistan. The International Council on Security and Development, a think tank that had done fieldwork in the region for many years, issued a report observing, "NATO and Afghan forces now control a greater number of districts in Helmand and Kandahar than before."

This was also the assessment of Carlotta Gall, who had started working as an aid worker in Afghanistan in the early 1990s during the civil war and went on to become the best-informed *New York Times* reporter on Afghanistan. Gall frequently wrote stories that were critical of US policies in Afghanistan on issues such as civilian causalities, but found that the Taliban had been "thoroughly routed" in Kandahar, their traditional stronghold, and a place she had reported from since 2001.

While these were undeniably tactical victories, were they a strategic success? General Petraeus frequently said that the Taliban's momentum was blunted—and had even been reversed in some areas, but Petraeus also pointed out that the gains were fragile and reversible. The CIA agreed with Petraeus's assessment that the surge had halted the Taliban's progress, but the agency also concluded that the Afghan War was now "trending to stalemate."

Despite some of the surge's tactical successes, the security situation in the country deteriorated markedly during the years of the surge. The Afghanistan NGO Safety Office, which had advised aid organizations working in Afghanistan for almost a decade, found that attacks by insurgents increased by two-thirds in 2010 over the already record levels in 2009, which was the "highest annual growth rate we have recorded." US military officials explained away this inconvenient data by asserting that the rising violence showed that the Taliban were getting hammered, pointing to a similar phenomenon in Iraq as the surge troops poured in there in 2007.

Carter Malkasian, an Oxford-minted historian and US State Department official who spoke Pashto, deployed to Afghanistan multiple times, including two years working in Helmand, then four years as an advisor on Afghanistan to General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs. His book, *The American War in Afghanistan*, was the most authoritative account of the conflict. Malkasian's considered conclusion about the Afghan surge was that it was "a tactical success but a strategic failure. Brilliant minds and great generals, brave soldiers, Marines, Green Berets, and SEALs could only get so far. The resolve of the Taliban fighter was difficult to overcome. The costs had been too great. They signaled to Obama not only the unsustainability of the surge but the unsustainability of the whole Afghan endeavor. The strategic discourse reoriented to withdrawal. That shift in direction is the true strategic significance of the surge."

In other words, during Obama's first term there were some 100,000 US troops in Afghanistan, and while they had achieved battlefield successes, the large costs in blood and treasure could no longer be justified in Obama's mind, since the aim of the war was to destroy al-Qaeda, not the Taliban. Obama saw what he described as only "incremental progress" in Afghanistan. He was reminded of the "awful costs" that had been entailed every time he visited wounded soldiers at Walter Reed military hospital

outside Washington, DC; some with blast injuries that left them without limbs or permanently brain damaged. For Obama, that set the stage for trying to end the US mission in Afghanistan entirely.

Perhaps the surge's tactical success could have been turned into a strategic success if the Americans had engaged in serious diplomatic efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table at a time when the US had considerable leverage over them. In 2010 the Taliban had been largely defeated in their strongholds in southern Afghanistan, while the Afghan government was willing to seriously engage in peace talks, as it showed with its formation of the High Peace Council.

The CIA also assessed that there was significant potential that peace talks with the Taliban might help to splinter their movement between the hard-liners and those who were more inclined to lay down their arms. The surge of US troops was hurting the morale of the Taliban, yet most US military leaders were opposed to peace talks with the Taliban until they had been defeated or significantly weakened on the battlefield, while the Obama administration didn't prioritize deal-making with the Taliban.

It's not clear what such peace talks might have yielded, but they were never seriously attempted until eight years later. By then, the Taliban had grown stronger and were able to drive a much harder bargain, to the extent of excluding the elected Afghan government entirely from their negotiations with the Americans.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE DRONE PRESIDENCY

Turns out I'm really good at killing people.
Didn't know that was going to be a strong suit
of mine.

—PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

The firebrand Muslim American cleric with a record of inciting militants to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States—and a secret penchant for soliciting prostitutes on the sketchier streets of San Diego—didn't see it coming. High above the deserts of northern Yemen three Predator drones were tracking the militant cleric Anwar al-Awlaki as their operators waited for the best location to strike him and his armed entourage while they sped down a desert road in two Toyota Hilux trucks.

The crews of the Predators sat in air-conditioned comfort eight thousand miles away, at Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico, while the drones had launched from the sweltering American base at Camp Lemonnier in the East African country of Djibouti, flying for more than three hours to their targets in Yemen. On September 30, 2011, the order came down to take the shot, and the Predators unleashed their Hellfire missiles, incinerating both trucks and their passengers.

It was the first time since the Civil War that an American president had ordered the targeted killing of a US citizen. Awlaki, one of the leaders of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, died along with one of his most trusted acolytes, Samir Khan, a fellow American citizen. While Khan was not one of the targets of the strikes, he was the editor of the English-language webzine *Inspire*, which regularly published articles urging militants living in the West to carry out homegrown terrorist attacks. *Inspire* also adopted a jaunty tone in colloquial American English that set it apart from the typical dour jihadist publication; in its first issue, one article was headlined "Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom."

President Obama, who had ordered the Awlaki operation, described it publicly as "a major blow to al-Qaeda's most active operational affiliate." The former constitutional law professor was now the judge, jury, and executioner.

During his two terms in office, Obama authorized a campaign of drone attacks that killed an estimated 2,970 suspected militants in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen—all countries that the United States was not at war with. The strikes also killed at least 218 civilians, according to a count by New America, a nonpartisan research institution. The bulk of those strikes were carried out by the CIA, though the equally secretive Joint Special Operations Command also launched some airstrikes and ground operations.

Obama was now the drone president. It was not what he thought would be one of the defining features of his presidency. He had come into office hoping to wind down the "global war on terror," but events kept interfering with this goal.

One of those events was the plot to bring down Northwest Flight 253 over Detroit on Christmas Day 2009, which was masterminded by Awlaki. If the attack had succeeded in its plan to blow up the plane as it was coming in to land, it would have killed the 290 passengers and crew. A successful attack in the post-9/11 era against an aviation target in the United States during Christmas with hundreds of American fatalities would likely have dealt the Obama presidency a blow from which it would have been hard to recover.

Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, a protégé of Awlaki's, hailed from a prominent Nigerian family and had been educated at a leading British college, University College London. In Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport on December 25, 2009, Abdulmutallab boarded Northwest Airlines Flight 253,

bound for Detroit. Hidden in his underwear was a bomb made with plastic explosives that went undetected by airport security. As the plane prepared for landing in Detroit, the “underwear bomber” tried to detonate his bomb, but it didn’t explode, instead creating a small fireball that burned him badly. Crew members and passengers extinguished the fire and subdued Abdulmutallab.

After the failed bombing attempt Abdulmutallab was taken to a hospital in Detroit so his injuries could be treated. At the hospital Abdulmutallab told FBI agents that he was allied with al-Qaeda and had been given the bomb when he was in Yemen. It was Awlaki who had personally directed him to bring down an American passenger jet.

Even though the underwear bomber didn’t succeed in blowing up Northwest Flight 253, the botched bombing reignited Americans’ fears about flying. It also raised a storm of criticism of the Obama administration, because after Abdulmutallab had given up significant information about the failed bombing for about an hour to FBI agents, he was then read a Miranda warning, which requires suspects in US custody be informed that they have the right not to incriminate themselves. As a result, Abdulmutallab stopped talking to the agents.

Representative Peter King of New York, the top Republican on the House Homeland Security Committee, told NBC News, “I think that the administration has made a mistake by treating this terrorist as a common criminal, by putting him into the criminal-justice system. I wish they had put him into a military tribunal so we could get as much intelligence and information out of him as we could.” Former Vice President Dick Cheney piled on, charging that the decision by Obama’s Department of Justice to “Mirandize” Abdulmutallab showed that “President Obama is trying to pretend we are not at war.”

This political crisis was amplified by the secretary of homeland security, Janet Napolitano, who went on CNN to say “the system worked” when it had manifestly not done so. Allowing a terrorist suspected of being associated with al-Qaeda to smuggle a bomb onto an American passenger jet headed for the United States was not how the system was supposed to work.

The White House led a review of the Christmas Day plot, which found that the US government had enough intelligence to make the determination that Abdulmutallab was likely working for al-Qaeda’s affiliate in Yemen

before he boarded his flight to Detroit. The fact that Abdulmutallab was able to get on the flight at all was a failure of the post-9/11 watch-listing system that was supposed to keep suspected terrorists off American planes.

If a failed terrorist attack could be this politically damaging, what would happen if a major one succeeded? Obama summoned his national security team for a dressing down, saying: "We dodged a bullet, but just barely. It was averted by brave individuals, not because the system worked. And that is unacceptable," he told them.

After the failed Christmas Day bombing terrorism became the leading national security issue for the Obama administration. When they came into office the Obama team felt that the past decade had been too much of a "detour" to the Middle East, and they wanted to "pivot to Asia" in part to "manage" the rise of China. For the moment those initiatives would have to be secondary to what still remained effectively the "global war on terror," even if President Obama himself stopped using this term since a war on the tactic of terrorism didn't make a whole lot of sense.

One of the lessons of post–World War II American foreign policy was that any US president who made the decision to send American troops to a foreign war—or conversely decided not to intervene overseas when US interests were at stake—was typically making this decision with a limited set of options, all of which would likely entail unintended second- and third-order effects. The increasing precision of America's fleet of armed drones helped to solve this policy conundrum for President Obama; he could greatly reduce the threat to Americans that was emanating from Yemen while avoiding sending a sizable contingent of US troops to the country.

So, Obama launched a covert drone war in Yemen against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, telling his war cabinet: "We can't do in Yemen what we did in Afghanistan. We shouldn't have to spend tens of billions of dollars in Yemen because one scared kid from Nigeria was recruited to do something bad."

Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was the result of a merger between al-Qaeda's battered Saudi network and its Yemeni branch. From Yemen, it plotted attacks against American, Saudi, and Yemeni targets. The group also proved capable of seizing territory, and in 2015 fighters from the group captured Mukalla, Yemen's fifth-largest city, holding onto it for a year before they were expelled. But capturing Mukalla came at a cost for Al-

Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula as it drew US attention and American airstrikes in the area killed the group's leader and other senior figures.

During the two terms of the Bush administration there had been only one US strike in Yemen, while under the Obama administration there were 185, resulting in the deaths of at least 973 suspected militants and at least 88 civilian fatalities, according to a count by New America.

After the failed underwear bomber attack, US national security officials identified the American-born Awlaki as a grave threat. Whereas they had once pegged him only as a militant cleric whose sermons were radicalizing some Muslims in the West, they now identified him as an operational leader of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

The managers of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen were so impressed by Awlaki that they wrote to bin Laden suggesting that he be promoted to be the overall leader of the group. From his hiding place in Abbottabad, Pakistan, bin Laden nixed this idea. In a memo on August 27, 2010, bin Laden instead ordered that Awlaki send him a "vision" statement about how he saw the situation in Yemen and asked that he also be provided with a "detailed" and "lengthy" résumé for Awlaki, who bin Laden said should remain in his present position.

Bin Laden didn't know Awlaki personally, which might explain his skepticism about the Yemeni American cleric; he might also have been irritated by the larger share of the media spotlight that Awlaki was now taking from him. In any case, even in hiding and almost a decade after 9/11, bin Laden was still controlling decisions about the promotions of key personnel in al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups.

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In 2010, a year before he was killed in Yemen, Awlaki had declared that "Jihad is becoming as American as apple pie." There was some truth to this seemingly hyperbolic claim. Not only was New Mexico–born Awlaki an operational leader of al-Qaeda's Yemen affiliate, the editor of its influential *Inspire* webzine, Samir Khan, hailed from Charlotte, North Carolina. Florida-raised Adnan Shukrijumah oversaw al-Qaeda's operations to try to attack targets in the West until his death in a Pakistani military raid in 2014. Californian Adam Gadahn was al-Qaeda's spokesman and media advisor until he was killed in a drone strike in Pakistan the following year. Alabama

native Omar Hammami played a leadership role in al-Shabaab, a Somali terrorist group aligned with al-Qaeda, and the Pakistani jihadist group Lashkar-e-Taiba recruited Philadelphia-based David Headley to plan a large-scale three-day attack in Mumbai, India, in 2008 that killed 166 people.

Awlaki's own life story was quite an American journey. His Yemeni father had come to the United States as a student. When he was a young boy, Awlaki was raised in New Mexico and Minnesota. Awlaki later attended Colorado State to study engineering, but he was also becoming increasingly devout, and opted not to become an engineer but an imam at a mosque in San Diego. In San Diego Awlaki spent time with Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, who would become two of the 9/11 hijackers whose flight crashed into the Pentagon. Awlaki was also meeting with Omar al-Bayoumi, the Saudi official who helped the hijackers settle in San Diego. Awlaki met up again with the two future hijackers after he relocated to northern Virginia in 2000.

In the months following the 9/11 attacks Awlaki's association with the hijackers made him the subject of considerable interest to the FBI. Agents started tailing Awlaki around the Washington, DC, area, where he had taken on a new job as the imam of a mosque in northern Virginia. The FBI agents following Awlaki discovered that his appetite for consorting with prostitutes had remained undiminished.

Sensing he was likely being observed by law enforcement, Awlaki moved to London in 2002, where he found the "Londonistan" milieu more amenable than post-9/11 America. After a couple of years of living in London, Awlaki moved to Yemen.

Awlaki started a website where he posted his sermons, attracting the attention of Islamist militants from around the English-speaking world. They could also chat with the cleric himself on the no longer functional website www.anwar-alawlaki.com. One such militant was US Army Major Nidal Hasan, who sought spiritual advice from Awlaki in the months before he killed thirteen fellow soldiers and civilians at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009.

After the failed underwear bomber plot, Awlaki continued to plan additional bombings of American aviation targets. In October 2010 operatives from Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula mailed two packages with plastic explosives hidden inside printer cartridges, shipping them from Yemen via FedEx and UPS to synagogues in Chicago. With mordant humor

the packages were addressed to Diego Deza, an inquisitor during the Spanish Inquisition, and Reynald de Châtillon, a French knight who had taken part in the Crusades. Because of intelligence provided by the Saudis to Obama's counterterrorism advisor, John Brennan, one package was discovered in Dubai and the other at a British airport before they could detonate.

Just days after the Christmas Day underwear bomber plot, President Obama gave his verbal approval to kill Awlaki. According to his aides, Obama was untroubled by his order to kill the cleric; as commander in chief his first duty was to protect his fellow citizens. Lawyers working for the Obama administration then provided official legal guidance that killing Awlaki was lawful because he posed a "continued and imminent threat" to Americans.

Obama's extensive use of drones in Yemen was informed by what his administration had already done in Pakistan and, in the process, building up experience that enabled more precise strikes. During the Bush administration, there was a CIA drone attack in Pakistan every sixty-one days, while during the first two years of the Obama administration, there was a drone strike in Pakistan every four days.

The CIA drone program in Pakistan had several distinct advantages for Obama: There was no universe in which he was going to order large-scale US ground operations in Pakistan, a country armed with nuclear weapons and around a million men in its active-duty military and reserves; nor were the Pakistanis ever going to grant permission for large numbers of US soldiers on their territory. These drones carried no pilots to be shot down so there would be no US casualties, while drones could loiter over targets for many hours, building up a "pattern of life" of their targets that could reduce the risk of civilian casualties. Drones also married together what used to be multiple military and intelligence roles, such as reconnaissance, targeting, and killing into one platform. They would become Obama's weapon of choice.

Key Pakistani officials were also privately supportive of the drone strikes, despite their occasional public protests. Pakistani President Asif Zardari gave his blessing to the program, telling US officials, "Collateral

damage worries you Americans. It does not worry me." Since one of the victims of the CIA drone strikes was the leader of the Pakistan Taliban who had ordered the assassination of Zardari's wife, Benazir Bhutto, Zardari's enthusiasm for the drone program was understandable. But Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani also told US officials in the summer of 2008 that, as long as the drones "get the right people, we'll protest in the National Assembly and then ignore it." Former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf later acknowledged to CNN that his government had secretly signed off on the CIA drone strikes during the Bush administration.

The threat from al-Qaeda operatives living in Pakistan's tribal regions came from the group's trainers based in Waziristan. They were training their Western recruits to build bombs from commonly available items such as hydrogen peroxide, which, as we have seen, was the key ingredient of the bombs used by the four suicide attackers who carried out the London terrorist attacks on July 7, 2005.

Al-Qaeda operatives in Waziristan were particularly intrigued by their Afghan American recruit, Najibullah Zazi, whose father had moved to New York from Afghanistan. Zazi attended Flushing High School, in Queens, New York. After he dropped out of high school he became a coffee-cart vendor in downtown Manhattan. At the same time Zazi was becoming increasingly angered by the American war in Afghanistan and he began listening obsessively to Awlaki's sermons.

In August 2008, Zazi and two high school friends from Queens, Zarein Ahmedzay, an Afghan American, and Adis Medunjanin, of Bosnian descent, flew to Peshawar, Pakistan. In Peshawar, the trio encountered "Ahmad," an al-Qaeda operative. Angered by the CIA drone campaign and already radicalized, Zazi and his two friends volunteered to be suicide bombers. Al-Qaeda trainers gave Zazi a week of training on building hydrogen peroxide–based bombs.

Zazi and his two accomplices planned to attack trains leaving Manhattan's Grand Central Station during rush hour. After he returned to the United States during early September 2009, Zazi checked into a motel in suburban Colorado, where he cooked batches of hair bleach in the motel's kitchenette to make highly concentrated hydrogen peroxide suitable for a bomb. On the night of September 6, Zazi sent several coded emails to the al-Qaeda operative "Ahmad" seeking advice on the "recipe," which to the casual reader might have seemed like he was looking for tips on making

a cake. That email address in Pakistan was being monitored by British intelligence officials, who tipped off their American counterparts that the account belonged to an al-Qaeda operative.

The National Security Agency investigated and found that the email to the al-Qaeda operative originated from a location in a suburb of Denver. FBI technicians swabbed the motel room where Zazi had been assembling his bombs. The tests were positive.

The FBI started twenty-four-hour surveillance of Zazi. On September 9, 2009, Zazi began driving a rental car from Colorado to New York City. The timing of Zazi's trip to New York was alarming: the eighth anniversary of 9/11 was only two days away, and later in September, the annual UN General Assembly was to be held in Manhattan, attracting pretty much every world leader to the city.

President Obama was now receiving daily briefings about Zazi. Officials came up with a plan to perform seemingly random searches on the bridges and roads into New York City around the time Zazi would be approaching Manhattan. While performing the search of Zazi's car, the police officers screwed up, making the supposedly random search look like it was targeting Zazi. Zazi also heard from his father that some folks were making inquiries about him. All this made Zazi suspicious, and he flew back to Colorado on September 12. Zazi was soon arrested, as were his two accomplices.

The month following Zazi's failed plot, CIA Director Leon Panetta went to the White House with a laundry list of requests for the agency's drone program. The CIA needed more armed drones and permission from the Pakistanis to strike in larger areas of the tribal regions as well. While some of Obama's war cabinet wondered privately why the CIA was building up a second Air Force, President Obama quickly granted Panetta's requests. "The CIA gets what it wants," Obama said.

Panetta had an easy laugh and the affable air of a favorite uncle, but he was also a skillful Washington operator who had served as President Clinton's chief of staff and as a longtime congressman from his native California. When Panetta had taken the job of CIA director, his predecessor, General Michael Hayden, told Panetta that he was going be the combatant commander of the war on terror. Panetta thought: *What the hell is he talking about?* It turned out to be the CIA's drone program in Pakistan.

Now that he oversaw that program Panetta was determined to defend the CIA's turf. Taking the opposing view was the US ambassador to Pakistan,

Cameron Munter, who believed that the dramatic increase in drone strikes was damaging American relations with an important ally. In his view the CIA was running the world's most expensive artillery system, with little regard for the fact that the strikes were stoking anti-Americanism in the world's second-largest Muslim nation.

At a meeting of the National Security Council in June 2011, Ambassador Munter made the case that he should have the right to veto strikes if they seemed like they would be counterproductive.

Panetta cut him off, saying, "I don't work for you."

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton came to her ambassador's defense, saying that the CIA shouldn't just ignore Munter's advice.

"No, Hillary," Panetta said sharply. "It's you who are flat wrong."

The State Department lost that battle.

In October 2009 General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the chief of staff of the Pakistani Army—in practice the most powerful man in Pakistan—visited the White House to discuss the terrorist plots emanating from his country and the one billion dollars a year that the US was giving the Pakistanis for their counterterrorism efforts. Unexpectedly, President Obama dropped by the meeting. He told the general and his entourage that if there was a terrorist attack in the United States that could be traced back to Pakistan's tribal areas, he would take unspecified actions that went well beyond drone strikes. The implication was that this could take the form of large-scale US airstrikes against targets deep inside Pakistan.

Months later the case of Faisal Shahzad reminded Obama and his national security team why their laser focus on the Pakistani tribal regions was well warranted. In the early years after 9/11 the Pakistani Taliban were not seen as a threat to the American homeland. But they were beginning to have larger ambitions. Protesting the Spanish role in the US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan, the Pakistani Taliban had dispatched suicide bombers to Barcelona in January 2008 to carry out suicide bombings on the city's transportation system. While that plot was foiled, it indicated that the Pakistani Taliban were adopting some of al-Qaeda's agenda of global jihad.

Not even two years later the Pakistani Taliban found an American recruit suitable for an attack on New York City, long the glittering prize for jihadist

terrorists. Faisal Shahzad, the son of a senior Pakistani military officer, had been attending college at the University of Bridgeport in Connecticut in 1999. After 9/11 Shahzad became increasingly intrigued by bin Laden's ideology and started listening to lectures by militant clerics such as Awlaki.

On a trip to visit his family in Pakistan, Shahzad traveled to the tribal regions, where he was given a five-day course in bomb-making. The training happened at a different location each day because of the persistent threat of CIA drone strikes. Shahzad taped a video condemning the American drone strikes and said he would take revenge in Manhattan.

After five months in Pakistan, Shahzad returned to Connecticut. He accumulated the supplies for his bomb and on the afternoon of May 1, 2010, loaded the bomb into his SUV and drove to the corner of Forty-Fifth Street and Seventh Avenue, one of the busiest spots in midtown Manhattan. The SUV was filled with propane gas tanks, gasoline canisters, and a stack of firecrackers. Shahzad initiated the timer on the bomb and strolled away. As he walked toward Grand Central Terminal, he listened for a big explosion. It never came. The bomb was a dud, perhaps because of the abbreviated training he had received in Pakistan's tribal regions.

A street vendor noticed smoke coming out of Shahzad's SUV and told a police officer. The bomb squad examined the vehicle and found its unique vehicle identification number, which led them to Shahzad's recent purchase of it. Meanwhile, Shahzad made a reservation for a flight from New York to the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. Realizing that he was escaping, Customs and Border Protection agents ran to the gate from which his plane was departing, only to find the doors were closed—but the plane had not yet pulled away. The crew opened the doors and the agents found and arrested Shahzad. "I was expecting you," he admitted. "Are you NYPD or FBI?"

Obama expanded the targeting for the CIA drones in Pakistan to include militant groups less directly threatening to the US homeland than al-Qaeda. Under Obama, almost half of US drone strikes targeted the Taliban and the allied Haqqani Network. This enlargement of the target set coincided with the surge of US soldiers in Afghanistan. At the end of the Bush administration, there were more than 20,000 American soldiers in Afghanistan. By mid-2010, there were 90,000. Many of the drone strikes

under Obama in Pakistan's tribal regions were aimed at providing "force protection" to this much larger contingent of US soldiers in neighboring Afghanistan since the tribal regions were where key elements of the Taliban such as the Haqqani Network were headquartered. In 2010 the Obama administration conducted a record number of 122 strikes in those regions.

The Obama-era drone program also widened the target set to include many lower-level militants: During Obama's first years in office, only around 2 percent of drone-related fatalities in Pakistan could be considered leaders of al-Qaeda. The CIA drone program in Pakistan had first evolved as a measure to kill hard-to-capture al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, but under Obama it effectively became a counterinsurgency air force, largely killing lower-ranking members of the Taliban.

In September 2012, President Obama told CNN that drone strikes were only used when "we can't capture the individual before they move forward on some sort of operational plot against the United States." In fact, the Obama administration ramped up the number of "signature" strikes, which were not targeted at particular "high-value" targets who were known or suspected to be members of al-Qaeda but rather were military-age males in Pakistan's tribal regions who were displaying the signature behaviors of suspected militants.

The drone program was devastating to al-Qaeda's cadre in the Pakistani tribal regions. As a result, in an October 2010 memo bin Laden ordered his men to leave the area, warning that "the Americans have great accumulated expertise of photography of the region due to the fact they have been doing it for so many years. They can even distinguish between houses that are frequented by male visitors at a higher rate than is normal." Bin Laden suggested that his followers head to a remote part of Afghanistan such as the mountainous, heavily forested region of Kunar, which "can accommodate hundreds of the brothers without being spotted by the enemy." It was in Kunar that bin Laden himself had hidden shortly after the battle of Tora Bora.

In November 2010 an al-Qaeda leader wrote to bin Laden that he had indeed started relocating al-Qaeda members to Kunar and other similarly remote areas of Afghanistan. In the same vein, bin Laden wrote two of his

sons advising them to avoid Pakistan's tribal regions and instead move to the city of Peshawar in northwest Pakistan, noting "it is clear that the tribal region has been very much discovered."

Al-Qaeda's leaders found the drone program so damaging that they set up a special "security committee" to counter it. A May 2010 report by the committee claimed that the group had executed thirty to forty "spies" who were providing intelligence about the targets of the drones. An al-Qaeda leader then disseminated the findings of the committee to the leaders of jihadist groups in Somalia and Yemen, saying that the key to the CIA's success had been building a "network of spies on the ground." He also noted that if a single drone was in the area, a strike was probably not imminent since it was likely only doing surveillance. But if several drones appeared at once, that meant that the Americans were going to launch a strike.

In addition to the paranoia these strikes engendered in al-Qaeda's leaders, another measure of their success is that there were no attempted or successful terrorist attacks traceable back to al-Qaeda's core group in Pakistan in either the United States or the West in general following this unprecedented campaign of CIA-directed drone attacks. This absence of attacks by al-Qaeda against the American homeland made it possible for policymakers to contemplate a full US withdrawal from Afghanistan in the coming years.

Human rights organizations claimed that the drone strikes killed large numbers of civilians, while Obama's counterterrorism advisor, John Brennan, asserted publicly in 2011 that the strikes had caused no civilian casualties for nearly a year.

The question of how many civilians were killed by the CIA's drone strikes was complicated, since the militants lived among the population and did not wear uniforms, and they had an incentive to claim that all casualties were civilians whereas US government officials tended to claim the opposite. New America's research found that the civilian death rate for CIA drone strikes in Pakistan did decline over time—likely because of some combination of better intelligence, more precise munitions, and greater scrutiny from both Congress and the media—declining from an estimated

27 percent civilian casualty rate under Bush to 6 percent under Obama. In 2011, Pakistani Major General Ghayur Mehmood publicly acknowledged that US drone strikes were largely accurate: “The number of innocent people being killed is relatively low. Most of the targets are hard-core militants.”

A decade after the 9/11 attacks, those drone strikes were launched under the rubric of the Authorization for Use of Military Force that the US Congress had overwhelmingly voted for just days after the attacks. It authorized the president to go to war against those responsible for 9/11 and those who had harbored them. The lawmakers who had voted for this measure likely had little idea that this authorization would eventually be used to conduct US military operations pretty much anywhere in the world.

Senator Rand Paul, who led the isolationist wing of the Republican Party, on the floor of the US Senate observed in 2013, “They have now said that the war has no geographic limitations, so it’s really not a war in Afghanistan, it’s a war in Yemen, Somalia, Mali. It’s a war in unlimited places.” Underlining Senator Paul’s warnings of the expanding battlefield, the Obama administration increased the number of drone strikes and special operations raids in Somalia in an effort to combat al-Qaeda’s local affiliate, al-Shabaab, which was at war with the government of Somalia and was launching terrorist attacks in neighboring Kenya.

The Obama administration’s interpretation of the Authorization for Use of Military Force greatly expanded the powers of the US president to wage military operations around the globe without congressional approval. The ramping up of US drone strikes in Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen and the surge of American troops into Afghanistan presaged what would arguably be the biggest gamble of the Obama presidency.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

OPERATION NEPTUNE SPEAR

A simple plan, carefully concealed, repeatedly rehearsed, executed with surprise, speed and purpose.

—ADMIRAL WILLIAM H. MCRAVEN, THE ARCHITECT OF THE BIN LADEN RAID, ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL SPECIAL OPERATION

After escaping from Tora Bora in the winter of 2001, bin Laden spent four years moving from hiding place to hiding place, until October 2005, when he and two of his wives and several of his children and grandchildren moved into their new permanent home in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A small and relatively affluent city in the foothills of the Himalayas, Abbottabad was hundreds of miles from the Pakistani tribal regions where many American officials believed bin Laden might be hiding. The large house had separate living quarters and kitchens for each of his wives, a spacious office for bin Laden from which he could try to manage his global terrorist enterprise, and plenty of space for the kids to roam in the backyard behind high walls that

kept prying eyes out. It was a suburban dream home compared to his ramshackle hideout in Tora Bora.

As he adjusted to his new home bin Laden was unsettled by an unwelcome development: leaders of jihadist organizations and key militant sheikhs had started turning against him because of all the bloodshed that he and his followers had caused. One of bin Laden's spiritual inspirations, Sheikh Salman al-Awdah, a leading Saudi religious scholar, addressed bin Laden on a widely watched Arab TV network in 2006: "My brother Osama, how much blood has been spilt?" Awdah asked him: "How many innocent people, children, elderly, and women have been killed . . . in the name of Al Qaeda?" This was an attack on bin Laden himself, not some generic condemnation of terrorism.

After Sheikh al-Awdah's critical statement, bin Laden issued a rare public apology on behalf of al-Qaeda and instructed his followers in his brutal Iraqi affiliate to correct their "mistakes." Al-Qaeda's managers, also in hiding in Pakistan, had previously written private memos to the leadership of Al-Qaeda in Iraq telling them to stop wantonly killing Muslim civilians, but they had never criticized the group publicly.

The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, which had once been aligned with bin Laden, also issued a public statement in 2009 decrying the targeting of civilians, a not-so-subtle dig at al-Qaeda.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda began losing support among ordinary Muslims. In the two most populous Muslim countries—Indonesia and Pakistan—the number of people with a favorable view of bin Laden or endorsing suicide bombings dropped by more than half between 2002 and 2009. This shift was motivated partly by the civilian casualties caused by al-Qaeda's affiliates and allies, the victims of which were not typically Americans but largely ordinary Indonesians and Pakistanis.

Bin Laden realized that he had a serious problem. Al-Qaeda and its affiliated groups could hardly claim they were defending Islam if most of their victims were Muslim civilians. In a memo dated August 7, 2010, bin Laden advised the leaders of the Somali militant group al-Shabaab to avoid actions that might bring harm to Muslim civilians. Five months later two of bin Laden's aides wrote a blistering letter to the leader of the Pakistan Taliban warning him to stop authorizing suicide attacks in marketplaces and mosques that were killing ordinary Muslims.

Bin Laden understood that al-Qaeda's "brand" was becoming tarnished. He started noodling with a brand refresh, and even considered renaming the group, coming up with some rather ponderous new names such as "the Monotheism and Jihad Group." Bin Laden wanted to use the upcoming tenth anniversary of 9/11 as the moment to launch a kinder, gentler al-Qaeda that would avoid attacks on Muslim civilians.

Around the time that bin Laden was contemplating a relaunch of al-Qaeda, Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old Tunisian street vendor who had grown frustrated at frequent shakedowns by the police, set himself on fire outside a police station on December 17, 2010, to protest the predatory regime in his country. It wasn't immediately obvious that this act of self-immolation would be the spark that would light the flames of the Arab Spring, a series of revolts that spread from Tunisia across the Middle East to Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. But it did.

These revolutions were propelled by a mixture of ordinary Arabs, liberals who were intent on creating more open societies, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood hoping to install Islamist governments, all of whom were utterly fed up with the brutality, corruption, and incompetence of their kleptocratic rulers. They took to the streets at great personal risk since the reigning tyrants didn't hesitate to kill their protesting subjects.

Bin Laden had long hoped for such uprisings in the Middle East, but his ideas and followers were notably absent from these protests, and few of the protesters were demanding the installation of Taliban-style theocracies, bin Laden's preferred mode of governance.

Al-Qaeda's leader had spent the past five years in a prison of his own making hiding out in his compound in Abbottabad. He could only observe the Arab Spring from the sidelines, flipping through the TV channels to watch the coverage of what he believed were the most significant events in the Middle East in centuries.

The Arab Spring caused a crisis in the bin Laden household. Bin Laden's wives, his adult children, and bin Laden himself all believed that he was a world historical figure who needed to be at the center of these momentous events. But at this time of seemingly great transformation across the Middle East, the world wasn't paying any attention to him.

Even bin Laden's family members, who were his most reliable cheerleaders, were aware that history was passing by their great leader. One of his adult children asked him: "How come there is no mention of al-Qaeda?" Bin Laden, who was glued to the TV coverage of the Arab Spring, answered: "Some analysts do mention al-Qaeda." In fact, if analysts mentioned al-Qaeda at all it was to note that the group wasn't involved in the revolutions sweeping the Arab world.

Bin Laden and his family wanted to make al-Qaeda great again. They spent many evenings during the first months of 2011 talking about the Arab Spring and how best bin Laden could insert himself into these revolutions. Over the course of several weeks, they discussed the content and timing of a videotaped statement that bin Laden would release that could put him back in the spotlight. The bin Ladens believed that these talks were so important that they started keeping careful notes about them in a family journal that grew to more than two hundred pages.

Around the same time, in a lengthy memo to one of his deputies bin Laden seemed annoyed that there had been so little progress during the past decade in attacking the United States successfully again and instructed him to find "one of the qualified brothers to be responsible for a large operation in the US." He also wrote to the leader of al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen, telling him not to attack local police officers but instead "to extend and develop our operations in America and not keep it limited to only blowing up airplanes." The goal was to force the United States "finally to withdraw from our countries and stop supporting the Jews." Bin Laden told his deputies that assassinating President Obama was a high priority, but there was no need to waste time on plots against Vice President Biden, whom he considered to be "totally unprepared" to be president.

While bin Laden grappled with what to say publicly about the Arab Spring and what to do about the lack of operations against the United States, he faced an even more pressing problem at home: al-Qaeda's leader was highly dependent on his two longtime bodyguards, who were planning to leave him. They were brothers who had grown up in Kuwait, and could speak the local languages in the Abbottabad region because their family originally hailed from northern Pakistan. The Kuwaiti brothers were bin Laden's key link to the world outside the compound walls, whether it was getting messages to other leaders of al-Qaeda or buying household supplies

for bin Laden's family living at the compound, numbering fifteen adults and children in all.

The bin Ladens rarely stepped outside the gates of their compound unless it was for infrequent trips to the doctor. The terrorist leader himself never left his compound and, even when he strolled around his garden, he did so with a large hat firmly pressed on his head; al-Qaeda's leader had great respect for the capabilities of US satellites.

The Kuwaiti brothers were getting restless. Considering all the risks that came with guarding the world's most wanted man, they were being paid a pittance by the tightfisted leader of al-Qaeda—one hundred dollars a month. After almost a decade on the run, they wanted out. Things became so tense that bin Laden started communicating with his bodyguards by letter even though they only lived yards apart from each other within the Abbottabad compound. On February 3, 2011, bin Laden wrote to them summarizing an agreement they had recently made: the two brothers would leave Abbottabad by July, and meanwhile bin Laden would start looking for possible replacements.

Around the same time that he was having big problems with his bodyguards, bin Laden was delighted to be reuniting at last with his oldest wife, sixty-two-year-old Khairiah. She had spent nearly a decade since the 9/11 attacks living in exile in Iran under various forms of house arrest. In the summer of 2010, the Iranian regime released her along with members of al-Qaeda in a prisoner swap for an Iranian diplomat whom al-Qaeda had kidnapped in Pakistan.

By January 2011, Khairiah had made her way to Waziristan in Pakistan's tribal regions. Bin Laden was as ardent as a young swain to see her again, writing, "How long have I waited for your departure from Iran!"

Bin Laden's excitement about being reunited with Khairiah, who had a PhD in child psychology, was understandable: she had once played a key role in shaping his public statements. Now, with the Arab Spring in full bloom bin Laden needed Khairiah by his side more than ever so she could help him think through what he should say publicly about these momentous events. Bin Laden also wanted her advice about the statements that he planned to issue around the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, which was only eight months away. Bin Laden told Khairiah that while she was staying in Waziristan an aide would provide her a computer so she could start putting together her "observations and ideas" about what he should say to

mark the 9/11 anniversary. In mid-February Khairiah finally arrived at the Abbottabad compound, where she was joyfully reunited with her husband of twenty-five years.

After a decade on the run bin Laden was confined to his compound, but he took solace in three wives ranging in age from twenty-eight to sixty-two, among whom he rotated aided by a form of natural Viagra. He was a doting father and grandfather to the dozen children and grandchildren living with him, helping them cultivate vegetable plots and handing out prizes for "best performance" when they recited poems.

In his office at his Abbottabad compound, bin Laden regularly wrote lengthy memos to his deputies and to al-Qaeda's affiliates and allies from Morocco to Somalia giving them advice on a wide range of matters. In one memo to the Pakistani Taliban, bin Laden complained that Faisal Shahzad, the failed Times Square bomber, should not have been allowed to go on his mission because, as a naturalized American resident, he had sworn an oath to the United States. "We do not want the Mujahideen to be accused of breaking an oath," bin Laden wrote. This must have caused some head-scratching among the recipients of bin Laden's letter: Wasn't he trying to kill as many American civilians as possible? And now here he was getting hung up on an oath sworn to the United States?

Bin Laden took a keen interest in the doings of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen. He tried to micromanage the group from more than two thousand miles away, writing that its members should always fill up on gas before they set off on road trips so that they wouldn't have to stop at gas stations that were monitored by government spies. He also warned the group not to try to seize power, writing, "most people in Yemen, if given a choice" would not choose a "government formed by al-Qaeda."

Bin Laden was also a hands-on manager of his core al-Qaeda group. When one of his top deputies was killed in a CIA drone strike in Pakistan in May 2010, he appointed Atiyya al-Libi to replace him as the number three in al-Qaeda, sending him a forty-nine-page letter full of instructions about what he expected from al-Libi in his new role.

For relaxation, bin Laden watched Al Jazeera and the BBC; using his remote he would block the picture if a female anchor was reading the news. Occasionally he would record a video or audio statement attacking the United States and the tape would be taken by courier to be uploaded to the internet, a continuing proof of life and a way of trying to stay relevant.

It wasn't a bad life, considering that he was the world's most wanted man. Significant American resources were being spent to target al-Qaeda and allied groups; the budget of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center alone was now three billion dollars a year.

At the CIA, the priority was preventing another attack on the homeland. That meant that while bin Laden was certainly of interest, the day-to-day focus of the Counterterrorism Center was on finding the operational leaders of al-Qaeda who were directing the most worrisome plots. In 2005 the CIA had closed the dedicated bin Laden unit that had first opened its doors a decade earlier and reassigned its analysts and operatives to other roles in the agency's Counterterrorism Center, a recognition of the fact that the terrorism problem was now far bigger than one man.

The CIA had also made an analytical judgment that bin Laden had become more like the chairman of the board of al-Qaeda, with only a limited hands-on management role. In fact, bin Laden was still trying to micromanage al-Qaeda and its affiliates with varying degrees of success from his hiding place in Abbottabad.

Then, just before the ninth anniversary of 9/11, an old lead started to yield new results. Years earlier, the CIA had started to get interested in a man called Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, who might be able to lead them to bin Laden. Now it seemed possible that they had found him.

The CIA's identification of the Kuwaiti as bin Laden's courier was a fine piece of detective work. As the years went by after the 9/11 attacks and the bin Laden trail had gone very cold, it became obvious that none of the al-Qaeda detainees in US custody knew where he was, so the CIA adopted a new approach, which was to focus not on where bin Laden might be, but on *who* he might be with. If you could figure out who bin Laden was meeting with, you might then be able to track down al-Qaeda's leader. It was a bank shot.

By 2003, the CIA had concluded that al-Qaeda's leaders were not communicating by phone or by email, only by courier. So, the courier seemed like a promising thread to pull to find bin Laden. The question was: Who would be playing this role? It would have to be someone who was a long-standing member of al-Qaeda and completely trusted by bin Laden. The CIA had some pieces of the puzzle, but there was no picture on the box to help them figure out what the finished puzzle looked like.

When Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) was arrested in Pakistan in 2003 he had told his Pakistani interrogators that a man known as Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti had helped bin Laden escape from Tora Bora. “Abu Ahmed al Kuwaiti” was a *kunya*, or nickname, meaning “the father of Ahmed from Kuwait,” a bit like saying “John’s dad from Chicago.” Still, it was something.

Later, when KSM was in CIA custody and was subjected to waterboarding 183 times, he told his American interrogators that al-Kuwaiti had “retired” in 2002. Not too many folks were known to have retired from al-Qaeda. *Interesting*. The CIA had bugged the secret “black site” prison where KSM was being held and heard him telling other al-Qaeda detainees not to say a word about the Kuwaiti. *Very interesting*.

Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti was a name already known to the CIA. Back in 2002 a North African government had learned of it from a detainee in its custody. Still, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti was only one among many hundreds of names and nicknames that the agency was then learning about who might be associated with al-Qaeda. While the Kuwaiti’s phone number and email would pop up in the contact lists and address books of other al-Qaeda detainees, the CIA was “deeply uncertain” about his importance, according to Nada Bakos, who was the lead CIA targeting officer hunting Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the brutal leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Bakos was privy to an important break in the Kuwaiti case. In January 2004, Kurdish and US forces in northern Iraq detained an al-Qaeda courier named Hassan Ghul bearing letters from al-Qaeda’s leaders to Zarqawi. Ghul told Kurdish interrogators that bin Laden was likely living in the Peshawar area, that he would probably have only one or two bodyguards, and that bin Laden was “always with” Abu Ahmed, the Kuwaiti. Ghul sang like a “tweetie bird,” according to a CIA official, giving information that generated twenty-one intelligence reports before he was subjected to coercive interrogations by the CIA. It would still take the agency six more years to track down the Kuwaiti. But these were accurate leads acquired without the CIA’s coercive interrogation techniques, which Ghul was later subjected to, including being kept awake for interrogations for fifty-nine hours straight, to the point that he began hallucinating.

Ghul’s account dovetailed with that of Mohammed al-Qahtani, a Saudi who was likely going to be the twentieth hijacker but who was turned back at Orlando Airport before the 9/11 attacks by an alert immigration agent

who smelled a rat. Qahtani was later arrested in Pakistan and sent to Guantánamo, where he was interrogated for forty-eight days straight. Qahtani lost sixty pounds during these interrogations and was hospitalized twice, treatment that a judge at Guantánamo later deemed to be "torture." During these torture sessions Qahtani told his interrogators that the Kuwaiti worked for al-Qaeda, which seemed to vindicate those US officials who supported the coercive interrogations of detainees.

This all suggested that the Kuwaiti could be significant. But what was his real name? A CIA analyst reviewed all the relevant files for anything that might have been overlooked and found that a foreign intelligence service reported in 2007 that the Kuwaiti's real name was Ibrahim Saeed Ahmed. Now the CIA had a real name, though Ibrahim Saeed Ahmed was something of a "John Smith" name in Pakistan, a country of some 200 million people.

Voice samples from calls from a phone associated with the Kuwaiti that had been collected in 2002 by the US intelligence community were compared to samples collected in 2009. These were then geolocated to a specific part of Pakistan and were assessed to likely be the Kuwaiti.

In the summer of 2010, a suspected al-Qaeda member received a call monitored by US intelligence. It was placed by someone they believed was the Kuwaiti calling from the city of Peshawar. The suspected al-Qaeda member asked the Kuwaiti: "What are you doing?"

The Kuwaiti dodged the question a few times, saying finally, "I'm doing what I did before." There was a pause and the suspected al-Qaeda member told the Kuwaiti, "Then go with Allah." *Bingo.* The Kuwaiti was still working for al-Qaeda, which hadn't been clear until now.

Still, the Kuwaiti practiced careful operational security, removing the battery from his cell whenever he was traveling to and from Abbottabad. This required getting someone on the ground to follow the Kuwaiti from Peshawar back to where he was living, which turned out to be a compound in Abbottabad.

On August 27, 2010, CIA Director Leon Panetta was briefed by "Gary," the head of the agency's Afghanistan-Pakistan desk. Agents had followed the suspected bin Laden courier to a compound in Abbottabad, which looked like a "fortress." Intrigued, Panetta said: "Tell me about that fortress." On the third floor there was a terrace surrounded by a privacy

wall. Panetta asked, "Who puts a privacy wall around a patio? Isn't the whole purpose of a terrace to see out?"

On September 10, 2010, the day before the ninth anniversary of 9/11, Panetta went to see Obama in the Oval Office. He told the president, "It's very preliminary, but we think we have a potential lead on bin Laden—the best one by far since Tora Bora." Obama didn't say anything, he just kept listening.

Panetta and CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell walked the president through what they knew about the man known as Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti who had ties to bin Laden. They explained that he wasn't living in Pakistan's tribal regions but rather in a compound in Abbottabad. The size and structure of the compound suggested that someone important was living there; maybe an al-Qaeda leader. Panetta described Abbottabad as a small city about thirty-five miles north of the Pakistani capital, Islamabad, the Pakistani equivalent of parts of Virginia not too far from the nation's capital; a pleasant retirement community favored by former military officers.

The most recent seemingly promising lead that the CIA had on one of al-Qaeda's leaders had led to a disaster; a suicide bombing that had killed seven CIA officers and contractors at a US base in eastern Afghanistan on December 30, 2009. It was one of the largest losses of life in CIA history. The suicide bomber was a Jordanian doctor who had convinced CIA officers that he was helping them hunt down al-Qaeda's number two, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Instead, he was a double agent working for al-Qaeda and the Pakistani Taliban.

With this episode on his mind, Obama didn't get his hopes up, but on December 14 Panetta visited Obama again, this time with the director of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center, who outlined the agency's recent detective work. The Kuwaiti had purchased the Abbottabad compound using a false name and the people living there were going to great lengths to hide their identities. They had no internet, and they burned their trash. This was a smart move on their part; the CIA had acquired DNA samples from relatives of bin Laden. With no trash to collect there were no discarded toothbrushes or apple cores to pick up that might yield a useful DNA sample from the inhabitants of the compound.

The CIA's surveillance of the compound was exacting. Officials even counted laundry hanging on the compound's laundry lines to build up a

picture of the numbers of those living there. With all the evidence it had gathered, the agency concluded that there could be a match with the members of bin Laden's family.

There was also a man who never left the compound property but took regular walks pacing around his garden. The director of the CIA's Counterterrorism Center told Obama: "We call him 'the Pacer.' We think he could be bin Laden."

"What's your judgment?" Obama asked.

"I think there is a good chance he could be our man," the CIA officer told the president. "But I can't be sure."

Obama asked his war cabinet to start exploring what military options might be possible. US relations with Pakistan—never that great—were at an all-time low because Raymond Davis, a CIA contractor, had killed two Pakistani men in Lahore, a major Pakistani city, on January 27, 2011. Obama administration officials publicly claimed he was a "diplomat." Not too many American diplomats looked and acted like Davis, a buff dude who had shot two men in broad daylight in a crowded Pakistani city. Davis was eventually freed from Pakistani prison in mid-March 2011 after the payment of "blood money" to the victims' families, a not uncommon remedy in the Pakistani legal system.

In Obama's mind, doing some kind of joint operation with the Pakistanis was off the table, not least because their equivalent of West Point was only a couple of miles from the Abbottabad compound. Also, involving the Pakistanis would increase the likelihood that the Abbottabad intelligence could leak.

Obama decided that the circle of people in the administration with a "need to know" would be kept very small. Meetings about bin Laden were listed as "Mickey Mouse" meetings on the official National Security Council agenda. There were no "read-aheads" for these meetings and no "seconds" were allowed to attend them. TV cameras in the Situation Room were turned off and their lenses were covered so there would be no inadvertent leaks.

While the CIA tried to gather more intelligence about the mysterious occupants of the Abbottabad compound, Obama's war cabinet began to consider what the military options might be. One was a bombing raid; this was relatively quickly discarded. There were too many downsides: Could you prove that bin Laden was killed if the compound was obliterated? You

would also need thirty-two 2,000-pound bombs to destroy the one-acre compound and any secret bunkers that might be inside it, which would have the effect of a small earthquake going off in the middle of a city of a nominal ally, with a high likelihood of civilian casualties in the surrounding neighborhood. And, obviously, a bombing raid would not be "plausibly deniable."

Another course of action was to target the Pacer with a recently developed tiny drone weighing only thirteen pounds. This *was* plausibly deniable, but there were downsides to this approach as well: What if it missed the target? The drone hadn't been used in a combat operation yet. It could then spook the Pacer to leave the compound. Also, there would be no "sensitive site exploitation," meaning no chance to gather up the computers, phones, and files at the target, which was a downside of both the bombing raid and the drone strike.

That left you with American boots on the ground. The civilian overseer of US special operations, Michael Vickers, called Vice Admiral William "Bill" McRaven, the commander of Joint Special Operations Command, in Afghanistan and asked him to travel urgently to Washington. On February 25, 2011, at CIA headquarters on a quiet Friday evening—a good time for a discreet briefing—McRaven was told about the Abbottabad intelligence.

McRaven started planning what assaulting the compound would involve, bringing on a couple of his military planners. Joint Special Operations Command did around a dozen of these kinds of raids most nights in Afghanistan, so from a military perspective raiding this compound was perfectly doable. What was different was that the raid would be deep inside the territory of an allied country, and it wasn't clear how the Pakistani military might react to it. Not only was Pakistan's Military Academy located close to the compound, so were a major Pakistani infantry battalion and a police station.

Admiral McRaven inspired a lot of confidence in Obama and the top brass at the Pentagon. He wasn't one for false bravado, but when he said he could get the job done, his long record of overseeing thousands of special operations and a healthy dose of Texas swagger had a way of settling the horses. McRaven was not only a supremely effective "door kicker," but his graduate thesis at the Naval Postgraduate School became the book *Spec Ops*, which was the bible for "direct action" special operators and was based on McRaven's careful examination of several of the most successful

special operations since World War II. If there was a man made for this moment, it was Admiral McRaven.

SEAL Team Six was available for the Abbottabad mission and had a great deal of experience operating in neighboring Afghanistan. But there were also downsides to a SEAL raid: What if there was a firefight and several SEALs were killed? Given the anger surrounding the recent Raymond Davis affair, the Pakistanis could also imprison SEALs taking part in an unauthorized ground operation in their country. And what if the mysterious Pacer was just some drug lord keeping a low profile or another high-ranking al-Qaeda leader? Would these kinds of targets be worth all the risks of a ground operation? There were a lot of "What ifs?"

The US military had been developing new stealth helicopters with much-reduced radar and noise signatures. They hadn't been used in combat yet but seemed like they could evade Pakistani radar and give the SEAL operators an advantage "on target" that would allow the helicopters to be heard only two minutes or so out from the Abbottabad compound. The president authorized the use of the new stealth helicopters.

There were several meetings with the president during the first months of 2011 to discuss the bin Laden intelligence picture and the various COAs (courses of action, pronounced Ko-Ah) that the president could select from. As the SEAL operation became a likely COA, Obama told McRaven to plan to have more backup helicopters and be ready to have his special operators fight their way out of Pakistan. In earlier iterations of the SEAL planning there had been greater emphasis on not angering the Pakistanis, who were critical to the war effort in neighboring Afghanistan, since most of the supplies for US troops there had to be shipped by trucks through Pakistan or by planes flying through Pakistani airspace.

There were 165 distinct phases of the Abbottabad operation, so the SEALs repeatedly rehearsed the raid on a full-scale model of the compound built in North Carolina. They then did a full-dress rehearsal that included flying the 162 miles to the target and back at another mockup of the compound in Nevada, in a region that somewhat replicated the topography and weather conditions they would encounter in Pakistan.

Every contingency had been planned for the bin Laden raid, including a "quick reaction force" with additional helicopters standing by and a location in a desolate part of Pakistan where the helicopters would refuel as they flew back to Afghanistan.

Michael Leiter, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, was brought into the circle of knowledge about Abbottabad relatively late in the game. He set up a small "Red Team" to take a close look at the case that the Pacer might be bin Laden. After the weapons of mass destruction intelligence failure, which had played the key role in the case for war in Iraq, the CIA and its "customers" at the White House were all quite leery of any intelligence assessment that was based on circumstantial evidence. And the idea that bin Laden was, in fact, the Pacer was entirely circumstantial; there wasn't anything that the CIA had found that proved that al-Qaeda's leader was living in Abbottabad.

Morell, the deputy director of the CIA, got everyone's attention in the Situation Room when he observed that there was a better circumstantial case that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction than the case that bin Laden was living in Abbottabad. *Really?* A member of Leiter's Red Team also induced some heartburn when he said there was only a 40 percent chance that it was bin Laden in the compound. Morell put the likelihood higher, at 60 percent, while those who had spent years working on the bin Laden "account" put the odds even higher. "Sam," the lead CIA al-Qaeda analyst, was at 80 percent, while "Maya," a CIA analyst intensely focused on the bin Laden case—who wasn't going to win any Miss Congeniality contest among her colleagues—was at 95 percent. The more you knew about bin Laden the more likely you were to think that he was the mystery man in Abbottabad.

Yet, at the end of the day, these percentages could be misleading, suggesting some kind of mathematical gradation of certainty whether for or against bin Laden's presence in Abbottabad. Either bin Laden was at the Abbottabad compound or he wasn't. In the Situation Room a discussion about the various percentages took place at a meeting chaired by Obama. After a few minutes Obama interrupted, saying: "I know we are trying to quantify these factors as best we can. But ultimately this is a fifty-fifty call. Let's move on."

Influential voices in Obama's war cabinet were arguing against any ground operation in Abbottabad. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a former CIA director who had started working in Washington during the Lyndon Johnson administration, was fixated on the failure of "Desert One," the 1980 effort to free the US hostages held by Iranian revolutionaries at the American embassy in Tehran. That operation ended with an American

helicopter crashing into a US transport plane during a sandstorm and killing eight US service members, while the hostages remained in captivity. Gates had been working at the Carter White House on the night that the Desert One operation had ended in failure; it was seared in his memory. Joint Special Operation Command, now led by Admiral McRaven, had been created to avoid some of the interservice rivalries that had contributed to the Desert One fiasco.

As secretary of defense, Gates felt that his first duty was to his troops—around 100,000 of them were in Afghanistan at the time—and he had real concerns about the Pakistani reaction to a US ground operation. The war in Afghanistan was highly dependent on the supply routes that crossed Pakistan's territory and all the percentages about bin Laden that were being thrown around ultimately were based on gut instincts. From Gates's perspective, the war in Afghanistan was being risked on a crapshoot.

Vice President Biden was also focused on the irreparable damage that a SEAL operation would likely do to the US relationship with the Pakistanis: Might there be a firefight with the Pakistani military or an incident at the US embassy in Pakistan? Biden pressed for getting a better intelligence picture about Abbottabad, although at this point the CIA had been surveilling the compound for eight months; any more aggressive surveillance might be detected by the inhabitants of the compound. Biden warned of enormous consequences if the raid failed.

At the final meeting to decide what to do about Abbottabad, Obama polled the key officials in the Situation Room. Gates and Biden voted against the SEAL operation. General Cartwright, the vice chair of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and an Obama favorite, backed the tiny drone option. CIA Director Panetta and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton advocated for the SEAL operation.

Panetta, who'd had a long career in Congress, posed a test he commonly used when he was in politics: "If I asked the average citizen, 'If you knew what I knew, what would you do?' In this case the answer is clear. This is the best intelligence we've had since Tora Bora. I have tremendous confidence in our assault team. If we don't do it, we will regret it."

Obama's war cabinet was divided on the best way forward. Even those who supported the raid, such as Tony Blinken, had the image of President Jimmy Carter front of mind. Carter's Desert One failure had contributed to his one-term presidency.

Obama spent the night in his family quarters at the White House mulling over his decision in the Treaty Room with a basketball game playing on the TV in the background. This seemed to be the best chance to get bin Laden since the battle of Tora Bora. There was no comparison between the skills of SEAL Team Six, honed by thousands of such raids during the past decade, and the forces that were available to President Carter in 1980. After many months of surveillance of the Abbottabad compound it was clear that the intelligence picture wasn't going to get any better. Kicking the can down the road and not making a decision was itself a risk as there was always the possibility that the Pacer might move, or that as the circle of knowledge about Abbottabad kept expanding, something might leak. Obama thought about all the 9/11 families he'd met and their continuing pain and the need to bring them some justice.

The next morning at 8:30 on Friday, April 29, Obama told his team the Abbottabad operation was a go. CIA Director Panetta relayed the order to McRaven. In theory, the agency controlled this covert operation, though as a practical matter McRaven was running the show now. McRaven needed a name for the impending raid, and he settled on "Operation Neptune Spear," which was a tribute to the trident insignia worn by the SEALs.

On April 30 McRaven delayed the operation by one day: there was some low-lying fog in some of the valleys that he knew the SEALs would be flying through. It wasn't a huge problem, but there was no reason to rush to failure.

At 10:30 p.m. local time on May 1, 2011—2:00 p.m. for Obama's war cabinet observing the operation from the White House—two US stealth helicopters lifted off from Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan, and flew "nap of the earth," hugging the terrain for 162 miles to Abbottabad. As they were approaching the Abbottabad compound the SEALs could see pools in backyards and golf courses. This obviously wasn't poverty-stricken Afghanistan.

As one of the helicopters came in to land on the third-floor roof of what was believed to be bin Laden's bedroom, it got caught up in the downdraft of its own rotor wash and plummeted like a stone into a large yard off to the side of the house. The pilot from the elite 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment skillfully ensured that his helicopter didn't crash but instead took a "hard landing" and the SEALs inside emerged unscathed.

Video of the helicopter going down was captured by a drone flying high over the compound. This video was fed back to one of the smaller rooms in the White House Situation Room complex, a moment that was memorialized in an iconic photo: Secretary of State Clinton with her hand over her mouth, President Obama crouched in a corner seat looking grim, and Gates with his arms folded tightly across his chest. *Desert One. Again*.

Admiral McRaven, who was narrating the progress of the raid from his base in Jalalabad, said in an even tone, as if telling someone what he'd just had for breakfast: "It appears we have a helicopter down. All of the guys are okay. Backup helicopter is on the way."

Bin Laden and his youngest wife, Amal, were in bed together and were woken by the sound of the helicopter taking the hard landing. Amal reached for the light switch. Bin Laden told her, "No." He knew it was the Americans. In any event, the electricity in the neighborhood was off; Pakistan has frequent rolling blackouts.

It was a moonless night—McRaven had timed Operation Neptune Spear for just such a moment—and the SEALs were wearing night-vision goggles, which gave them a considerable edge. They killed one of bin Laden's bodyguards in an annex to the main house and then killed the other bodyguard and his wife, who were living on the ground floor of the main house. Inside the main house they came across a locked gate leading to a staircase. They blew open the gate and moved quickly up the stairs. On the second floor they encountered bin Laden's twenty-three-year-old son Khalid, whom they shot and killed.

The SEAL team kept silent as they crept up to the third floor. The "point man" spotted a tall man on the third floor poking his head out of a door and shot at him twice. The three SEALs on the staircase ran up into the third-floor bedroom and two of them shot the tall man again.

Bin Laden hadn't reached for the AK-47 and pistol that were hidden in his room. This was no heroic martyrdom on a field of jihad. Instead, Osama bin Laden was killed in his suburban compound surrounded by his wives and children. He was fifty-four.

The SEAL ground commander gave the code word "Geronimo, E-KIA," Enemy Killed in Action, which meant that bin Laden was dead. This message was relayed back to the White House. Obama said softly, "We got him."

The SEAL ground commander told McRaven there was a "whole shit ton" of computers and electronics on the second floor of bin Laden's compound and he wanted time to gather them. From his careful study of multiple successful special operations McRaven had found that after the first half an hour of a raid, the element of surprise had usually evaporated. They were now close to the half-hour mark. Any minute now the Pakistani military would likely respond to this incursion on their territory. But clearly what al-Qaeda leader's computers and phones might yield was worth taking some more time on the ground; McRaven authorized the extra time.

Curious locals were starting to gather outside the Abbottabad compound to see what all the commotion was about. The SEALs had a good cover story for this; a CIA Pakistani American team member who spoke Urdu told the neighbors that a Pakistani military operation was underway, and that they should disperse.

The SEALs picked up bin Laden's body and extracted two DNA samples from it. They placed the samples on two separate helicopters in case one of them went down. They also took photos of bin Laden's face, which were uploaded to the CIA. Other SEALs continued to grab as much as they could from bin Laden's second-floor office.

The time on target was now stretching to forty-eight minutes. McRaven told the ground commander, "Hey, get everything you can. But it's time to wrap this up and get out of Abbottabad."

The SEALs set a charge to blow up the stealth helicopter and all its secret avionics. The downed helicopter detonated in a giant explosion, guaranteeing that this once-covert operation was now very public. The SEAL team helicopters headed back to Afghanistan, stopping to refuel on the way. The Pakistanis scrambled F-16s, but they had limited nighttime flying capabilities and couldn't find the American helicopters.

When bin Laden's body arrived in Jalalabad, McRaven looked it over and felt it was al-Qaeda's leader; he had two rounds in his head, but it was immediately obvious that it was bin Laden. "Maya," the intense CIA analyst who had been tracking bin Laden for years, took one look at the body and said, stone-faced, "I guess I'm out of a fucking job." Using facial recognition technology, the CIA confirmed that the photos of bin Laden were a 90 to 95 percent match, although definitive DNA evidence would take another day or so to process.

At twenty-five minutes to midnight on Sunday, May 1, 2001, Obama announced to the world that bin Laden was dead. Crowds of people gathered outside the White House, many from nearby universities who were only children when the 9/11 attacks took place. They chanted "USA! USA!" much of the night. John Brennan, Obama's counterterrorism advisor, was a former CIA officer who had been hunting bin Laden for the past fifteen years. He had, in the president's words, "the face of an Irish boxer." When Brennan heard the chants of "USA! USA!" he started to weep.

As with many significant events, conspiracy theories about the bin Laden operation took hold. One that received widespread attention was by the veteran American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, who wrote a lengthy article in 2015 in the *London Review of Books* that was then amplified by media around the world asserting that the SEAL raid was a setup in which Pakistan's military was holding bin Laden prisoner in Abbottabad and simply handed him over to the SEALs. The only shots the night of the raid were the ones that the SEALs fired to kill bin Laden, according to Hersh.

Hersh's article was based largely on a single unnamed, retired senior US intelligence official, while it was contradicted by bin Laden's family members who survived the raid at the compound and who spoke to Pakistani investigators. It was also contradicted by the SEALs who were on the mission and many senior officials in agencies across the US government who spoke on the record about multiple aspects of the operation.

Also, Hersh's claim that the only shots fired at the Abbottabad compound were those that killed bin Laden was contradicted by the physical evidence. Before the Pakistani military demolished the compound, I was the only outside observer allowed to visit it. The compound was strewn with broken glass and was pocked with bullet holes where the SEALs had fired at bin Laden's bodyguards and his family. The evidence at the compound showed that many bullets were fired the night of bin Laden's death, including those that killed bin Laden's two bodyguards, one of their wives, and bin Laden's son. Hersh's account of the raid was, in short, total nonsense, but it fed into a narrative that the Pakistanis "must" have known that bin Laden was hiding in Abbottabad.

It's hard to prove negatives, but the massive haul of intelligence recovered by the SEALs from the Abbottabad compound undercut this theory. In the 470,000 files that were recovered from the compound there was nothing to indicate that Pakistan was sheltering bin Laden. Bin Laden never expected these files to become public and if he was living in Abbottabad with some sort of connivance of the Pakistani authorities, the thousands of pages of memos and letters written by him and his family members living at the compound were oddly silent on this issue. Also, the US was monitoring the communications of senior Pakistani generals the night of the bin Laden raid, and they were genuinely bewildered about what was going on. No evidence has since emerged that the Pakistanis knew that bin Laden was in Abbottabad. *The absence of evidence is the absence of evidence.*

There are conspiracy theories and then there are lies. Biden publicly lied about his role in the bin Laden operation several times during the following years, claiming that he had privately advised Obama that he should do the raid, telling him, "Mr. President, follow your instincts. Mine are you should do it but follow your instincts." In Obama's 750-page memoir of his first term in office that covers the bin Laden raid in detail—one of the key decisions of his presidency—Obama wrote that Biden strongly advised against the raid. In his memoir Obama never described any private meeting where the vice president reversed his position.

Then there was the issue of torture and its putative role in finding bin Laden. Representative Peter King, the top Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, told Fox News shortly after bin Laden was killed, "For those who say that waterboarding doesn't work, who say it should be stopped and never used again, we got vital information which directly led us to bin Laden."

This was also the message that the CIA wanted to get out. The agency went to considerable lengths to shape the 2012 movie *Zero Dark Thirty*, giving the filmmakers access to CIA officers as they developed their script. The resulting film was watched by millions, and it opened with a scene that lasted for almost half an hour showing a bloodied al-Qaeda detainee strung up to the ceiling with ropes. After being beaten, waterboarded, and locked into a coffin-like wooden crate, he eventually tells his CIA interrogators that "the Kuwaiti" was bin Laden's courier.

The movie strongly implied that torture was the key to finding bin Laden. But that was simply not true. Only one member of al-Qaeda who was tortured gave up useful information about the Kuwaiti. Other al-Qaeda members who were waterboarded, such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, lied about the Kuwaiti, saying that he had "retired." The al-Qaeda courier Hassan Ghul gave up important information about the Kuwaiti before he was subjected to coercive interrogations.

Meanwhile, key pieces of the Kuwaiti puzzle came from standard intelligence work, such as tips from a foreign intelligence service, intercepts of cell phone calls, agents following the courier on the ground, and surveillance of the Abbottabad compound. Given all that, the role that torture played in finding the Kuwaiti was small and, in any event, likely unnecessary, leaving aside all the ethical and legal problems caused by using coercive interrogation techniques.

What did make the bin Laden operation a success was the patient detective work of the CIA officers working on the case for many years; advances in cell phone interceptions by the National Security Agency; the enormous strides that Joint Special Operation Command made during thousands of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan; and innovations such as the stealth helicopters. All these tactical advances and technological breakthroughs did not exist on 9/11, but the intelligence community and special operations forces had transformed themselves in the decade that followed the 9/11 attacks. The bin Laden raid was at the apex of those transformations. And ultimately President Obama made the right call to authorize the raid, over the objections of both his vice president and his secretary of defense.

The death of bin Laden was a strategic blow to al-Qaeda. Bin Laden was the group's founder and had been its leader since the late 1980s. When you joined al-Qaeda you swore an oath of allegiance to bin Laden. He set the group's strategy, including its most important decision: to attack the United States. Bin Laden's charismatic leadership and anti-Americanism made him a hero to many Muslims. It took al-Qaeda six weeks to name his successor, the dour Egyptian surgeon Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was a black hole of charisma and a feckless leader who would fail to resuscitate al-Qaeda after its founder's death.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TRYING TO WIND DOWN THE "WAR ON TERROR"

Only the dead have seen the end of war.

—ATTRIBUTED TO PLATO

The death of Osama bin Laden seemed to mark a turning point in the decade-long war on terror. When President George W. Bush had launched that war, he did so based on a simple premise: the Taliban had to hand over bin Laden or face the consequences. Now the architect of 9/11 was dead, and some measure of justice had been meted out to the victims of the 9/11 attacks and their families. In many Americans' minds 9/11 had been avenged.

It seemed like a natural moment to reorient the central focus of US foreign policy away from combating terrorism to other pressing issues, such as trying to contain the rise of China. President Obama believed that killing bin Laden was "critical" for his plan to wind down the war on terror, while Vice President Biden kept reminding Obama's war cabinet that they were only in Afghanistan to "get the guys who attacked us on September 11th." Bin Laden's death in May 2011 seemed to be the culmination of that goal

just months before the surge of US forces in Afghanistan were supposed to start coming home in July.

The previous fall, at a NATO conference in Lisbon, Obama had publicly announced that he planned to keep US troops in a combat role in Afghanistan for the next four years. The goal was to "transition" control to the Afghan Army and police by the end of 2014.

The month after bin Laden was killed, on June 22, Obama announced he was withdrawing 10,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year and another 23,000 troops by the summer of 2012, explaining, "We're starting this drawdown from a position of strength. Al-Qaeda is under more pressure than at any time since 9/11. This is the beginning—but not the end—of our effort to wind down this war." By the time of the US presidential election in November 2012 US troops in Afghanistan had dropped from 100,000 to 68,000.

While Richard Holbrooke—the dealmaker who had helped bring peace to the Balkans in the mid-1990s—was alive he had presumed he would be the lead negotiator for any deal with the Taliban. Holbrooke and General Petraeus, who had succeeded General McChrystal as the American commander in Afghanistan, had differing views about starting negotiations with the Taliban. When Holbrooke raised the idea, the general was dismissive, saying: "Richard, that's a 15-second conversation. Yes, eventually. But no, not now." Petraeus took the view that the Taliban had to be significantly weakened on the battlefield before meaningful negotiations could start.

In time the Obama administration did begin reaching out discreetly to Taliban leaders to see if some kind of peace agreement could be made. At the request of the United States a Taliban political office opened in Doha, Qatar, in 2013. The day the office opened the Taliban displayed their distinctive white flag outside the office as if it were some kind of embassy. Afghan President Karzai was furious, and the office was shut. But now that the Taliban had political representatives living in Doha, the United States would have a location for any future negotiations with them.

The Obama administration also started negotiating a bilateral security agreement with Karzai that would allow US forces in Afghanistan to remain after their combat role was over at the end of 2014, so they could continue to train Afghan forces and assist in their fight against the Taliban. Karzai was still smarting from the attempts by Holbrooke and other American

officials to sabotage his electoral chances in 2009 and was fixated on the issue of US raids on Afghan homes, an issue that angered many Afghans. Karzai also wanted guarantees that Pakistan wouldn't interfere in Afghanistan's security, which is where the Afghan president felt that the war in his country really originated since that was where the leadership of the Taliban was based.

The Americans were not going to give up what they felt were necessary counterterrorism raids or provide security guarantees against Pakistan. Karzai convened a *loya jirga*, a traditional Afghan decision-making body, made up of some two thousand Afghan leaders from around the country, who approved the bilateral security agreement pretty much on the terms the Americans wanted.

In November 2013, Obama's national security advisor, Susan Rice, traveled to Kabul to finalize the agreement with Karzai. At the last minute he refused to sign it, launching instead into a tirade against US forces and accusing the US of having a secret plan to "dismember" Afghanistan. Rice found Karzai to be one of the most disagreeable leaders she had ever encountered and told him that if he didn't sign the agreement the Afghan people would be on their own. Eventually Karzai's successor as president, Ashraf Ghani—who made a point of publicly thanking US soldiers for their sacrifices in Afghanistan—signed the agreement in September 2014.

As the US began withdrawing troops from Afghanistan, Obama dramatically reduced the number of CIA drone strikes in Pakistan. They declined sharply from 122 in 2010 to 70 in 2011, 48 in 2012, and 26 in 2013. By the end of his administration, in 2016 there were only three strikes. Fewer American service members in Afghanistan meant that over time, the CIA launched fewer "force protection" strikes into Pakistan's tribal regions. The drone program had also killed many of the leaders and middle managers of al-Qaeda in Pakistan's tribal regions; there were fewer al-Qaeda targets left. In addition, US-Pakistani relations were at an all-time low after the bin Laden raid, and in 2013, Pakistan's parliament passed a resolution forbidding further strikes.

As the 2012 presidential election heated up the Republican contender, Senator Mitt Romney, charged that "internationally, President Obama has

adopted an appeasement strategy." Obama countered: "Ask Osama bin Laden and the 22 out of 30 top al-Qaeda leaders who've been taken off the field whether I engage in appeasement."

Buoyed by the successes against the core al-Qaeda group and believing that the Iraqi civil war had largely fizzled out, Obama went through with a campaign pledge he believed he needed to make good on: Get out of Iraq. The architecture for the withdrawal was already in place: the Bush administration had negotiated a Status of Forces Agreement with the Iraqis that would pull all US troops out by December 31, 2011.

General Jim Mattis, the CENTCOM commander, oversaw all US military operations in the Middle East. Mattis had commanded the US Marine charge on Baghdad in 2003 and the battle of Fallujah a year later. Backed by Secretary of Defense Gates, Mattis felt strongly that the United States should leave a residual force of 18,000 troops in Iraq.

A party led by Ayad Allawi, a secular Shia, had won the 2010 parliamentary elections in Iraq, but Vice President Biden had pushed to reappoint Nouri al-Maliki, the former prime minister, who would prove to be a disastrous choice. Mattis was rightly worried that Prime Minister Maliki was laying the groundwork for a renewed civil war by purging Sunnis from all government posts. Mattis believed that a total US withdrawal from Iraq would likely snatch defeat from the jaws of victory, leaving a vacuum that would be filled by Sunni terrorist groups and Iran, which wanted to be the dominant influence in its neighbor Iraq.

Mattis tried to argue this case with Biden, who was the lead Obama administration official dealing with Iraq, but found that the vice president's mind was made up: He wanted the troops out of Iraq as fast as possible, and he seemed indifferent to considering any downsides to withdrawing. Shortly after the bin Laden raid, CIA Director Leon Panetta replaced Gates as secretary of defense. Panetta also pushed the Obama White House to keep a US troop presence in Iraq to prevent the return of sectarian violence. So too did Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Like Gates and Mattis, Panetta and Clinton were not successful in making this case.

The Obama administration could have negotiated more forcefully for a new status of forces agreement with the Iraqi government that would have kept additional US troops in Iraq. Obama had long been open to the idea of leaving a residual counterterrorism force in Iraq but he didn't want to invest much political capital in pushing for this and offered only 3,500 US troops

to remain in the country. Those troops would also have to have immunity from any prosecutions in Iraqi courts, a measure that would have to be approved by the Iraqi parliament. This was a poison pill: Iraqi parliamentarians—many in the pocket of Iran—were never going to vote for such a measure.

The removal of US forces from Iraq was also quite popular among both Iraqis and Americans. In October 2011 Obama and Maliki agreed that all US forces would leave Iraq by the end of the year. As the last US troops withdrew from Iraq, Biden visited Baghdad to take part in the withdrawal ceremonies. Biden called Obama from Iraq to thank him "for giving me the chance to end this goddamn war." But the mere absence of American troops didn't magically produce the end of war; a common illusion shared by both the left of the Democratic Party and the isolationist wing of the Republican Party.

The day after the US withdrew all its troops Maliki tried to arrest his vice president, the highest-ranking Sunni in the Iraqi government—an indicator of what was to come. As General Mattis had feared, the Iraqi civil war reignited as Maliki turned Iraq into a Shia authoritarian state, imprisoning many Sunnis. Seeking protection from the Shia-dominated government, and without the US support for the Sunni tribal Awakening movement, many Sunnis turned to Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The Americans had assumed that Al-Qaeda in Iraq had by now been defeated, but some of its cadre had simply melted away into the Iraqi deserts and the Sunni-majority cities of western Iraq. The group had a new leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who took over in May 2010 and would prove to be quite effective. As his name indicated, Baghdadi was not a foreigner as other leaders of Al-Qaeda in Iraq had been. Baghdadi claimed direct descent from the Prophet Muhammad; he held a doctorate in Islamic studies and had spent nearly a year in Camp Bucca, an American prison in Iraq, which became something of a jihadist university. This résumé gave Baghdadi formidable credentials among the jihadists.

On July 21, 2012, Baghdadi announced his "Breaking the Walls" campaign, a yearlong effort to release his group's prisoners. Al-Qaeda in Iraq conducted assaults on eight Iraqi prisons, releasing thousands of their prisoners, including senior members of the group. Al-Qaeda in Iraq was back in business.

The Arab Spring revolts, which had initially seemed so full of promise, in fact presented an opportunity for jihadist groups. The American intelligence community (as well as commentators such as Fareed Zakaria and this author) assessed that the protests across the Middle East that had begun largely peacefully would undermine al-Qaeda, undercutting its claims that change could only come to the Muslim world through bin Laden's ideology of violent anti-Americanism. In fact, the Arab Spring would produce leadership vacuums and chaos that Islamist militants deftly exploited. The Arab Spring would soon turn into an Arab Winter.

In Libya, the protests of the Arab Spring sparked a civil war. The Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi called the protesters "rats" and threatened to annihilate them. The British and the French proposed a "no-fly zone" to protect Libyan civilians. Since the Gadhafi regime had no air force to speak of, this was not particularly helpful. Obama called the Anglo-French proposal a "turd sandwich."

What was needed was airpower to neutralize Gadhafi's land-based army of tanks and paramilitary forces that were poised to wipe out the rebels. The Obama administration helped steer a UN resolution to take military action against Gadhafi's forces, which resulted in a US-led NATO air campaign in Libya. Gadhafi was eventually killed by rebels, but in the vacuum of authority that followed his death there was a civil war, which drew in jihadist groups that eventually included ISIS.

President Obama later said that not thinking through what happened the "day after" the fall of Gadhafi was his greatest mistake. This was an echo of President Bush's failure to think through what would happen after Saddam Hussein was toppled in Iraq in 2003. This also helped explain why, in the coming years, Obama would give only tepid and ineffectual support to the Syrian opposition forces fighting the Assad regime, whom he described as mostly "farmers or dentists" who had scant chance of toppling Assad. In the light of his Libya experience, in Syria, Obama seemed to be following Hobbes's advice in *Leviathan*: the only thing worse than a dictator is civil war and anarchy.

Even more than a decade after 9/11, the Libyan civil war demonstrated the continuing potency of terrorism as a political issue in the United States. One of the jihadist groups that sprang up during the Libyan conflict was Ansar al-Sharia, "Supporters of Islamic Law," who were aligned with al-

Qaeda. On September 11, 2012, the eleventh anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, militants in Benghazi, Libya's second-largest city, besieged a US State Department facility and a nearby CIA annex. They burned the State Department facility to the ground and then fired mortars at the CIA annex, killing four Americans, including the US ambassador, Christopher Stevens.

The attack in Benghazi came at a time when an incendiary video produced in the US was circulating on YouTube, *Innocence of Muslims*, portraying the Prophet Muhammad as a religious fraud and pedophile. Protests erupted outside the US embassies in Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, and Yemen, in which more than a dozen people were killed.

Obama's ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, drew the short straw of having to go on all five of the Sunday morning TV talk shows to explain what was then known about the Benghazi attacks. Rice's talking points, which had been "cleared" by the US intelligence community, pointed to the *Innocence of Muslims* video and the violence it had caused at the US embassy in Cairo as the proximate cause of the American deaths in Libya. While highlighting the effects of the video, Rice was also careful to say that the investigation was still ongoing.

Rice's remarks caused a political meltdown. The Republican theory of the case seemed to be that leading Democrats were covering up the involvement of terrorists connected to al-Qaeda in the Benghazi attacks during the run-up to the 2012 US presidential election because this didn't align with President Obama's assertions that al-Qaeda was now close to strategic defeat.

In fact, US intelligence officials advocated eliminating from the talking points used by Rice references to the suspected involvement of Ansar al-Sharia in the Benghazi attack because they didn't want to put the ongoing investigation at risk.

Regardless, the Benghazi attacks were quite politically damaging to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who was ultimately responsible for the safety of all US diplomatic outposts. Over the course of the next four years, there were several Republican-led congressional investigations into Benghazi. (In contrast, it took the 9/11 Commission only two years to issue its authoritative final report.)

The multiple Benghazi investigations ultimately didn't lead to much of anything: There was no cover-up about what happened in Benghazi, just the typical fog of war. Rice's appearances on the Sunday talk shows took place

only five days after the attacks and before further investigations found that heavily armed members of Ansar al-Sharia had conducted an "opportunistic" assault on the US facilities in Benghazi.

That didn't stop Republican presidential candidate Senator Mitt Romney from trying to make hay about Benghazi in his campaign against President Obama in the fall of 2012. In a presidential debate Romney claimed that Obama didn't call the Benghazi attacks a "terrorist attack" until two weeks after they happened. Obama smiled slightly when Romney said this, suggesting he "get the transcript." The debate moderator, CNN's Candy Crowley, pointed out that Obama had publicly called the Benghazi attacks an "act of terror" the day after they had happened.

The Benghazi investigations did, however, uncover some quite damaging information about Clinton: she was using a private, unsecure email server at her home in New York over which she had conducted government business. The discovery of her private email server would do significant damage to Clinton's presidential campaign against Donald Trump in 2016.

On May 23, 2013, Obama delivered the most comprehensive speech he had ever given about terrorism. He spoke at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, a parklike campus on the banks of the Anacostia River that houses large nineteenth-century redbrick buildings that are the living quarters of some of America's leading generals. It was an appropriate setting for Obama to send an unequivocal message: The era of the global war on terror was over. Obama declared: "We must define our effort not as a boundless 'global war on terror,' but rather as a series of persistent, targeted efforts to dismantle specific networks of violent extremists that threaten America." Obama said that the United States would dismantle those networks through partnerships with countries such as Pakistan, Somalia, and Yemen, but he also reserved the right to take unilateral US action against suspected terrorists with drones. Obama promised to tighten up the rules around the use of drone strikes, including a standard of near certainty that civilians would not be killed in any of them.

It was a dozen years after 9/11. All US troops had left Iraq. Most American service members were leaving Afghanistan. Declaring the end of

the seemingly endless global war on terror seemed perfectly reasonable. Yet events have a way of unexpectedly intervening in human affairs—and that would certainly prove to be the case with ISIS.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

OBAMA'S WAR AGAINST ISIS

You are the first class to graduate since 9/11 who may not be sent into combat in Iraq or Afghanistan.

—PRESIDENT OBAMA SPEAKING TO WEST POINT'S GRADUATING CLASS, MAY 28, 2014

A Delta Force team—the Army's equivalent of SEAL Team Six—took off from Jordan early in the morning of July 3, 2014, flying on the same type of stealth helicopters that were used in the bin Laden raid. Intelligence and satellite imagery indicated that a compound near Raqqa, the ISIS "capital" in Syria, was where several Western hostages were being held by the terrorist group, including two American freelance journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff.

The Delta operators landed at the compound and killed around a dozen militants. The mission was going exactly as planned, but back in the Situation Room at the White House, Obama's war cabinet soon heard the voice of a soldier on the ground saying, "Dry hole. It's a dry hole." The hostages were gone, recently moved by ISIS.

The fate of these American hostages would greatly influence the subsequent actions of President Obama. Six months earlier, he had downplayed the threat from ISIS, telling *New Yorker* editor David Remnick in January that the group was merely a "jayvee" (junior varsity) team. Obama and Biden believed that ending the lengthy, costly, and unpopular Iraq War was an important accomplishment, and they weren't about to send US troops back to Iraq to combat what they considered to be the B team. Even if they had wanted to, the Iraqi government was still reluctant to accept any kind of US military help.

In the spring of 2014, as ISIS was gaining strength, Obama had told members of his national security team that when it came to foreign policy, a key lesson of past presidencies was, "Don't do stupid shit." For Obama the lessons of Vietnam and the invasion of Iraq were obvious: It was a lot easier to get into a war than to get out of one. "Don't do stupid shit" became something of an Obama mantra.

Obama had not intervened in Syria after Assad had launched one of the worst chemical weapons attacks in decades on August 21, 2013, killing more than 1,400 people, in the assessment of US officials. Almost exactly twelve months before that Obama had famously said that the use of chemical weapons against Syrian civilians was a "red line" and that there would be serious consequences for the Assad regime if it deployed chemical weapons. But when Assad had crossed that red line, Obama hadn't retaliated. With this history in the background, it seemed unlikely that Obama would act militarily against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

ISIS had evolved out of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which deftly used the 2011 Syrian civil war to stage a comeback from the battlefield defeats it had suffered in recent years at the hands of the US military and the Awakening movement in Iraq. During the Arab Spring—as had happened in Libya—peaceful protests against Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad were brutally put down by the regime, sparking a civil war. In August 2011, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, a Syrian member of Al-Qaeda in Iraq, crossed from Iraq into Syria to fight the Assad regime. Jolani's new group, Jabhat al-Nusra, or "the Victory Front," would become one of the most effective groups fighting Assad, at times bucking directives from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Now that his organization straddled Iraq and Syria, in April 2013 Baghdadi renamed it the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), asserting

that he was in charge of al-Nusra. Al-Qaeda's relatively new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was having none of it, declaring that ISIS was not a branch of the al-Qaeda group, while Jolani aligned al-Nusra with Zawahiri. It was the first time that al-Qaeda had publicly rejected one of its affiliates.

ISIS, however, did not need al-Qaeda's support to fuel its rapid expansion. In early January 2014, ISIS seized the city of Fallujah, where US Marines had fought intense battles a decade earlier. After the fall of Fallujah, US Secretary of State John Kerry stated, "We're not contemplating putting boots on the ground." The same month, ISIS also consolidated control over the city of Raqqa in Syria.

ISIS's battlefield successes were in part the result of former Ba'athist officers who had served under Saddam Hussein and were now allying themselves with the Sunni zealots in the group. These former Ba'athists made up about a third of ISIS's leadership and knew how to conduct an effective military campaign. In early June ISIS seized Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq. The Iraqi military, in which the US had invested $25 billion over the past decade, gave up almost without a fight against a lightly armed guerrilla force.

A month later, on the first Friday in Ramadan, ISIS's leader, Baghdadi—dressed all in black, mimicking the dress of the Abbasid caliphs who had ruled the Arab world a dozen centuries earlier—ascended the pulpit of Mosul's historic al-Nuri Mosque, from which he declared that he was the caliph. This was a breathtakingly hubristic claim; the last time there was a caliphate was during the Ottoman Empire, which collapsed in the wake of World War I. The caliph was also the spiritual leader of all Muslims around the world. When Baghdadi made his fantastical claim, he was soon to take one of his American hostages, aid worker Kayla Mueller, and keep her captive while raping her repeatedly.

Days before Baghdadi had anointed himself caliph, ISIS had bulldozed the berms in the desert that demarcated the border between Iraq and Syria, physically destroying the borders drawn up by the British and French a century earlier in what is known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. The group videotaped the bulldozing and released it on the internet; ISIS was physically reshaping the borders of the Arab world.

The US intelligence community had simultaneously overestimated the capabilities of the Iraqi military, which largely disintegrated when confronted by ISIS, and underestimated the terrorist group's abilities to

seize huge swaths of territory. These intelligence blind spots existed, in part, because the American presence in Iraq at this point was limited to the US embassy.

ISIS would come to make Al-Qaeda in Iraq look almost moderate: the terrorist army seized territory the size of the United Kingdom and controlled a population larger than New York City's. ISIS used the most abhorrent tactics, including ethnic cleansing, public crucifixions, and videotaped beheadings. ISIS also trained a cadre of suicide bombers who brought large-scale terrorist attacks to the streets of Brussels, Istanbul, and Paris, while the group also inspired significant attacks in the United States, in California and Florida.

After Mosul fell to ISIS in early June 2014, Obama announced he was sending three hundred special operations soldiers to help train Iraqi forces. But the president was careful to note that they would not have a combat role. The Iraqi government was facing down what looked like an existential threat, so seeking any approval from the Iraqi parliament for immunity from prosecution of these US troops in Iraqi courts was not an issue, as it had been during 2011. The Iraqi government issued a simple diplomatic note that American troops would be immune from Iraqi court proceedings.

On June 12, ISIS massacred—on camera—1,700 Iraqi military personnel, many of them Shia. The massacre undercut what remained of the morale of the Iraqi Army. ISIS seemed unstoppable and was now marching toward Baghdad. The following day, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the spiritual leader of Iraq's Shias, called for volunteers to defend Baghdad. One hundred thousand Shia men answered the ayatollah's call, forming militias to defend the capital, which ISIS was never able to capture. Some of these militias were aligned with Iran. The United States and Iran were now effectively on the same side of the war against ISIS.

In mid-June, ISIS seized Iraq's major oil refineries in Baiji in central Iraq, which gave the group access to considerable resources. The group was also now the overlord of some ten million subjects whom they could tax and extort at will, the key source of funding for ISIS.

In early August, ISIS attacked the Yazidis, an Iraqi ethnic group that practiced an ancient pre-Islamic religion considered idolatrous by the zealots in ISIS. Tens of thousands of Yazidis fled ISIS's terrorist army to hide in the rugged terrain and high ground of Mount Sinjar, near the Syrian border. ISIS was threatening to wipe out the Yazidis, an act of genocide.

Obama felt he needed to act. American jets bombed ISIS columns approaching Mount Sinjar, while US cargo planes dropped food and water supplies to the forty thousand desperate Yazidis sheltering there.

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Along with the videos that ISIS released showing its terrible crimes, such as burning alive one of its prisoners, the group also produced videos that portrayed the "Islamic State" in Iraq and Syria as a promised land where Muslims from around the world could come to live the perfect Islamic life. Often filmed in the "golden hour" before sunset, these videos showed ISIS fighters passing out sweets to laughing children on the streets and kids playing at an amusement park. The message was that in ISIS-stan you could have a happy, normal family life while also fighting the enemies of Islam.

This propaganda campaign worked: ISIS recruited the largest number of Islamist "foreign fighters" in modern history. More than 40,000 zealots from around the Muslim world flocked to be part of the supposedly perfect Islamic State and its self-declared "caliphate." Around 6,000 of them traveled from Western countries to join ISIS. More than 500 of the militants were Western women, some of whom were looking to marry an ISIS fighter.

These Western recruits were some of the most radical of the ISIS terrorists. In mid-August, one of those terrorists known as "Jihadi John"—who had been born in Kuwait and had grown up in London—demanded in a video that the US airstrikes against ISIS stop. In the same video ISIS beheaded American journalist James Foley.

In September, the terrorist group also murdered Steven Sotloff. The televised beheadings of the two Americans were distributed globally by ISIS on social media. The murders of the Americans were the most widely followed news story of the past five years in the United States, and they galvanized the Obama administration to act. Obama appointed retired Marine General John Allen to head an anti-ISIS coalition that was eventually joined by more than eighty countries, including some Arab countries. This was the kind of international coalition that had gathered to prosecute the Afghan War after the 9/11 attacks, or that President George H. W. Bush had assembled to expel the Iraqi military from Kuwait following its invasion in 1990.

The anti-ISIS coalition planned a three-part campaign: First, US bombers, aided by other allied air forces such as the British, French, and Jordanians, would soften up ISIS targets. Meanwhile, American military advisors would train Iraqi units for the second phase: to seize back ISIS-held territory, most importantly Mosul. In the third phase, US-supported forces would attack ISIS strongholds in Syria.

Obama demanded that Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki—whose anti-Sunni policies had helped to fuel the rise of ISIS—step down. Maliki resisted at first, but the Iranians wanted him gone as well because ISIS also threatened their interests. Maliki was replaced as prime minister by Haider al-Abadi, who was seen as a less sectarian leader.

By the summer of 2015, ISIS had scored victory after victory across Iraq. And on November 13, ISIS-trained terrorists massacred 130 people in Paris in multiple locations across the city, including at the Bataclan music hall, where concertgoers were listening to the California band Eagles of Death Metal. Three weeks later, in San Bernardino, California, a husband and wife inspired by ISIS—Syed Rizwan Farook, a US citizen, and Tashfeen Malik, a permanent resident—killed fourteen people attending an office holiday party.

Polling found that Americans were now more fearful about terrorism than at any time since the attacks on 9/11. Even Obama loyalists such as his national security advisor, Susan Rice, found that Obama's hyper-rational assessment of the true scale of the ISIS threat led him to downplay the real public fear that such attacks caused.

Grudgingly, Obama began making statements that seemed to take the public's fears about ISIS into account. Obama addressed the nation after the San Bernardino attacks, acknowledging that "the terrorist threat has evolved into a new phase. As we've become better at preventing complex, multifaceted attacks like 9/11, terrorists turned to less complicated acts of violence like the mass shootings that are all too common in our society."

The US-led campaign against ISIS got off to a slow start, according to Obama's secretary of defense Ash Carter, who had replaced Panetta in December 2014, but the high-profile terrorist attacks in Paris and San Bernardino brought a lot more energy to US military planning. In December

2015, Obama told his team he was mandating them to "put ISIS in a box" by the end of his term, now a little more than a year away. The same month, the Pentagon brass briefed Obama on a detailed plan to retake Mosul and Raqqa. The year-and-a-half delay in drawing up a serious campaign plan was caused in part by scant intelligence about ISIS, while a US effort to train anti-ISIS Syrian fighters had yielded a grand total of only sixty fighters by July 2015.

Michael Vickers, a top Pentagon official in the Obama administration, thought that the Obama team was initially quite hesitant to authorize significant airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. Obama's war cabinet held lengthy discussions about whether to authorize the use in Syria of Apache helicopters, which were known for their firepower and maneuverability. After two years of debate, the helicopters were eventually authorized for use—but, always conscious of trying to avoid getting sucked into a wider war, the Obama war cabinet only allowed three Apaches at a time to operate in Syria.

Further complicating matters, the most promising allies for the US in the fight against ISIS in Syria were Syrian Kurdish forces. Neighboring Turkey, a major NATO ally, was deeply suspicious of any American support for the Kurds; the Turks had long fought against Kurdish groups seeking greater autonomy from Turkey. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, an Islamist with authoritarian tendencies, was often a prickly partner for the United States. During the first two years of the ISIS "caliphate," the Turks allowed tens of thousands of foreign fighters to transit through Turkey on their way to join ISIS in neighboring Syria.

Meanwhile, through 2015, ISIS had seized Palmyra in Syria, the city of Ramadi in Iraq, and had even expanded to Libya, taking control of the coastal city of Sirte. ISIS now controlled a third of Syria and 40 percent of Iraq. ISIS increasingly took on the trappings of a state, maintaining a police force and even issuing its own license plates, practicing an odd combination of brutal Nazi-like tactics and the delivery of basic services.

The actions of ISIS that were widely seen as the most repellent—throwing homosexuals to their deaths from tall buildings, beheading men accused of "sorcery," and enslaving Yazidi women—were part of its appeal to the group's new recruits. ISIS videotaped all its crimes and widely circulated them on social media with the implicit claim that it was enforcing "real" Sharia law of seventh-century Islam. As a result, the group attracted

to its distinctive black banners a dozen or so affiliated terrorist organizations from around the Muslim world. ISIS was now the baddest, meanest jihadist organization on the global stage. Al-Qaeda seemed anemic by comparison.

Control of vast swaths of territory meant that ISIS's claim to be the "Islamic State" had some basis in fact, but it also posed a strategic problem for the group. Back when the organization had been Al-Qaeda in Iraq, it had functioned largely as an insurgent-terrorist organization that operated in the shadows. Now ISIS had to defend itself like a conventional army that controlled cities and towns across Iraq and Syria. This made ISIS fighters vulnerable to American airstrikes and to Iraqi and Syrian forces on the ground.

A key ally in the US campaign against ISIS was Iraqi Lieutenant General Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi. A tall, thin chain-smoker, Saadi was critical to the campaign that defeated the terrorist army. The conventional Iraqi Army had mostly fled from the ISIS militants who had seized a third of Iraq in 2014, while it was Saadi's "Golden Division" of Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service that subsequently did the bulk of the fighting to defeat ISIS. The Counter Terrorism Service had no tolerance for sectarianism, which had been the bane of the Iraqi Army and police, and was regarded by ordinary Iraqis as a truly Iraqi nationalist force.

American logistical and intelligence support and US airpower accounted for 50 percent of the battlefield successes against ISIS, according to Saadi, while another important factor was the professional training of the Counter Terrorism Service by US Special Forces that enabled it to become the premier component of the Iraqi military.

Saadi led the Counter Terrorism Service's Golden Division in key battles of the war against ISIS, liberating Iraqi cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi, and Tikrit through 2015 and 2016.

The final big battle of the anti-ISIS war in Iraq was the fight for Mosul. The medieval-era section in western Mosul was a maze of narrow streets and stone buildings, which were well-suited to be ISIS strongholds. ISIS fighters had dug a system of underground tunnels throughout Mosul, giving them protection from airstrikes and places where they could store supplies and weapons. ISIS also deployed hundreds of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices—cars and trucks driven by suicide bombers—while ISIS

fighters launched hobby-shop drones that dropped bombs, marking the first systematic use of armed drones by a terrorist group.

As US-backed Iraqi forces took control of Mosul from ISIS, CENTCOM commander General Joseph Votel was already planning the seizure of the core of the terrorist group's "caliphate," the Syrian city of Raqqa, ISIS's financial and leadership hub, where it planned its terrorist operations in the West.

By the end of the first three years of the war against ISIS, the US had conducted an enormous number of airstrikes on targets in Iraq and Syria, nearly 25,000. In the final months of the Obama administration, the US Air Force also launched roughly five hundred strikes against ISIS's targets in Sirte, Libya, killing an estimated 1,000 fighters and liberating the city.

In August 2016, Lieutenant General Sean MacFarland, the US ground commander for the fight against ISIS, said the US-led coalition had killed an estimated 45,000 ISIS fighters. With the war against ISIS now in full gear and the terrorist army losing significant territory in Iraq, Obama began contemplating withdrawing all US troops from Afghanistan, leaving only a small force of 1,000 service members focused on the protection of the US embassy. But as Obama and his war cabinet discussed a possible Afghan withdrawal, they were always cognizant of the disaster that had unfolded in Iraq after they had pulled all US troops out of the country at the end of 2011 and ISIS had seized much of the country. No one wanted to see the Taliban win that kind of victory in Afghanistan.

As the Obama war cabinet deliberated about what to do in Afghanistan, the Taliban delivered a reminder of their increasing ability to strike at will in Kabul. On August 24, 2016, Taliban gunmen stormed the campus of the American University of Afghanistan, which produced one of the highest percentages of Fulbright scholars in the world. A prominent symbol of the US presence in Afghanistan, the university was educating women, which had made it an appealing target for the Taliban.

Breshna Musazai was studying law at the university, and her future seemed bright. As the Taliban gunmen roamed the campus, they killed anyone who moved. One of them shot Breshna in the leg. She pretended to be dead, and a gunman shot her again to finish her off. The bullet struck

Breshna's foot. It felt like her foot had exploded. For the next six hours, as the terrorists rampaged on the campus, Breshna lay motionless in a hallway, bleeding out. She closed her eyes and prepared for death.

The Taliban terrorists killed fifteen students and staff. Breshna survived the assault but was seriously wounded and eventually was flown to Dallas, where doctors performed surgery on her wounded leg, saving it. After six months of medical treatment in Texas, Breshna decided to return to Afghanistan; using a wheelchair, she continued her law studies at the university, graduating in 2018. At her graduation ceremony, the audience gave Breshna a standing ovation while her father wept tears of joy.

Back in Washington, DC, at the final meeting on the Afghan War, Obama ended the debate about pulling out all US troops from Afghanistan, saying, "I'm leaving the decision to my successor," who he strongly presumed would be his former secretary of state, Hillary Clinton. Obama didn't want to box Clinton in by ordering a full US withdrawal from Afghanistan, which could set her up to make the politically costly decision to send American troops back into Afghanistan if the situation there worsened.

This was an echo of President George W. Bush's decision not to order a surge of US troops into Afghanistan toward the end of his second term, when the Taliban were resurging. Bush had left any kind of surge decision to the incoming president, so that he wouldn't be boxed in. When he left office, Obama ordered a force of 9,800 troops to remain in Afghanistan. This wasn't the decision Obama had wanted to make, but he recognized that the only thing worse than maintaining a US military presence in Afghanistan was increasing the risks of a terrorist attack in the United States and abandoning Afghanistan to a possible Taliban takeover.

The war on terror was now in its fifteenth year.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TRUMP'S WAR ON TERRORISM

I know more about ISIS than the generals do, believe me.

—DONALD TRUMP, CAMPAIGNING IN IOWA IN 2015

During his first run for the presidency, Donald Trump claimed that he had seen thousands of Muslims cheering the 9/11 attacks from their rooftops in New Jersey. There was no evidence for this, but it was emblematic of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign, which stoked the fears that many Americans still had about terrorism and the suspicions that some of them harbored about Islam. A decade after 9/11, one in five Americans had unfavorable views about Muslims.

Trump's emergence on the national political stage was propelled by two lies that he helped spread: that President Obama wasn't an American—which meant he couldn't legitimately serve as president—and that he was secretly a Muslim. Around two-thirds of Trump supporters believed Obama was a Muslim and wasn't born in the United States.

The fear of Muslims that Trump played on during his campaign was amplified by the rise of ISIS and mass casualty attacks carried out or

inspired by the group, such as those in Paris and San Bernardino. Days after the San Bernardino attack, on December 7, 2015, Trump called for a "total and complete shutdown" of Muslims traveling to the States. Polls in early 2016 found that half of all Americans supported banning Muslims from traveling to the United States.

Worries about terrorism continued to fuel the Trump campaign. On June 12, 2016, Omar Mateen—who had been born in Queens, New York—murdered patrons at Pulse, a nightclub frequented by Orlando's gay community. Inspired by ISIS, Mateen killed forty-nine people. It was the most lethal terrorist attack on American soil since 9/11. Within a day of the massacre at the Pulse nightclub, Trump gave a speech renewing his call for a Muslim travel ban, saying, "I will suspend immigration from areas of the world where there is a proven history of terrorism against the United States."

Many Americans felt threatened by the terrorist attacks in states such as California and Florida, which could occur seemingly anywhere without warning; 9/11 remained a scar on the national psyche. For voters in the 2016 presidential election, terrorism was one of the top four issues they cared about, while one in five said it was their top priority. The voters who were most worried about terrorism voted for Trump over Clinton by the large margin of 17 percent. Many voters clearly believed in what Trump had claimed was his "secret plan" to defeat ISIS. The "war on terror" not only continued to dominate US foreign policy and national security efforts at home, it also continued to define the fortunes of America's top politicians.

President Trump followed through on his campaign promise to ban Muslim immigrants. On January 27, 2017, a week into his first term, Trump signed an executive order that indefinitely barred the entry of any Syrian refugees into the United States. The order also suspended travel for three months from seven Muslim-majority countries: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.

The rollout of the ban was a shambles; on the afternoon of Friday, January 27, chaotic scenes unfolded at American airports and across the globe. Meanwhile, Trump claimed, "It's not a Muslim ban, but we were

totally prepared. It's working out very nicely. You see it at the airports, you see it all over."

As a counterterrorism measure, the travel ban didn't make sense. On February 28, 2017, during a speech to Congress, President Trump claimed that "the vast majority of individuals convicted of terrorism and terrorism-related offenses since 9/11 came here from outside of our country." This was false. The actual problem was no longer foreign-born terrorists; now it was homegrown terrorists—US citizens and legal residents who were becoming radicalized by consuming jihadist propaganda online.

The travel ban was a solution to a problem that didn't exist. No lethal terrorist attack in the United States had been conducted by a citizen of one of the seven travel ban countries. When the United States suffered its only deadly attack since 9/11 directed by a foreign terrorist organization, it was carried out by a Saudi military officer—who was from a country not subject to the travel ban. The Saudi officer killed three American sailors at the US Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida, on December 6, 2019.

One of the countries that was subject to the travel ban was Iraq, even though Iraqi soldiers were leading the fight against ISIS. The inclusion of Iraqis on the travel ban list angered those in the administration who had served in Iraq. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis met with Trump in the Oval Office, where he made the case that the Iraqis were key allies in the battle against ISIS. "Okay," Trump said, "if this is what we need to win I'll take them off."

On September 24, 2017, Trump issued an updated version of the travel ban, which covered the citizens of Chad, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen. The inclusion of non-Muslim-majority countries helped the Trump administration strengthen the legal defense of the travel ban in a case that was heading to the Supreme Court.

The actual jihadist terrorist threat to the United States was underlined on October 31, when Sayfullo Saipov rammed a vehicle into a crowd of pedestrians in lower Manhattan, killing eight people. Saipov was a legal US resident who had emigrated from a non–travel ban country, Uzbekistan, and had become radicalized during the years he had lived in the United States, downloading thousands of ISIS images on his cell phone. ISIS had been

waging a successful social media campaign to incite homegrown attacks in the West, and travel bans weren't going to block the internet.

On June 26, 2018, the Supreme Court upheld the third version of the travel ban. Adding some non-Muslim countries to the travel ban list had made it easier for the court to find that the ban wasn't directed at the adherents of a particular religion, freedom of religion being a bedrock American constitutional principle.

On January 24, 2017, four days after Obama had left office and Trump had assumed the presidency, the Iraqi government announced that East Mosul was "fully liberated," though a tough fight was still ahead in western Mosul, where ISIS was deeply dug in.

In its battle against ISIS, the Obama administration had deployed a relatively small force of 5,000 US service members to Iraq and provided substantial airpower to support Iraqi fighters on the ground. Meanwhile, in Syria, the Obama team deployed 500 American troops. This was essentially the same strategy that the Trump administration would use in its war against ISIS.

On the campaign trail Trump said that "within thirty days" of taking office he would task the Pentagon with producing a new plan to defeat ISIS. Trump said the goal was not to "defeat" ISIS as it was under Obama, but to "annihilate" it. Despite the Trumpian bluster, the new Trump plan was largely the Obama plan to defeat ISIS.

The Trump administration did, however, institute a significant shift in the fight against ISIS in Syria. The Obama administration was worried about "mission creep" in Syria, so it had placed a limit of only three US helicopters that could be deployed there. Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, who as a colonel had led the battle against Al-Qaeda in Iraq in Tal Afar in 2005 and was now Trump's national security advisor, removed this restriction.

In the last months of Obama's second term, his war cabinet had debated arming the Kurds in northern Syria. The Kurds would be key to taking Raqqa back from ISIS, but arming them would anger neighboring Turkey, a key NATO ally with a large Kurdish minority that was often at odds with the Turkish government. On January 17, 2017, three days before Trump was

to be inaugurated as president, Obama directed that the decision about what to do in Syria be left up to the incoming Trump administration.

Four months later, in May, Trump approved a plan to arm the Kurdish forces fighting ISIS in Syria with machine guns and mortars. Trump also lifted Obama-era restrictions on the number of American soldiers in Syria, which was capped at five hundred Special Forces trainers. During Trump's first two years in office, the number of American forces in Syria would rise to 2,000 troops.

On October 20, the US-backed Kurdish forces in Syria announced that ISIS had lost the key city of Raqqa. As Raqqa was falling, President Trump claimed that ISIS hadn't been defeated earlier because "you didn't have Trump as your president." In fact, the operations against ISIS had been planned for two years before Trump assumed the presidency, and during the Obama administration ISIS had lost significant Iraqi cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi, and Tikrit.

Lieutenant General Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, the commander of the Iraqi Special Forces unit that was the most effective fighting force against ISIS, explained, "There was no difference between the support given by Obama and Trump."

Trump could certainly take some credit for speeding the collapse of ISIS's territorial "caliphate," but ultimately both Obama and Trump used the same strategy to defeat ISIS. They deployed only a relatively small number of American soldiers on the ground in Iraq and Syria who operated "by, with, and through" local allies. In Iraq those forces were the Counter Terrorism Service, while in Syria it was the largely Kurdish fighters of the Syrian Democratic Forces, all backed by significant American air support. This also meant that when victory against ISIS eventually came, the liberators were not Americans in tanks and Humvees but Iraqi and Syrian forces.

Militias known as the "Popular Mobilization Forces," consisting primarily of Iraqi Shia, often backed by Iran, also fought ISIS in Iraq. Despite their long animus, the United States and Iran were now on the same side of the war against ISIS, even if the main goal of the Iranians in Iraq was not so much the defeat of ISIS but to increase their growing influence over the country.

The overall cost of the anti-ISIS campaign in both the Obama and Trump presidencies was $128 billion, compared to the total Pentagon and State

Department expenditures on the Afghan and Iraq wars, which were thirty times larger at around four trillion dollars. A decade and a half after 9/11, the Americans had finally alighted on the most politically sustainable and affordable approach to wage war against jihadist militants overseas: using a relatively small number of US forces partnered with the right local allies.

As a result of this strategic approach, fifteen US service members died in combat during the five-year fight to liberate ISIS-held territory. Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish forces did almost all the fighting, and the dying: 26,000 members of the Iraqi military died, as did 11,000 Kurdish fighters. Put another way, around 2,000 times more Iraqi and Kurdish forces died on the battlefield than the American service members who were supporting them.

The costs to Iraq's civilian population were high during the anti-ISIS war. For instance, the operation to take back Mosul relied heavily on US airpower, leaving much of the city destroyed. Of Mosul's 1.4 million inhabitants, almost a million fled the city, and an estimated 9,000 Iraqi civilians were killed in the nine-month battle.

ISIS had once attracted an estimated 40,000 militants from around the world who wanted to be part of its "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq. The Obama and Trump campaigns against ISIS effectively ended the flow of foreign militants to the group. Yet, the territorial defeat of ISIS in Iraq and Syria did not end the group's ideological appeal. On April 21, 2019, a Sri Lankan jihadist group inspired by ISIS carried out suicide bombings at churches and hotels frequented by foreigners, killing at least 250 people.

On December 14, 2018, Trump spoke with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a phone call. Erdoğan reminded Trump that he had said that the US troops were in Syria only to defeat ISIS. Now that that had happened, wasn't it time for them to depart? Erdoğan also claimed that Turkey could handle any remaining ISIS remnants. Trump surprised Erdoğan and his own national security advisor, John Bolton, when he promised to withdraw all American troops from Syria. Trump told Erdoğan, "It's all yours. We are done."

Bolton, Mattis, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met Trump at the White House to try to persuade him not to pull out all the US troops in Syria, which risked the return of ISIS.

CENTCOM commander General Votel saw no strategic rationale for the withdrawal. Now Votel had the difficult job of informing the largely Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces, who were doing the bulk of the fighting on the ground against ISIS, that the US was pulling out. On a secure videoconference call Votel talked to their commander, General Mazloum Kobani Abdi, telling him: “We’re leaving now.”

On December 19, Trump tweeted, “We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being there during the Trump Presidency.”

The following day at 7:30 a.m., Mattis decided to go see the president. Mattis was angry about abandoning the US-allied Kurdish forces, who would likely face the wrath of the Turkish Army. He believed he needed to try one more time to persuade the president to reverse his decision. At 3:00 p.m., Mattis met with Trump in the Oval Office. Trump wouldn’t change his mind, so Mattis pulled out a two-page resignation letter and said he would stay on for two and a half months to make sure that there was a smooth transition to his successor. Livid at the laudatory coverage of Mattis’s resignation on principle, within days Trump forced Mattis out of his job.

There were few people Trump treated like a peer: one was General Jack Keane, a burly, blunt officer who grew up working-class in Manhattan. Keane was a former vice chief of staff of the Army and a frequent guest on Fox News. In the fall of 2006 he had played an important role in George W. Bush’s decision to adopt counterinsurgency tactics in Iraq and to appoint General Petraeus as the new commander there. Hillary Clinton also relied on Keane for military advice, while Keane acted as something of a shadow national security advisor to Trump. Even deep in retirement Keane was one of the most influential generals of the post-9/11 era. Trump offered him the position of secretary of defense twice—once early in his first term and again after Mattis resigned. Both times Keane had turned down the offer. His wife of more than fifty years had recently died after a long struggle with Parkinson’s disease. Having incurred large expenses for his wife’s care, Keane didn’t want to go back into government service.

Keane visited Trump at the White House on February 12, 2019. Keane thought that a total US pullout from Syria was a big mistake. Using a map of Syria in the Oval Office, he showed Trump where the Iranian presence in the country was and pointed out where the country’s oil fields were located, warning the president that if the US pulled out, “the Russians and the

Syrian regime will own the air space, the Iranians will own the ground, and the Iranians will take control of the oil fields."

"That's a big deal," Trump said.

Keane persuaded Trump to keep American soldiers in Syria to ensure that ISIS didn't return and to limit Iran's influence in the country.

On October 27, 2019, Delta Force launched "Operation Kayla Mueller," named after the American aid worker whom the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi had repeatedly raped and who had reportedly been killed years earlier on Baghdadi's orders. The CIA had located Baghdadi in a compound in northwestern Syria close to the Turkish border. As the operation got underway, in the White House Situation Room at 5 p.m., Vice President Mike Pence intoned a prayer to the Lord to protect America's warriors, while Trump's war cabinet bowed their heads. Unexpectedly, First Lady Melania Trump entered the Situation Room and took a seat next to the president to watch a black-and-white video feed of Operation Kayla Mueller as it unfolded.

Five thousand miles to the east and in the middle of the night in Syria, the Delta operators landed at the suspected Baghdadi compound. They unleashed their combat dog into the building, and the team followed close behind. Baghdadi escaped through a tunnel with two of his small children. Using a suicide vest, the ISIS leader blew himself up as well as his children as the American soldiers closed in.

After confirmation came through that Baghdadi was dead, to the amazement of Christopher Miller, the top counterterrorism official in the Situation Room, the First Lady took over the discussion. She advised her husband that he should make the announcement of Baghdadi's death the following morning from the White House's Diplomatic Room during the Sunday news shows. Melania Trump also told her husband, "You should talk about the dog. Everyone loves dogs." When Trump announced the news of the death of Baghdadi the next morning in the Diplomatic Room, he emphasized that "a beautiful dog, a talented dog—was injured and brought back."

With Baghdadi dead, ISIS had lost both its territorial caliphate and its caliph. While the group still had lethal affiliates such as ISIS-K, based in

Afghanistan, it was never able to recover its former status as the "Islamic State" ruling over much of Iraq and Syria, which also greatly diminished its inspirational appeal to jihadists around the world.

Two months after Baghdadi had been "taken off the battlefield," to use the Pentagon's jargon, an Iran-backed militia killed an American contractor working in Iraq. In retaliation, Trump authorized the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, who was the overseer of Iran's various affiliated Shia militias around the Middle East, stretching from Lebanon in the north to Yemen 1,500 miles to the south. Iran preferred to conduct wars and military action by proxy; rather than openly using its own military, it often worked through militias that it armed and funded in other countries. In Syria those militias helped to prop up the Assad regime, while in Yemen Iran supported Houthi rebels who had seized control of the capital, Sanaa, in 2014. Iran also controlled much of Lebanon through its proxy force there, Hezbollah. General Soleimani oversaw all these operations, while he also backed Shia militias in Iraq that had killed hundreds of American servicemen in the country.

The CIA briefed the Trump war cabinet that Soleimani was purportedly planning imminent attacks against US targets in Iraq using local militias. On January 3, 2020, shortly after Soleimani had arrived at Baghdad International Airport, the vehicle he was traveling in was destroyed by missiles launched from an American drone.

The United States braced for a substantial Iranian retaliation; Soleimani was a national hero for the militants in Iran. But when it came, Iran's retaliatory missile strike at Al-Asad Airbase in Iraq had been anticipated by the US soldiers posted there, who were well dug in. No American service members died, although 110 troops sustained nonlethal brain injuries from the shock waves of the missile strikes. It could have been a lot worse, and Trump chose not to respond and escalate the conflict further. After the attacks he tweeted, "All is well!"

Soleimani's assassination and the Iranian missile attack on the US base in Iraq would be a harbinger of a new chapter in the long-simmering conflict between the United States and Iran—a "state sponsor" of terrorism—which was a different kind of conflict than the long post-9/11 wars that the United States had fought against "non-state" terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIS, and their affiliated organizations.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE ART OF THE GIVEAWAY

> *The worst thing you can possibly do in a deal is to seem desperate to make it. That makes the other guy smell blood, and then you're dead.*
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> —DONALD TRUMP, *THE ART OF THE DEAL*, 1987

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani called President-Elect Donald Trump on December 2, 2016, to congratulate him on his victory. Trump seemed surprised by Ghani's language skills, complimenting him on his excellent English. Ghani explained that he had obtained his PhD from Columbia University and had taught at Berkeley and Johns Hopkins.

Knowing that Trump wanted to get "the hell out of Afghanistan," Ghani pitched the president-elect on why the United States had significant interests in the country, telling him that there was an estimated $1 trillion of mineral deposits in Afghanistan. Rare earths and critical minerals such as lithium are essential for electronics and the batteries of electric cars, laptops, and smartphones. Ghani explained that while the Chinese were trying to lock up all the sources of these minerals around the world, the US had a big opportunity in Afghanistan, which abounded in them. Ghani

wanted to show Trump that Afghanistan could potentially self-finance within a decade. Trump loved the idea; maybe these critical minerals could pay back the US for its investment in Afghanistan.

Trump asked his commerce secretary, Wilbur Ross, to investigate. Ross wrote the president a memo explaining that mining Afghanistan's minerals would make no commercial sense because of the war that was going on in the country.

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Trump's national security advisor, Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, had a deep interest in Afghanistan going back to when he had led an anti-corruption task force there between 2010 to 2012, when President Obama was in office. McMaster's book about the Vietnam War, *Dereliction of Duty*, made the crucial point that President Lyndon Johnson's generals had told the president only what he wanted to hear about how the war was going. McMaster did not intend to make the same mistake with Trump.

Trump was a visual learner, so McMaster showed the president photographs of Afghanistan over the course of the past half century. Some were taken before the Soviet invasion in 1979, when the country was at peace and in Kabul, women were free to wear Western-style skirts and uncover their hair. The photos showed that Afghanistan wasn't the hopeless case that so many, including Trump, believed it to be.

Trump was convinced that the United States had wasted trillions of dollars in Afghanistan, and he frequently complained about the "extravagant mansion" President Ghani owned in Dubai. There was no evidence for this, and it appeared that Trump was confusing President Ghani—as he often did—with his predecessor, President Hamid Karzai, whose brothers had made fortunes in post-9/11 Afghanistan. Another go-to fable that Trump would often regale his war cabinet with was that the US had to helicopter Afghan teachers to their schools because the country was so dangerous.

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Six months into Trump's first term, at a meeting at the Pentagon in the conference room known as "the Tank," Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis laid out for the president the large scale of American military commitments

around the world. After Mattis was finished, Trump said, "General, I disagree with all of this."

Trump was particularly incensed by the lack of progress in Afghanistan, telling the generals arrayed around him, "You are losers. Why don't we win anymore?" Trump turned to a frequent target of his rage: the US ground commander in Afghanistan, General John "Mick" Nicholson, demanding that he be removed. General Joseph Dunford, Trump's top military advisor, tried to defend Nicholson, but Trump was now on a tear, saying, "I wouldn't go to war with you people. You're a bunch of dopes and babies." General Dunford, a low-key Marine, had also served as the US commander in Afghanistan, a fact that Trump was either unaware of or didn't care about.

The meeting in the Tank was a fiasco. The only official who was happy about the way the meeting had gone was Steve Bannon, Trump's chief strategist, an "America First" isolationist who reveled in Trump's takedown of the Pentagon brass. Bannon told colleagues, "Their fucking heads were blowing up."

Bannon and McMaster had very different views about the world. Bannon described McMaster as a "fucking globalist" who wanted to keep America embroiled in its forever wars, while McMaster thought that Bannon was a fawning court jester who kept Trump "entertained" with stories about people who were supposedly out to get him. Eventually, Bannon and McMaster would almost come to physical blows about what to do in Afghanistan.

McMaster felt that having Bannon, a political strategist, sit on the National Security Council was a bad idea, since national security decisions should be decided on their merits rather than on the preferences of any one political party. McMaster persuaded Trump to drop Bannon from the NSC. Bannon wasn't happy about that, and continued to occasionally drop in on NSC meetings uninvited.

During the summer of 2017, McMaster was chairing a discussion of Afghanistan in the White House Situation Room when, much to his annoyance, Bannon showed up. Bannon started criticizing Afghanistan, saying, "It's not a real country." McMaster got very angry, put his hands on the table, leaned forward, and looked like he was getting ready to throw a punch at Bannon. Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis calmed McMaster down, saying, "H.R. Sit down. Take it easy."

Relations between Trump and McMaster were also strained. McMaster didn't travel regularly to kiss the ring at Trump's weekend homes in Florida and New Jersey. McMaster didn't really click with Trump and tended to brief him in bullet-point style, saying, "Sir, I have five points for you."

Trump took to mocking McMaster in private, puffing out his chest in imitation of the general and adopting a drill sergeant's booming voice, shouting, "I'm your national security advisor, General McMaster, sir! I'm here to give you your briefing, sir!"

McMaster had become the face of the Afghan War in the Trump White House. Secretary of Defense Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson supported "staying the course" in Afghanistan, but it was McMaster who was expending his political capital to make this case with Trump. Mattis and Tillerson stood back, content to let McMaster absorb the heat of Trump's anger over the course of the Afghan War.

At a White House meeting General Dunford said that sustaining a US troop presence in Afghanistan was like buying term life insurance: it worked as long as you kept paying. If you stopped paying, things would fall apart in Afghanistan. Trump wanted to "win" in Afghanistan. His generals were advocating for term life insurance.

The decision-making on what to do about the Afghan War was complicated by a plan touted by Erik Prince, the founder of Blackwater, a military contractor. Prince's solution was to contract out the war to retired special operations soldiers who had deployed multiple times to Afghanistan. Knowing that Trump was an avid reader of the *Wall Street Journal*, Prince published an op-ed there on May 31, 2017, laying out this plan for his "audience of one." Trump circled the op-ed and told his national security team to investigate the proposal.

Prince provided his plan to senior Trump officials. It called for more than five thousand military contractors to be embedded throughout the Afghan armed forces. But the Pentagon was not about to contract out its operations to kill Taliban fighters to contractors who were effectively mercenaries. Prince proposed putting these contractors under the control of the CIA, but the agency didn't want to "own" the Afghan War and, in any event, it still needed significant US military protection for its bases and personnel in Afghanistan. McMaster thought that the Prince plan was half-baked.

Bannon, who had earlier made the cardinal error of upstaging his boss with a cover story about his starring role as Trump's campaign manager in *Time* magazine, was forced out of the White House on Friday, August 18, 2017. His absence meant that the most forceful voice for getting out of Afghanistan wouldn't be at a key meeting the same day at Camp David.

A one-page "courses of action" paper was prepared for that meeting. It proposed three courses of action, two of which were nonstarters: a total withdrawal from Afghanistan, or having the CIA take over the war. Trump went with the third option: to make a commitment to Afghanistan and bulk up the number of troops there. It was the plan that McMaster had been pushing for.

Three days later, Trump delivered a prime-time address about his new "South Asia strategy." This strategy emphasized a long-term commitment to Afghanistan, an increased US troop presence, and a tougher stance on Pakistan, which had long harbored leaders of the Taliban. President Trump admitted in his speech, "My original instinct was to pull out. And historically, I like following my instincts." This was not a typical Trump MAGA speech but a sober assessment of why it was in US interests to maintain a presence in Afghanistan.

President Ghani was heartened. He believed that Trump's South Asia strategy was the first time that the United States had formulated a real framework to ensure that the Taliban remained a marginal force in Afghanistan while building up the elected Afghan government.

Trump also changed the military rules of engagement in Afghanistan. Under Obama, those rules were quite restrictive, while Trump allowed commanders to attack the Taliban at will. By spring 2018, there were 14,000 US troops in Afghanistan, around double the number there had been at the beginning of the Trump presidency. Trump's new Afghan strategy sparked discussions among Taliban leaders that now might be the time to start peace negotiations with the Americans.

An indication of how much many Afghans—including members of the Taliban—wanted an end to the war came in mid-June 2018. The combatants agreed to a three-day ceasefire during the Eid religious holiday. Social media was filled with remarkable images of Afghan officials hanging out with Taliban fighters enjoying ice cream. It seemed like peace had a real chance.

Around this time, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghan American diplomat who had served as US ambassador to Afghanistan in the early years after the fall of the Taliban. Pompeo told Khalilzad that President Trump wanted him to negotiate a safe exit for all US forces from Afghanistan—a promise that the president felt he had made to his voters.

Unknown to Trump, there was acute tension between Ambassador Khalilzad and President Ghani. The two men had known each other for four and a half decades, beginning when they were high school students in Afghanistan in the mid-1960s. They then both attended the American University of Beirut, and Khalilzad later received his PhD in political science from the University of Chicago, while Ghani's doctorate in anthropology was from Columbia.

They had long been frenemies—Khalilzad had harbored dreams of being the Afghan president himself—but now that Khalilzad was leading the US-Taliban negotiations, from which Ghani and his government were excluded, their relationship soured. Matin Bek, who was Ghani's chief of staff and who was often in the room with both men, compared their tense relationship to a wrestling match. Unfortunately for the Afghans who had embraced America's promise of democracy, it was a contest that would only benefit the Taliban.

There were other capable American negotiators that Trump could have chosen, such as Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who had served in Afghanistan and Pakistan with distinction. Trump's selection of Khalilzad meant that the negotiations with the Taliban had little chance of being advantageous in any way for Ghani and his government.

Khalilzad took the view that the Taliban and Ghani were both at fault for not coming to some kind of power-sharing agreement. Since Trump had consistently said publicly that he was pulling all US troops out of Afghanistan, this wasn't entirely fair. The Afghan government had no leverage to ensure that it would be part of some power-sharing arrangement, particularly since it was not part of the US-Taliban negotiations. Khalilzad's boss, Secretary of State Pompeo, went as far as to say that the Trump administration thought of President Ghani as an "adversary." This was an extraordinary thing to believe given that the United States had by now spent more than a decade and a half trying to build up a more open, democratic

system in Afghanistan, and the real adversary should have been the Taliban, a group of theocrats for whom open democratic societies were anathema.

Khalilzad believed that Ghani had to give up power to make way for a transitional government that involved the Taliban. Ghani wasn't on board with that plan at all. Ghani also felt that Khalilzad purposely misled the Afghan government about the substance of his negotiations with the Taliban and that he had volunteered "to destroy the land of his ancestors, and bring disgrace to his adopted land, the United States." The two men ended up loathing each other.

Ghani wasn't alone in thinking that Khalilzad wasn't a straight shooter. The top American commander in the region, CENTCOM commander General Kenneth "Frank" McKenzie, thought that Khalilzad's negotiating process was "opaque," that he had a "propensity for extreme secrecy," and that "we were all, to some degree, in the dark about the exact nature of his outreach." In other words, the top US military commander in the region had little to no idea about what the top American diplomat was up to.

For the past eight years the Pakistanis had detained one of the founders of the Taliban, Mullah Baradar. Ambassador Khalilzad pressured the Pakistanis to release him, believing that if there were to be real progress on negotiations with the Taliban, only someone of Mullah Baradar's "stature" could make any future agreement stick.

In late October 2018, the Pakistanis released Mullah Baradar. Obama administration officials had met with lower-level Taliban leaders on multiple occasions in the past to discuss the possibility of some kind of deal. But Khalilzad now had President Trump's full backing to make an agreement, and a Taliban leader to negotiate with who likely had the heft to have other Taliban leaders sign on to any deal that might be struck.

On February 5, 2019, President Trump gave a State of the Union address to Congress signaling that his patience with the American project in Afghanistan had run out and he was now pushing for a withdrawal from the country. Trump also told the American people that the United States had begun negotiations with the Taliban, which would enable the drawdown of

the 14,000 US troops still in Afghanistan, with perhaps some residual forces left for “counterterrorism.”

A year earlier, McMaster had been eased out of the White House, along with his South Asia strategy. He was replaced as national security advisor by John Bolton, who was equally skeptical of any kind of deal with the Taliban. At this point it was abundantly clear that Trump bitterly regretted not getting out of Afghanistan in early 2017 as he had wanted to do. Now he wanted to wash his hands of the country ahead of the US presidential election in early November 2020.

General John Kelly had been Trump’s chief of staff since July 2017, and he would depart in January 2019 as the US negotiations with the Taliban got off the ground. Trump spent more time with Kelly than with pretty much anyone else in the White House. One day, Trump told Kelly that when it came to Afghanistan, “We got our boys who are over there blowing up every day for what? There’s nothing worth dying for in that country.” Kelly’s twenty-nine-year-old son Robert had been killed by a roadside bomb in Helmand Province nine years earlier, but Trump either didn’t know Kelly’s son had died fighting in Afghanistan, or he had forgotten.

In an interview with Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson on July 2, 2019, Trump called Afghanistan “the Harvard of terrorists.” Trump added that, as a result, he expected to keep a residual US intelligence presence in the country.

Three weeks later, Trump claimed to reporters, “If we wanted to fight a war in Afghanistan and win it, I could win that war in a week. I just don’t want to kill ten million people.” Was Trump contemplating dropping nuclear weapons on Afghanistan?

On Thanksgiving Day, November 18, 2019, President Trump visited US troops in Afghanistan at Bagram Air Base. There President Ghani explained to Trump that progress was being made in Afghanistan, which the American president appeared to acknowledge. Trump then told Ghani he was going to threaten the Pakistanis with nuclear weapons because they continued to

provide a safe haven for the Taliban. Ghani argued for diplomatic pressure on the Pakistanis instead.

The US negotiations with the Taliban led by Ambassador Khalilzad took place in Doha, the capital of Qatar, the tiny oil-rich emirate where the Taliban had established their political office. The goals of the US negotiators were to end any threat emanating from Afghanistan from al-Qaeda, establish a ceasefire, and secure a negotiated peace settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. These were not the same goals that the Taliban leaders had: a total US withdrawal; the release of thousands of their prisoners from Afghan jails; and removal from UN sanctions lists.

The first meeting between the American and Taliban negotiators was charged with emotion. The Afghan interpreter broke down crying; he had lost family members in the war. Lisa Curtis, the top Afghan policy official at the White House and one of only two women at the negotiating table, also became emotional. Everyone in the room realized the levels of loss that the Afghan people had suffered during the many years of war.

The negotiations were often tense. Curtis was reprimanded by Ambassador Khalilzad for looking uncomfortable during the meetings and even for taking drinks of water while the Taliban were speaking, because that was apparently seen as disrespectful.

During the negotiations the Taliban said they were open to a power-sharing agreement with the Afghan government, although they always referred to it as the "Kabul regime" rather than "the government." The Taliban also claimed they were fine with girls going to school. Meanwhile, the Taliban secretly kept al-Qaeda's leaders apprised of their negotiations with the United States and told them that they would maintain their long-standing ties.

At one point during the negotiations, Taliban officials didn't seem to believe that the United States was really leaving Afghanistan. So, Khalilzad arranged a briefing by US military officers to demonstrate to the Taliban how a US withdrawal would be operationalized. Using a whiteboard, the officers pointed out the locations of American troop positions in

Afghanistan. One of the Taliban officials joked, “Oh look, they’re bringing out the crown jewels before we’ve even gotten started.”

Curtis thought the negotiations with the Taliban were deeply flawed because the US acquiesced to the Taliban’s demand that the Afghan government not take part in any of the negotiations with the Americans. The Taliban regarded the elected Afghan government as puppets of the Americans and wanted to negotiate only with their puppet master. Still, the exclusion of the Afghan government from the negotiations gave the impression that the US was shifting its support from the Afghan government to the Taliban.

Curtis also thought that Trump didn’t care about a peace deal; he just cared about getting US troops out. The United States had little leverage because the Taliban knew that Trump was done with Afghanistan. If the US wanted to pull out of Afghanistan, Curtis thought that a smarter approach would be to negotiate the withdrawal with the elected Afghan government rather than with the Taliban. That never happened.

Trump’s bromance with Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis—whom he had once compared to one of his heroes, General George Patton—had long soured. The proximate reason for Mattis’s resignation on December 20, 2018, was, as we have seen, Trump’s abrupt decision to pull US troops out of Syria, who were there to fight ISIS. But the split between the two men had been a long time coming, in particular because of Trump’s hostility to NATO, which Mattis described as “the most successful alliance in modern history”—not least because of NATO’s longtime support for the US-led war in Afghanistan.

Trump made sure to dump on General Mattis as he exited the administration, saying publicly: “How has he done in Afghanistan? Not too good. Not too good. I’m not happy with what he’s done in Afghanistan.”

On August 16, 2019, key members of Trump’s war cabinet met at his golf club in New Jersey to discuss the Afghan War, convening in an empty wing of the club inside a specialized tent to prevent any electronic eavesdropping. At the meeting were the CIA director, Gina Haspel; the new

secretary of defense, Mark Esper; Secretary of State Pompeo; General Dunford; and National Security Advisor John Bolton. Pompeo briefed them on the US-Taliban negotiations. Esper said the Pentagon would support the agreement with the Taliban if they kept to the conditions that they separate from al-Qaeda and engage in peace talks with the Afghan government.

By the end of the meeting, Trump seemed to support the agreement with the Taliban. Trump was very clear that any public statement about taking US troops down to zero in Afghanistan should be released by October 2020. The presidential election was on November 3, 2020, which was the lens through which Trump viewed the withdrawal agreement.

On August 26, 2019, at 2 a.m. in Doha, the US ground commander in Afghanistan, General Austin "Scott" Miller, Ambassador Khalilzad, and four senior Taliban officials finalized the "peace" agreement. It was, in reality, simply a withdrawal agreement with the Americans.

At a follow-up meeting at the end of August with Trump in the White House Situation Room, the president surprised his war cabinet by saying he wanted to "meet with the Taliban leaders." Bolton deadpanned that for that to happen, the Taliban leaders would first need to walk "through the world's most powerful magnetometer."

Trump added another surprise: He wanted to meet the Taliban leaders at Camp David, the site of the historic peace agreement that President Jimmy Carter had negotiated between Israel and Egypt four decades earlier. The Camp David meeting with the Taliban was slated for September 8, 2019, three days before the 9/11 anniversary, which was poor timing.

This all became moot on September 5, when a US soldier was killed in a car bomb attack in Kabul. Trump was furious, canceling the meeting at Camp David, and the talks with the Taliban were paused.

Three years earlier, the Taliban had kidnapped two professors at the American University of Afghanistan, American Kevin King and Australian Timothy Weeks. In November 2019, the Taliban released them, which helped to restart the US-Taliban talks.

On February 29, 2020, at the Sheraton hotel in Doha, Ambassador Khalilzad and Mullah Baradar signed an "Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan," specifying that the US would go to zero troops in Afghanistan by May 2021. In a secret appendix to the US-Taliban agreement, the Taliban said they would publicly denounce al-Qaeda. They never did.

On the same day in Kabul, President Ghani and US Secretary of Defense Esper signed what appeared to be a similar agreement to the Doha deal, but there was an important difference. In the deal with the Taliban, the Americans agreed that they would pressure the Afghan government to release up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners it was holding. In the US deal with the Afghan government, there was no mention of the size of this massive release of Taliban prisoners but instead a bland sentence about "determining the feasibility of releasing significant numbers of prisoners on both sides."

President Trump called the Taliban leader Mullah Baradar after the Doha agreement was signed, telling him, "You are a tough people and have a great country." Trump asked if there was anything he could do for the cleric. Mullah Baradar told the president, "We need to get our prisoners released."

The US pressed the Afghan government to release these Taliban prisoners, and 5,000 were eventually released by September 2020, while the Taliban released 1,000 of the prisoners they were holding, consisting mostly of Afghan soldiers and policemen. Many more of the released Taliban prisoners went back to the battlefield than US officials had anticipated. Since many of them were midlevel or senior commanders, they would soon be instrumental in helping the Taliban recapture Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, the US did not negotiate the release of an American hostage being held by a branch of the Taliban known as the Haqqanis. Mark Frerichs, a contractor who had worked for a decade in Afghanistan, was kidnapped in January 2020. He remained in Taliban captivity for two years, a failure of US diplomacy given the release of the thousands of Taliban prisoners that the Americans facilitated.

In early October 2020, Trump tweeted that he would have all US troops in Afghanistan home by Christmas. That was news to the Pentagon, but

certainly was encouraging to the Taliban.

On November 9—six days after the 2020 presidential election, which Trump lost to Joe Biden—Trump fired Secretary of Defense Esper, who had publicly said he would not support the invocation of the Insurrection Act to use American troops to quell protests of the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. Esper was replaced by Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher Miller.

Two days after firing Esper—without any of the consultations with the National Security Council that would typically have preceded this kind of decision—Trump signed an order ordering a full withdrawal from Afghanistan by January 15, 2021, which was only five days before Biden would be sworn into office. He also ordered all seven hundred US troops out of Somalia. This plan was cooked up by retired Colonel Douglas Macgregor, a frequent Fox News guest who was a recently appointed special advisor at the Pentagon, and Johnny McEntee, Trump's former "body man" who was now running personnel for the Trump administration.

Acting Secretary of Defense Miller and General Mark Milley, Trump's top military advisor, had no inkling that Trump wanted to immediately pull all US troops out of Afghanistan. They went to the White House to confirm the order, which was signed with Trump's distinctive black Sharpie scrawl. The order was quickly rescinded; there was no way to pull out all American troops from Afghanistan in that short a time frame, not to mention that it would likely hand the Taliban a quick victory. The withdrawal of US troops from Somalia was implemented.

On November 17, another order was received at the Pentagon, which directed the US military to reduce its presence to 2,500 troops in Afghanistan. That was the number of troops that General Miller, the US ground commander in Afghanistan, had assessed was the minimum that could still effectively support the Afghan armed forces and carry out their counterterrorism mission.

By the time President Trump left office, this small US footprint in Afghanistan was sufficient to ensure that all thirty-four of the provincial capitals of the country were not in the hands of the Taliban, even as they kept advancing in many of the country's rural districts.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE TALIBAN, VICTORIOUS

If you ever feel useless, just remember USA took 4 Presidents, thousands of lives, trillions of dollars and 20 years to replace Taliban with Taliban.

—INTERNET MEME, AUGUST 16, 2021

The paradox of our war with the Taliban is that while we couldn't win in a short period of time with 150,000 US and coalition troops, we couldn't lose with a few thousand advisors. . . . We instead chose to defeat ourselves.

—MICHAEL VICKERS, THE TOP INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL AT THE PENTAGON DURING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION, TESTIFYING TO THE AFGHANISTAN WAR COMMISSION IN JULY 2024

When Joe Biden won the US presidential election in November 2020, the Taliban were worried he might insist on keeping American forces in

Afghanistan. During one of the Democratic primary debates in December 2019—in contrast to Senator Bernie Sanders, who was advocating for a complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan—Biden said, "I would leave behind Special Forces in small numbers to be able to deal with the potential threat."

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani was heartened by such statements and thought that because Biden was more of an establishment guy than Trump, he would trust the collective judgment of his national security team. With Trump, it was a one-man show. President Ghani believed that Biden would not be making the momentous withdrawal decision alone.

Biden administration officials decided to "hold over" from the Trump team Ambassador Khalilzad as the chief US negotiator with the Taliban. When Khalilzad met with President Biden, it seemed clear to him where Biden stood: Afghanistan was a godforsaken country, and the US was never going to be able to fix it.

On his first day in office, January 20, 2021, President Joe Biden rescinded numerous Trump-era executive orders. But there was one Trump initiative that Biden seemed quite enthusiastic about: Trump's "peace" deal with the Taliban.

For Biden the scar tissue of his fights with the Pentagon about the surge of troops in Afghanistan in 2009, during the Obama administration, lingered on more than a decade later. Biden was convinced that just staying on in Afghanistan was a slippery slope; the Pentagon would inevitably ask for many thousands of additional troops and more Americans would die. Biden was also concerned that if the US delayed its pullout from Afghanistan any longer, the Taliban would renege on the withdrawal agreement.

On April 6 in the Oval Office President Biden gave a verbal order to his top military advisor, General Milley, to draw down the troops to zero, saying, "It's time to bring the troops home."

Milley asked, "Zero means zero?"

"Yes, zero means zero," Biden replied.

On April 14, President Biden announced that the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan would be completed by September 11, the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. Belatedly realizing that this was spectacularly inept timing for the completion of the withdrawal, the Biden administration changed the date to the end of August 2021. When Biden

announced the withdrawal, the Taliban were, by their own account, filled with joy.

The day after announcing the US withdrawal, Biden called President Ghani, telling him, “This is not the news that you expected to hear.”

Ghani said, “No, Mr. President. There were two choices. Either this is the news that you are leaving or that you are staying. So, it’s not a surprise. It’s your sovereign decision.” Ghani’s view was that the United States had always treated Afghanistan as a theater of its war on terror, not as a sovereign country. The US military had arrived in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks without asking the Afghan people. Now it was leaving without asking the Afghan people. Ghani was focused on managing the difficult consequences of the withdrawal, not debating the decision to withdraw.

Steve Brooking, a former British diplomat who was the longtime principal UN interlocutor with the Taliban, concluded that Biden’s withdrawal announcement “emboldened the Taliban; seriously damaged the morale of the Republic’s security forces; and persuaded many Afghans to think about switching sides to the Taliban, who were now perceived as likely winners.”

The withdrawal agreement had been negotiated by the Trump administration, but it wasn’t a treaty with a state ratified by the US Senate. Instead, it was a deal with an insurgent-terrorist group that had no input from the elected Afghan government. Yet Biden claimed he was bound by the deal, while the Taliban were not abiding by its key terms such as negotiating in good faith with the Afghan government about some kind of power-sharing arrangement. There was one part of the agreement that the Taliban were observing: they were not shooting at US soldiers as they headed for the exits. The swift withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan was what the Taliban had wanted all along, and they saw no need to impede it.

In his first term, President Trump had had no compunction about pulling the United States out of the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal, which was negotiated together with some of the America’s closest allies—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—and was an agreement that the Iranians were adhering to, according to US intelligence agencies. Biden could just as easily have pulled out of the agreement with the Taliban and with far better justification, since they were flouting the terms of the deal. Instead, he went through with one of the worst diplomatic agreements in the history of the

United States. To the dismay of many of the US service members and American civilians who had worked in Afghanistan over the past two decades, the Taliban won at the negotiating table what they hadn't won on the battlefield.

Ghani's chief of staff, Matin Bek, had been in Doha trying to negotiate with the Taliban about the possibility of some form of power-sharing deal with the Afghan government when Biden announced the withdrawal. On April 15, when Bek saw the Taliban negotiators, they were in a celebratory mood. Since the Americans were leaving, they said, there was no need to talk about a deal with the Afghan government; instead, any talks should be about the terms of its surrender. Bek realized that any leverage over the Taliban to make an agreement with the Afghan government had simply evaporated after Biden's withdrawal announcement.

The Taliban soon announced they wouldn't be attending a diplomatic conference in Istanbul the United States was organizing to help move the Afghan peace process forward. Why bother? The Taliban had secured the withdrawal of all US forces by a certain date, which was clearly not "conditions-based," to use the terminology of the American negotiators. Rather it was an arbitrarily selected date that also happened to land right in the middle of the Afghan "fighting season" that typically peaked during the summer months, when it was easiest to maneuver around Afghanistan's mountainous terrain.

The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Mark Milley, had told President Biden that unless the US kept a small military force in Afghanistan of around 2,500 troops, the Afghan military would collapse, which would likely lead to a Taliban takeover of the country. This was also the view of the US ground commander in Afghanistan, General Miller, and the regional American commander, General McKenzie.

The generals assessed that with 2,500 troops the Americans could continue to advise the Afghan Army and maintain eight US bases, including the massive Bagram Air Base. Afghanistan is surrounded by key American rivals such as China, Iran, and Russia, and the Bagram base gave the United States a significant military presence in the region. At one time Bagram had housed 10,000 American troops and contractors, but going any lower than

2,500 troops in Afghanistan meant that the strategic base at Bagram would have to be abandoned.

Biden chose to ignore his top generals' advice.

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Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited NATO headquarters in Brussels on March 23, 2021, where he took the temperature of America's allies about the total US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The militaries of multiple NATO countries had long served in Afghanistan, and more than a thousand soldiers from Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other allies had died fighting there. Yet none of the leaders of the major NATO allies were demanding an exit from Afghanistan.

Blinken, a talented amateur rock musician, reported back to President Biden that he had heard in "quadrophonic sound" from key European allies such as the British, French, and Germans that the US pullout was a bad idea because it would end any leverage over the Taliban to make some kind of political settlement with the Afghan government. By this time there were considerably more European NATO troops in Afghanistan than US forces.

Unlike in President Obama's cabinet, where you had powerhouse figures like the secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, who had lost to Obama in the Democratic primaries, and Robert Gates, the secretary of defense, who had also served in the same position for President George W. Bush, Biden's cabinet was far more deferential to Biden than the "team of rivals" that Obama had surrounded himself with.

Jake Sullivan, Biden's national security advisor, who had previously worked in staff roles for Biden—the president was more than three decades Sullivan's senior—acquiesced in the president's decision to go to zero. Secretary of State Blinken had also worked for Biden in various capacities since 2002. Now Blinken pushed back on Biden's withdrawal decision because of the intense opposition he had encountered to it among some of the United States' closest allies. Blinken explored the possibility of a more extended US troop presence to see if a political settlement with the Taliban might be feasible. The Trump administration's agreement with the Taliban had a deadline of May 1, 2021, for the total US pullout from Afghanistan. Taliban leaders in Doha were adamant that there could not be a significant extension to this deadline.

For more than a decade, Biden had been a leading skeptic of the US project in Afghanistan. While he was vice president, Biden strongly opposed President Obama's surge of US troops into Afghanistan and believed that in doing so, he had served his country well. For many years Biden had even kept classified documents related to that debate in the garage of his home in Delaware.

Obama had ignored Biden's skepticism about the surge in 2009 and had authorized the additional troops, but in the following years, Biden's views about what was possible in Afghanistan didn't change; if anything, they hardened. In 2015 Biden's beloved oldest son, Beau, died from a brain tumor, aged forty-six. Beau had served in Iraq in the Delaware National Guard from 2008 to 2009, and the president believed his son's brain cancer might have developed because of the ubiquitous, noxious US military burn pits in Iraq.

Beau's death made Biden even more wary about sending troops into harm's way in far-flung foreign lands where he felt that America's key interests were not at stake. Six years after his son's death, when Biden announced his Afghan withdrawal plan, the president said, "Throughout this process, my North Star has been remembering what it was like when my late son, Beau deployed to Iraq . . . and the impact it had on him and all of us at home." For President Biden, Beau's memory was ever-present, especially when it came to the decisions that he made as commander in chief. Biden told his aides privately, "If the mission is to preserve the Ghani government, I wouldn't send my own son."

In the end, Biden made his withdrawal decision alone and in the face of opposition from his top generals, key NATO allies, and the elected Afghan government.

A month after Biden announced the impending withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan, on May 18 the lead US negotiator with the Taliban, Ambassador Khalilzad, testified to the US House Foreign Affairs Committee that those who thought the Taliban would quickly take over the country as the US pulled out were "mistaken." Khalilzad also asserted that the Taliban would seek to end their international isolation by taking a more pragmatic stance, testifying: "They say they seek normalcy in terms of relations—acceptability, removal from sanctions, not to remain a pariah."

Similarly, Barnett Rubin, a professor at New York University who was an expert on Afghanistan, claimed in a paper in March 2021 that the US was underestimating "the leverage that the Taliban's quest for sanctions relief, recognition and international assistance provides."

The previous year the *New York Times* had run an op-ed by Sirajuddin Haqqani, whose byline had him listed simply as "the deputy leader of the Taliban." But Haqqani was a lot more than that: He was on the FBI's Most Wanted list, with a $5 million reward on his head from the State Department, and his men had once kidnapped a reporter for the *New York Times*. These facts were not presented to the readers of the *Times*. Instead, they were fed a bunch of lies by Haqqani, or more likely by his ghostwriter, who seemed to have suspiciously good command of the jargon of American human rights activists.

Haqqani claimed, "We together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam—from the right to education to the right to work—are protected." Haqqani also asserted that "reports about foreign [terrorist] groups in Afghanistan are politically motivated exaggerations by the warmongering players on all sides of the war."

Haqqani's op-ed was emblematic of the fantasy that "Taliban 2.0" would come back as a more moderate Taliban. This fanciful notion gripped the Taliban's American apologists, such as Ambassador Khalilzad and Rubin, who in turn influenced Biden administration officials who were eager to put a hopeful gloss on President Biden's decision to withdraw completely from Afghanistan.

After Biden announced his withdrawal plan, the tides of war shifted in the Taliban's favor. Until then the Taliban had never been able to capture and hold for a significant length of time any of the thirty-four Afghan provincial capitals. What was not visible to most outside observers was that when Biden took office in January 2021, the 2,500 American troops in Afghanistan were backed up by 7,000 additional NATO forces as well as by 15,000 contractors. When American forces started leaving, so too did all the other NATO troops and, crucially, also some 6,000 US contractors who were servicing the complex American-made helicopters and planes that were used by the Afghan Air Force.

Without the more than 180 aircraft of the Afghan Air Force that provided close air support, maneuverability on the battlefield, and medevac

capabilities, Afghan soldiers were far more vulnerable to attack. Since war is about psychological factors as much as anything else, the fact that the Americans were now really leaving led some local Afghan military commanders to begin discreetly hedging their bets, cutting side deals with the Taliban so they could live to fight another day. The Taliban set up "Invitation and Guidance Committees" that were charged with negotiating surrenders with local Afghan commanders. This was standard practice in Afghanistan, which had been embroiled in a series of wars for more than four decades. Switching sides to whichever army seemed to have the strongest momentum was a well-established way of keeping your head on your shoulders.

On May 14, President Ghani gave an interview to *Der Spiegel*, a leading German magazine, striking an upbeat tone: "This narrative of gloom and doom" about Afghanistan "must stop." He claimed that "no power in the world could persuade me to get on a plane and leave this country. It is a country I love, and I will die defending it." This show of bravado wouldn't last.

In June, Ghani made one last effort to try to extract some concessions from President Biden. Ghani and the top officials in his government, including National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib and Chief Executive Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, were invited to meet with Biden at the White House.

Underlining the extent of the paranoia that was now rampant in Kabul, the trip to Washington almost didn't happen. Rumors were sweeping the capital that the Americans were extracting these top Afghan officials to safety in the United States. These were the kinds of rumors that could collapse the government. Dr. Abdullah argued it was nonetheless worth the risk to fly out of the country if they could convince Biden to give them something tangible. Even the mere appearance of continued US support would be good for Afghans' morale, Dr. Abdullah said.

The trip was on. Ghani didn't want to pay for an expensive charter flight, so his war cabinet flew on Kam Air, a local Afghan airline whose pilots had never flown to the United States. On the flight to Washington, Ghani gathered his team. There were no seats on the plane, so the Afghan officials

all sat on the floor. Ghani told them the questions he thought they should ask Biden: It was clear that Biden had made his decision, and he wasn't going to reverse it, but could there be some flexibility on the withdrawal date? Could Afghan troops continue to receive US air support? What kind of maintenance contractors might be provided for the Afghan Air Force? The last issue was a particular preoccupation of Ghani's, who was deeply concerned about the ability of his air force to function without the contractors.

The meeting with Biden in the Oval Office on June 25 did not get off to a good start. Biden began by asking if Afghanistan was a "real nation," which was a bizarre question to pose to the most senior officials of the Afghan government since Afghanistan had existed as a united country in various forms since 1747, making it older than the United States. The Afghan officials were supplicants at the White House, so they didn't argue the point with Biden, although they did try to reassure him that they were, indeed, a real nation.

Ghani told Biden that the Afghan people had one big question: "Do they have a friend in the White House?" Biden's answer seemed ambiguous.

Then Biden started in on Ghani, saying, "Afghanistan's military strategy is a disaster; that's why the Taliban are starting to make gains." Biden told Ghani that by trying to defend everything, the Afghan armed forces were going to fail, and they should pull back to the key cities and defend only those. Biden insisted to the Afghans: "You guys need to have a ground strategy."

It was a somber flight back home to Kabul for Ghani and his war cabinet; it was obvious that Biden had promised nothing in the way of support. Ghani sat on the floor of the airplane for several hours with Dr. Abdullah and others in his war cabinet to discuss what kind of common strategy could be presented to the Biden administration. Complicating matters, Ghani and Abdullah were bitter rivals; both believed they had won the Afghan presidential election in 2019, and the US-brokered compromise was that Ghani would become president while Abdullah would take on the nebulous role of chief executive, resulting in a confusing and often chaotic management structure at the top of the Afghan government.

Meanwhile, the Taliban continued to make rapid advances in many of Afghanistan's rural districts. When the US withdrawal had begun on May 1, around eighty of Afghanistan's some four hundred administrative districts

were held by the Taliban. By July 10 the Taliban controlled more than half the districts in the country.

The Afghan government shared a good deal of the blame for this. Ghani ruled with a small coterie of close aides, relying particularly on his national security advisor, Hamdullah Mohib. Neither Ghani nor Mohib had any military experience to speak of and yet they would routinely fire commanders for what the CENTCOM commander, General McKenzie, believed were reasons other than issues relating to their competence. Ambassador Ross Wilson, the top US diplomat in Afghanistan, thought that these personnel changes undermined the morale of the Afghan military. That was the same message that US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin had delivered to President Ghani in person when he had visited Kabul in March, that appointing loyalist generals was undercutting his military.

Even as the Taliban were making swift advances around Afghanistan during July, President Ghani, a technocrat who had co-authored a book titled *Fixing Failed States*, continued to hold business-as-usual meetings about mundane matters such as the laws governing nongovernmental organizations. Meanwhile, the Taliban sent delegations to both China and Russia, acting as if they were a government-in-waiting.

On May 8 senior State Department and Pentagon officials participated in a ROC (rehearsal of concept) drill that tried to plan for what could happen if the Taliban continued to make significant advances. General Miller warned that American civilians at the embassy and elsewhere in Afghanistan should try to evacuate ahead of the US military so they wouldn't have to do so in the middle of a crisis. A senior State Department official pushed back, claiming, "We have a much higher risk tolerance than you guys." This comment was false bravado because very few State Department officials in Kabul ever left the embassy and when they did, they traveled by helicopter even for the three-mile trip to Kabul Airport.

The State Department wanted to maintain its large embassy presence in Kabul at seemingly any cost because that was what the White House wanted. This desire was based on Pentagon assessments during the early summer of 2021 that the Afghan security forces could block major Taliban

advances into the following year and that Kabul would hold. If the embassy stayed open it could continue to issue US visas for “at-risk” Afghans.

General Miller found that Afghan officials didn’t believe the US was really going to zero troops and would often ask him: “You’re not really leaving, are you?” For some of these officials, the United States had been in Afghanistan for much of their lives.

On July 2 the last US forces quietly departed in the middle of the night from Bagram Air Base. Seven years earlier it had been the busiest American military airfield in the world. There were no longer enough US troops in country to guard the giant base. With Bagram gone there was nowhere in Afghanistan to service the American jets and helicopters that were providing crucial air support to the Afghan Army.

For the US military, the drawdown of troops, known in military jargon as a “retrograde,” was best accomplished by moving quickly; there was safety in speed so that American service members wouldn’t be killed as they withdrew. By early July, the military was down to 1,000 troops to protect the embassy and Kabul Airport. The speed of the withdrawal surprised senior Biden administration officials. It also cratered the morale of the Afghan security forces, which nominally numbered 300,000 soldiers and policemen but in reality were about a third of that size.

A reporter asked Biden if there was any comparison to be made between the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and the hasty American retreat from Saigon in 1975. “None whatsoever. Zero,” Biden replied firmly. He added, “There’s going to be no circumstance where you’re going to see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States in Afghanistan.”

On July 13, a dissent channel cable was sent by some of the US diplomats based in Afghanistan to Secretary of State Blinken warning of precisely what Biden had just airily dismissed: a possible rapid Taliban takeover, the collapse of the Afghan military, and the fall of the Ghani government within weeks. The lead pens were Anton Cooper and Elisabeth Zentos, who held senior positions in the political section of the embassy. The cable was signed by twenty-three diplomats, and it urged that the rapid evacuation of Afghan allies begin no later than August 1. The dissent channel had been in existence since the Vietnam War as a way for foreign service officers to get their views known to senior State Department officials even if they differed from official US policy.

On July 23 President Biden called Ghani, who again made a plea for US close air support. Biden told the Afghan president, "Close air support works only if there is a military strategy on the ground to support." Biden had clearly lost any faith that Ghani had a workable strategy.

General Miller met with Ghani for the final time before his tour was up. Ghani fixated on the issue of contractors for his air force, declaring, "I'm going to get some South African contractors." Miller thought that Ghani was detaching from reality.

The Taliban captured their first provincial capital, Zaranj, in Nimruz Province on Afghanistan's border with Iran, on August 6. Soon other Afghan provincial capitals were falling like dominoes. On August 12 General Mark Milley called the national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, in the middle of the night to warn him that Ghazni was now in Taliban hands. It was obvious at this point that the jig was up; the city of Ghazni straddled the highway between Afghanistan's two key cities, Kabul and Kandahar. Milley said, "They're in fucking Ghazni; pull the fucking trigger" on the evacuation order.

The following day, August 13, Ambassador Wilson was visited by two of President Ghani's senior staffers, who said that President Ghani did not want to see a bloodbath in Kabul, and he was prepared to give up power.

Blinken was on vacation in East Hampton, New York. On August 14 he called Ghani to make sure that he was comfortable with resigning to make way for a unity government that would include both longtime Afghan politicians and members of the Taliban, the details of which were to be negotiated in Doha. Ghani told Blinken he was willing to die in defense of Afghanistan's constitutional order, but now that he was being stripped of all the instruments of power, he was left only with his moral authority. Ghani's vow that he was prepared to go to his death defending the elected Afghan government wouldn't age well.

The same day in the White House Situation Room, the homeland security advisor, Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall, chaired a meeting at 3:30 p.m. with national security officials from across government. The notes from that meeting underlined how unprepared the Biden administration was for what was coming. They showed that many hundreds of local US embassy staff in Kabul—presumably prime targets for the Taliban—had yet to be registered for possible evacuation, while the US government was still working out which countries might accept Afghan evacuees.

The Taliban told senior Afghan officials that they were committed not to enter Kabul, a city of some six million people, to avoid creating chaos. But by the middle of the day on August 15, the situation in Kabul had, in the Taliban's view, spiraled out of control. Ministries were being evacuated, and people were looting. After midday, the Taliban authorized its fighters to enter the city.

Early on the morning of August 15, Ambassador Wilson called Secretary of State Blinken, telling him Taliban forces were entering Kabul in large numbers. Wilson said, "My recommendation: We have to evacuate immediately."

Blinken agreed to Ambassador Wilson's request for a "noncombatant evacuation operation." Senior US military officers thought Wilson had waited far too long to make this call. Wilson had been slimming down his staff of some 4,000 at what was then the largest US embassy in the world, but there were still 2,000 embassy personnel in Kabul. Wilson felt that by keeping the embassy open as long as possible his staff could continue to process the many thousands of Special Immigrant Visa applicants, who were typically Afghans who had helped the US military.

There had been a backlog of 18,000 of these applicants when Wilson had started his job running the embassy in January 2020, a backlog that was exacerbated by extended closures of the embassy because of concerns about the spread of COVID-19. The embassy was closed to all in-person visa interviews in June and July 2021 as the Taliban made swift advances around Afghanistan.

Ambassador Wilson also felt that anything that looked like an American rush to the exits would undermine the Afghan government. Throughout the summer, Afghan government officials had been begging Blinken, "Don't engage in an evacuation. That will precipitate exactly what we are trying to prevent."

General Miller took a different view, remembering that when he was a young cadet at West Point, the US embassy in Iran had been overrun by Islamist revolutionaries in 1979. He had also been a Delta Force captain during the "Black Hawk Down" battle in Somalia in 1993, during which eighteen American service members were killed in one day. Miller believed that if you didn't get "ahead of the risk curve," things could go badly wrong, as they had in Tehran and Mogadishu, and he thought that the State

Department's delay in ordering an evacuation would make for a chaotic withdrawal.

By this point around 95 percent of US troops had already withdrawn from Afghanistan. *Who evacuates their military before their civilians?* This meant that US soldiers and Marines had to be reinserted into Afghanistan to protect the evacuation of civilians from Kabul Airport. Secretary of Defense Austin had called President Ghani on August 14 to inform him that the US was sending 3,000 troops back into Afghanistan to provide protection for the evacuation that everyone knew was going to happen, even if it hadn't been formally triggered yet by Ambassador Wilson. Austin made it clear to Ghani that these additional US troops were not going to be used for the protection of Kabul, only to protect the evacuees.

When General McKenzie did the rough math on how many people the US military would need to evacuate, including US citizens, Afghans applying for Special Immigrant Visas, and "at-risk" Afghans, he came up with around 140,000 people; a vast number to extract by aircraft. Like General Miller, McKenzie felt that the State Department had no sense of urgency about the impending evacuation given its large scale.

General McKenzie flew to Doha, arriving on the morning of August 15, to meet with the Taliban leader, Mullah Baradar. The goal of the meeting was to ensure that the Taliban didn't interfere with the evacuation that would take place over the next couple of weeks. Mullah Baradar agreed that his fighters would not impede the evacuation, and they would also provide security in Kabul since the Americans didn't have enough troops on the ground to do so. The irony of the Taliban now being responsible for the security of the Afghan capital wasn't lost on US officials.

At the presidential palace in Kabul, the morning of August 15 had begun normally enough. Matin Bek, President Ghani's chief of staff, met the president at their regularly scheduled 9 a.m. meeting. They discussed the call with Blinken the night before, during which the US secretary of state had sounded relieved that Ghani was willing to step down. Ghani told Bek that he would leave office after a *loya jirga* had been convened over the next couple of weeks. He wanted Afghan tribal and political leaders from around the country to agree to the transfer of power from the elected government to the Taliban.

As the morning unfolded news came in of additional provincial capitals falling to the Taliban and shooting could be heard in the distance, but Bek

believed the assurances that he was hearing from a senior Afghan official he trusted who was negotiating with the Taliban that they wouldn't enter Kabul.

At noon Bek tweeted, "Don't Panic! Kabul is Safe!" Soon the Taliban issued a public statement that they were not going to enter Kabul.

This was reassuring; many Kabulis remembered that the last time the Taliban had swept into the capital in 1996, they had seized the former communist president of Afghanistan, Mohammed Najibullah, who was sheltering in a UN compound. The Taliban castrated him and strung him up on a lamppost to die. No one wanted a repeat of this spectacle.

It had already been a long day and Bek went to lunch around 2 p.m. An hour later he discovered that President Ghani had fled. By nightfall on August 15, it was official: Kabul had fallen.

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Breshna Musazai, the law student at the American University of Afghanistan who had been shot and left for dead by a Taliban gunman five years earlier, had becoming increasingly troubled by the military advances that the Taliban had been making in Afghanistan.

On August 15, 2021, Breshna's father told her, "The Taliban are here in Kabul!"

Breshna was in shock. An official from the university texted Breshna and told her that she and her brother could get on a flight out of the country. Two days later Breshna went to Kabul Airport. Many thousands of Afghans were gathered at the gates of the airport, desperately trying to leave. Breshna's brother helped her with her wheelchair, and they boarded a flight that took them to Qatar.

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The day after the fall of Kabul, President Biden shifted any blame from himself. Instead, he castigated the Afghans, claiming, "American troops cannot and should not be fighting and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves."

General David Petraeus, who had commanded US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, was annoyed by Biden's claim. "I was particularly hurt by statements 'Well, the Afghans wouldn't fight for their own country.' Sixteen

times as many Afghans died for their country as did US and coalition forces."

Three days after the Taliban had swept into Kabul, Biden was interviewed by George Stephanopoulos of ABC News. The president denied that his senior military commanders had advised him to keep 2,500 US troops in Afghanistan.

"Your military advisors did not tell you, 'No, we should just keep 2,500 troops. It's been a stable situation for the last several years. We can do that. We can continue to do that' ?" Stephanopoulos asked Biden.

"No. No one said that to me that I can recall," Biden replied.

Biden's top military commanders—General McKenzie, General Milley, and General Miller—all later testified to a US congressional committee that they had advised the president to keep the troop levels at 2,500, which they assessed was enough to keep the Taliban at bay.

General Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, said at a press conference on August 18 that US intelligence agencies hadn't predicted how quickly the Taliban would take over Afghanistan. "There was nothing that I or anyone else saw that indicated a collapse of this army and this government in eleven days," he said. In fact, CNN's well-sourced Pentagon correspondent, Barbara Starr, reported on August 12 that US intelligence officials were predicting a window of thirty to ninety days for the possible fall of Kabul. It would take only three days, but they were not far off target; a common DC practice when things go wrong is to blame the intelligence agencies, which are obliged to remain tight-lipped given the classified nature of their work.

In any event, you didn't need to have access to any highly classified intelligence to understand that as soon as Biden announced that he was pulling *all* US troops out of Afghanistan, a grim future was in store for the country. In June 2021, two months after Biden had announced his plans for the withdrawal, I wrote on *CNN.com*, "We could see in Afghanistan a remix of the disastrous US pullout from Saigon in 1975 and the summer of 2014 in Iraq when ISIS took over much of the country following the US pullout from the country."

During the sweltering second half of August 2021 tens of thousands of Afghans mobbed the gates of Kabul Airport, hoping to get a ride out on some of the last planes leaving the country. Some even hung on to the fuselage of planes as they were taking off. Zaki Anwari, aged seventeen, a player on Afghanistan's youth soccer team, tried to stow away on one of the departing aircraft, only to plunge to his death in Kabul city many hundreds of feet below. Afghan families passed babies over the airport walls to the US Marines posted at the airport's perimeter, hoping that even if they couldn't get out, maybe their infants could.

Commanding US troops at Kabul Airport was Rear Admiral Peter Vasely. On the night of August 18, Vasely was briefing President Biden about progress on the evacuation. Biden urged him to allow as many women and children onto the airfield as feasible.

The scale of the evacuation had gone from a trickle before August 15 to something now approaching a tsunami. There were 15,000 evacuees at the airfield, and at one point 5,000 people rushed onto the tarmac, forcing the airport to close temporarily since there was no way to have planes safely land or take off. Once normal operations resumed, aircraft were taking off every forty-five minutes. The failure to properly plan for an evacuation by the White House and State Department was somewhat ameliorated by an impressive extraction effort.

Private groups led by retired US military officers with names like "Pineapple Express" and "No One Left Behind" quickly sprang up to try to extract Afghan allies such as interpreters who would likely face retribution from the Taliban. Eight hundred thousand American service members had served in Afghanistan and thousands more had worked there as diplomats, aid workers, and journalists. Many of them felt an obligation to help the Afghans who had worked with them, to get out. As a result, US officials working at Kabul Airport were swamped by requests to evacuate specific Afghans.

Meanwhile, Rear Admiral Vasely was receiving increasingly dire intelligence reports about a planned terrorist attack at Kabul Airport by the Afghan affiliate of ISIS. By August 25 US military officials understood that the terrorist group, known as ISIS-K, was ready to launch an operation. The biggest risk was at the Abbey Gate of the airport, where large crowds had gathered. Vasely and other US officers wanted to shut the Abbey Gate, but it was close to the Baron Hotel, which the British were using as a staging

ground for their evacuees. The British requested that Abbey Gate be kept open for one more day, and the Americans agreed.

The ISIS-K suicide bomber struck at the Abbey Gate around 5:30 p.m. on August 26, killing 13 American service members and some 170 Afghans. When President Biden heard the news at the White House, he slumped in his chair saying, "The worst that can happen has happened." Biden had wanted to get out of Afghanistan to save American lives. This was the largest number of US fatalities in a single day in Afghanistan in a decade.

The ISIS-K "threat stream" continued to be intense during the final days of the US evacuation. Rear Admiral Vasely's number two, Major General Christopher Donahue, believed it could have been even worse were it not for the Taliban, who were screening out people around Kabul Airport who might be threats, including ISIS-K fighters. The Taliban wanted all the Americans out by the end of August, so it was in their interests to make sure they weren't attacked on the way out.

Anxious about the possibility of another ISIS strike, on August 29, the US launched a missile at a Toyota Corolla believed to be transporting an ISIS fighter moving explosives. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Milley, described it publicly as a "righteous strike." It would prove to be anything but. The driver of the car was working for a US aid group and he and two other adults and seven children were killed in the attack. The final American strike carried out while US troops were still on the ground in Afghanistan killed ten civilians.

When Biden spoke to the American people two days later, as the last US soldiers departed Afghanistan, he rationalized his withdrawal decision as a choice between leaving Afghanistan entirely or sending "tens of thousands more troops" back to Afghanistan.

This was a false choice. The 2,500 US troops that were then stationed in Afghanistan along with more than twice as many European NATO troops and a small army of contractors were enough to hold off the Taliban, along with the Afghan Army and police, more than 60,000 of whom had been killed fighting the Taliban. During the six years before the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, American combat fatalities in the country had been relatively low, around a dozen a year. A force of 2,500 American troops in Afghanistan was also politically sustainable at home, as it was only a tiny fraction of the two million men and women in the active-duty US military, reserves, and National Guard units.

During his August 31 speech, Biden congratulated himself for the fact that the US military had extracted from Kabul more than 120,000 Afghans, Americans, and citizens of allied countries, calling the operation an "extraordinary success," not unlike an arsonist praising himself for helping to try to put out a fire that he had started.

The vast majority of the Afghans who had worked with the US were left behind. The Association of Wartime Allies, an advocacy group for Afghans, estimated that only 3 percent of the 81,000 Afghans who had worked for the US government or military and had applied for special visas had made it out of Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, leaving 78,000 behind. It turned out that many of the Afghans who had rushed onto the US military transport planes leaving Kabul Airport were young single Afghan men who were not longtime American allies eligible for special visas.

Biden also claimed that the withdrawal would allow the US to better compete with the Chinese and the Russians, saying, "We're engaged in a serious competition with China. We're dealing with the challenges on multiple fronts with Russia. And there's nothing China or Russia would rather have, would want more in this competition than the United States to be bogged down another decade in Afghanistan."

This was nonsense: For years, both China and Russia had hoped to push American forces out of Afghanistan because the country borders both China and several republics of the former Soviet Union. According to the US intelligence community, the Russians had paid the Taliban millions of dollars to attack US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, while the Chinese had drawn close to the Taliban in recent years. During their withdrawal, the Americans had abandoned the vast Bagram Air Base—an ideal site from which to engage in competition with China or Russia.

During his second term, Trump pressed to get the Bagram base back, only belatedly realizing its strategic significance after he had overseen the withdrawal agreement with the Taliban.

The Afghan withdrawal also appeared to indicate that the United States was pulling back from the world. It didn't seem a coincidence that only three months after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Russian President Vladimir Putin moved an army of tens of thousands of his soldiers to the border with Ukraine as he prepared to invade the country.

The Chinese also reveled in Biden's humiliating withdrawal. The *Global Times*, a state-controlled media outlet, observed that the "US will abandon

Taiwan in a crisis given its tarnished credibility." If the big strategic idea behind the Afghan withdrawal was, as Biden claimed, to better compete in an era of peer competition with the Chinese and the Russians, it achieved the opposite of its intended effect, signaling instead American incompetence and isolationism.

After the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Biden's favorable rating dropped to the lowest level of his presidency, to 46 percent. It never recovered.

Two days after seizing Kabul, Taliban officials gave their first press conference. The Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid asserted, "The Islamic Emirate is committed to the rights of women within the framework of Sharia." The phrase "within the framework of Sharia" was doing a lot of work in this sentence, since the Taliban's understanding of Islamic law meant that women could not work outside their homes, nor could they be educated.

The Taliban's victory meant that two decades of progress in Afghanistan was lost. The country had nurtured scores of independent media outlets, and it had held regular, if flawed, presidential elections. Meanwhile, the Taliban were a theocracy and pariahs on the world stage whom only Putin's Russia formally recognized as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, four years after they had taken over the country.

Under Taliban rule, women's rights vanished. Women again had no right to work. Even the sound of a woman's voice outside the family home was banned. Girls were not allowed to be educated after the age of twelve, making Afghanistan the only country in the world where females couldn't attend high school or university. Even women-run nail salons and beauty parlors were closed, and women and girls were barred from parks. In a sign of what was to come, the Taliban's feared religious police quickly installed themselves in what had formerly been the ministry for women's affairs.

Meanwhile, the Taliban's alliance with al-Qaeda remained strong. An estimated four hundred al-Qaeda fighters continued to live in Afghanistan, some of them receiving appointments in the Taliban administration. The powerful minister of the interior, Sirajuddin Haqqani, was a member of al-Qaeda's leadership, according to the UN.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda, was also living in Kabul with the connivance of leaders of the Taliban. A year after the Taliban takeover, Zawahiri was killed in a US drone strike. After the news broke that Zawahiri had been hiding in Kabul, Lisa Curtis tweeted, "#Taliban basically asserting Doha agreement allows them to shelter #AlQaeda. Proves it was the worst agreement in US history. Not worth the paper on which it's written." This was a devastating critique coming from Curtis, the top official working on Afghanistan at the Trump White House who had spent untold hours working on the Doha agreement.

Nothing said you were breaking with al-Qaeda like sheltering Zawahiri and appointing a leader of the terrorist group to a top cabinet position. The Taliban 2.0 that some of their apologists had hoped for were a mirage. The Taliban were still Taliban 1.0, with one major difference: they were far better armed than the Taliban who had ruled over most of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. In all, $8.5 billion of US military equipment fell into the hands of the Taliban, according to the UN, which was more than the defense budgets of many European countries.

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Breshna Musazai was eventually transferred to a US military base in the Qatari desert while her visa application to the US was being reviewed. She spent a year in the desert waiting; her wounded leg continued to give her pain. The desert location was boring and depressing and there was no clarity about when she might get her visa, although her claim for asylum in the US based on her fears about what the Taliban might do to her if she returned to Afghanistan was clearly a strong one.

Breshna finally received her visa for the United States, where she would be reunited with her parents, who had also managed to get out of Afghanistan, in Virginia. Breshna was happy she was going to see her father and mother again, but was less excited about living in the United States.

She couldn't accept what had happened to Afghanistan.

But now she had nowhere else to go.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

STRATEGY AND TACTICS

Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.

—ATTRIBUTED TO SUN TZU

Located on the outskirts of the Syrian capital, Damascus, Sednaya was a prison where tens of thousands of Syrians were tortured and executed by the Assad regime. Those taken to Sednaya didn't expect to make it out alive. Locals were so fearful of the prison that they avoided mentioning it in public.

And then on December 8, 2024, a miracle happened. The gates of the prison were thrown open, and thousands of emaciated prisoners streamed out. The murderous Assad regime—which had instigated a civil war that killed half a million people over the past thirteen years—had just been overthrown by the group that once was al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria. Its leader went by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Jolani. Eight years earlier he had split off his group from al-Qaeda while continuing to fight the Assad regime.

Jolani found that al-Qaeda's amorphous agenda of global jihad wasn't useful for his quite concrete goal of deposing Bashar al-Assad. Increasingly,

his group tried to function like a government. When his men captured the city of Idlib in northwestern Syria in 2015, a city of some 160,000 people, they provided services such as schools and hospital care.

In November 2024, Jolani saw an opportunity to overthrow Assad while Russia—a key backer of the dictator—was preoccupied with its war in Ukraine. At the same time, Assad's other main allies, Iran and its Lebanese proxy Hezbollah, were under attack by the Israeli military following the October 7, 2023, massacre of more than a thousand people in Israel by Hamas—a group also backed by Iran. Without the strong support of his Russian and Iranian patrons, Assad's regime was significantly weakened and Jolani's men quickly took over the country.

Now Jolani was the new leader of Syria and became known by his real name: Ahmed al-Sharaa. President al-Sharaa was the first leader of an al-Qaeda affiliate to govern a country, an astonishing victory for a man who had once pledged allegiance to the leadership of al-Qaeda.

Countries around the world welcomed the end of the Assad regime in 2024—despite the attacks against religious minorities in Syria such as the Druze and Alawites during al-Sharaa's presidency in which some of his forces were implicated. Early in his second term President Trump even met with al-Sharaa, which was another first—a US president meeting with the onetime leader of an al-Qaeda group. Al-Sharaa also became the first leader of Syria to address the United Nations in almost six decades.

President al-Sharaa and Osama bin Laden had both emerged out of Sunni jihadist backgrounds, but while al-Qaeda's founder never achieved his strategic goals and helped to precipitate the "war on terror" that decimated his organization, al-Sharaa largely ended the long war in Syria and was recognized around the world as the new leader of Syria. By contrast, bin Laden had never shown any interest in governing and often tried to dissuade his followers from taking territory and any kind of governance role.

Bin Laden's overall strategy to push US troops out of the Middle East failed. The attack on 9/11 was a great propaganda coup for al-Qaeda, but it produced the opposite strategic effect of what bin Laden had intended. The United States became more involved in the Muslim world than at any time in its history, launching various kinds of military operations across the region, greatly damaging al-Qaeda and its affiliates. For bin Laden, violent tactics became his only strategy, while in President al-Sharaa's case,

warfare succeeded in achieving his strategic goals: ending the brutal reign of Assad in Syria and installing his own group in power.

When ISIS split from al-Qaeda in 2014, the terrorist army governed large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria, but its extraordinarily brutal tactics—including beheading American journalists and aid workers—earned it a world of enemies. ISIS's territorial rule ended during the Obama and Trump administrations. That's because two very different American presidents found that the best way to combat ISIS was to "Go Light, Go Long" over the course of a five-year campaign. They deployed a relatively small number of American soldiers on the ground to advise Iraqi and Syrian forces who did the great bulk of the fighting while the US provided intelligence and a massive number of American airstrikes against ISIS targets, around 35,000 during the campaign.

After a decade and a half of trying out a range of other tactics and strategies to combat jihadist militants, the United States had learned from its mistakes and found a way to fight these militants that was more financially and politically sustainable than previous approaches. Since history suggests that conflicts involving the United States will more likely be of the scale and nature of the war against ISIS than conflicts such as World War II, the successful war against ISIS was a valuable lesson for American policymakers.

Because of the lengthy wars against al-Qaeda and ISIS, a narrative emerged in the United States that was critical of America's "forever wars." This label tended to conflate the various kinds of wars the US had embarked upon after 9/11. There was a big difference in scale between the invasion of Iraq by 150,000 US troops in 2003 and the advisory force of 5,000 American soldiers who were deployed to Iraq in the war against ISIS more than a decade later. Similarly, there were 110,000 American troops in Afghanistan at the height of Obama's surge in 2010, but only 2,500 US soldiers eleven years later when President Biden announced the total American withdrawal from the country. Politicians across the political spectrum often railed against the "forever wars," yet the war against ISIS ended the group's territorial caliphate, while the small American military presence in Afghanistan two decades after 9/11 had been enough to keep the Taliban at bay.

The war in Afghanistan, the CIA drone war in Pakistan, and the anti-ISIS war were all predicated on a US "counter-sanctuary" strategy. It was not in

the interests of the United States and its allies to have ungoverned spaces in countries where jihadist groups recruited and trained militants for attacks against Western targets. Trying to eliminate those sanctuaries was a sound policy; generally, the best way to achieve this was with a persistent presence of a limited number of US military advisors working with local ground forces backed by American airpower and intelligence. In an ideal world, those US forces would be there at the invitation of the host country, as was the case in post-Taliban Afghanistan and in Iraq during the anti-ISIS war.

The key military innovation of the war on terror was the armed drone, which would also revolutionize other conflicts, such as the war in Ukraine, just as the machine gun had revolutionized earlier wars. It was now possible for a drone "pilot," out of harm's way on one side of the world, to hunt and kill a specific individual on the other.

The armed drone was also more than just a flying piece of artillery. It could hover over a target for hours, gathering video intelligence in real time and transmitting it back to the pilot. That allowed drone operators to adjust the plan of attack, including trying to avoid civilian casualties, something that a jet pilot dropping a bomb could not.

The CIA became both the judge and the jury about who to kill since the identification of who was a "terrorist" and therefore fair game was typically the agency's call. CIA targeters spent long stretches of time hunting suspected terrorists using surveillance drones and other forms of intelligence gathering, getting to know their target's "pattern of life" and waiting for the right moment to order a drone strike. Attacks authorized from the agency's headquarters in Virginia were then carried out by a drone operator over 2,000 miles away at a US Air Force base in Nevada who controlled drones launched from airfields on the other side of the world.

Drone warfare allowed the US government some measure of plausible deniability to operate in countries that were not declared war zones, such as the tribal regions of Pakistan along the Afghan border. Over the course of the war on terror, the CIA would launch more than 400 drone strikes in the Pakistani tribal regions, killing an estimated 3,000 suspected members of al-Qaeda and the Taliban along with some 300 civilians. As a result, armed

drones have made the distinction between “war” and “peace” considerably fuzzier and have lowered the threshold for US presidents to conduct military operations around the world, from Libya to Somalia to Syria. Drone warfare has also helped extend the war on terror potentially endlessly into the future given the relatively low costs of drone operations.

The war on terror was waged by a relatively small number of Americans—less than 1 percent of the population were serving in the all-volunteer force. This force was also far more walled off from the civilian population than had been the case during America’s previous conflicts, when there had been a draft, such as the conflicts in Vietnam and Korea and World War II.

It was also striking how the military had increasingly become a hereditary occupation: many of the generals who commanded in Afghanistan or Iraq—such as Generals Casey, Miller, McKenzie, McKiernan, Nicholson, Odierno, and Petraeus—had children who also served in the long post-9/11 wars. This was emblematic both of the length of those conflicts and the fact that around 80 percent of the US military came from families in which a close relative had also served.

This all-volunteer force—now resembling, at least in part, a hereditary caste—had a high degree of professionalism compared to many of the draftees who had fought in Vietnam. But the lack of a draft meant that there was less public discussion of the costs and benefit of the post-9/11 wars. This made the commander in chief less accountable to the American public. If the draft had been in effect during the Iraq War, Bush’s surge of troops to Iraq in 2007 might have been much harder to implement, given that two-thirds of Americans had by then already turned against the war.

This relative lack of public accountability was amplified by the large—but often unseen—role that contractors played in the post-9/11 wars. There were 160,000 contractors in Iraq at the height of the war—working in areas such as security and logistics—about the same as the number of American troops. When contractors were killed, their stories were generally not covered with anything approaching the media coverage of US military fatalities. An estimated 8,000 American contractors died in America’s counterterrorism wars, more than the total of American military deaths in those wars, around 7,000. The relative invisibility of the contractors made

these post-9/11 wars appear less lethal for Americans, another way in which US presidents became less accountable to the public for how those wars were waged.

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A lesson of the long war against al-Qaeda and its allies was that the US should have tried to make peace with the Taliban shortly after they had been utterly defeated in December 2001. Counterfactuals are murky business, but there was a reasonable chance that key leaders of the Taliban would have settled, and years of war would have been averted. There would have been no significant cost to pursuing peace, but the Bush administration cast the opportunity aside.

Another road not taken was almost a decade later, at the height of Obama's surge in Afghanistan, when the Taliban were being beaten on the battlefield. Again, this moment of leverage over the Taliban to make some kind of peace agreement was missed, and with every passing year they grew stronger. As a result, the Taliban were eventually able to drive a hard bargain at the negotiating table, which was compounded by the feckless diplomacy of the Trump and Biden administrations.

A further lesson was that while the United States was initially adept at regime change—it toppled the Taliban in just three months, and Saddam Hussein's regime in only three weeks—in each case, there was no real plan for the "day after," and both countries faced growing insurgencies. The same was true of Libya in 2011, when Obama didn't plan for the day after the US had helped overthrow Gadhafi. In the subsequent vacuum, jihadist groups such as ISIS inserted themselves into Libya, which also became mired in a lengthy civil war.

If the US toppled a regime, it had a responsibility to implement a realistic plan for what followed, as it had done in Germany and Japan after World War II. As Colin Powell told Bush in the run-up to the 2003 war in Iraq—in a maxim known as the Pottery Barn rule—"You break it, you own it." This maxim encompassed both a US national security interest in not letting power vacuums and civil wars to develop in the wake of American regime changes and a moral responsibility to the citizens of these countries not to come in, smash up the place, and leave without establishing some kind of stable political order.

Despite the many American missteps during the war on terror, there were no large-scale lethal attacks by foreign terrorist groups in the United States in the quarter century after 9/11. This was partly the result of US military actions and CIA drone attacks against al-Qaeda and its allies. But there were also significant defensive measures taken in the United States that insulated the country from foreign terrorists, such as the rapid growth of FBI-led Joint Terrorism Task Forces; the establishment of the National Counterterrorism Center, which collated and analyzed the work of all eighteen US intelligence agencies; the implementation of expansive "no-fly" lists; and substantially increased security at airports.

It was a system of layered defenses that proved hard for foreign terrorists to penetrate. This still left the American homegrown terrorist threat—militants who had become radicalized because of the adept use of social media by groups such as ISIS to propagandize and incite militants in their home countries; they no longer needed to travel to an overseas training camp to be indoctrinated. But there was a ceiling to the level of damage such US-based militants could inflict without the training provided by a group such as the pre-9/11 al-Qaeda in Afghanistan; while they could potentially kill dozens using widely available semiautomatic weapons in the United States, they couldn't carry out a 9/11-scale attack.

The fact is that the US succeeded in managing the threat from groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIS after 9/11. That was not an easy thing for American politicians to say publicly, because much political hay would then be made if there was a significant terrorist attack in the US following such a statement. "Managing" the threat from terrorists also didn't have the same rhetorical resonance as "defeating" or "annihilating" them, but, realistically, managing the terrorist threat was about as good as it was going to get, since terrorism as a tactic has been around for centuries.

Although al-Qaeda had been greatly degraded since 9/11, hundreds of its fighters continued to live in Afghanistan after the Taliban had taken over the country again in 2021, and it also maintained active affiliate groups in regions such as West Africa.

The new leader of the group, Egyptian Saif al-Adel—who had replaced Ayman al-Zawahiri after a US drone strike killed him in Kabul in 2022—kept a low profile, possibly because he was living in Iran, a police state that

had long known about and tolerated the presence of some of al-Qaeda's leaders on its territory. Neither al-Qaeda nor the Iranian regime wanted to advertise the presence of those terrorist leaders in Iran.

While ISIS had lost its territorial caliphate in the heart of the Middle East by early 2019, its affiliates such as the Afghanistan-based ISIS-K demonstrated their continued lethality when four of its terrorists killed 140 people at a concert hall outside Moscow in March 2024. The following year, on December 14, 2025, ISIS also showed its continued ability to inspire militants when a father and son motivated by ISIS's ideology carried out the most lethal mass shooting in Australia in decades. They targeted Jews attending a Hanukkah celebration on Bondi Beach in Sydney, killing fifteen people and wounding dozens more.

By the beginning of Trump's second term, the war on terror appeared to be winding down: The CIA had not conducted a strike in Pakistan since 2018, and the US had conducted at most a handful of covert strikes against al-Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen since 2020. Following ISIS's territorial collapse during Trump's first term, the number of US strikes in Iraq and Syria had plummeted.

However, in the first year of his second term Trump authorized a broad reescalation of the "war on terror," from Africa to the Middle East to Latin America. The Trump administration surged the number of airstrikes to unprecedented levels in Somalia—more than 120, many of them directed against ISIS's Somali affiliate, the rationale for which seemed to be the group's ability to attract "foreign fighters" who might carry out terrorist attacks in the West.

In October 2025, President Trump further extended the "war on terror" framework to Latin American cartels who were shipping drugs to the United States. The Trump administration notified Congress, "We must use force in self-defense and defense of others against the ongoing attacks by these designated terrorist organizations." The Trump administration's designations of a dozen drug cartels as "terrorist organizations" conflated groups motivated by profit with those motivated by ideology.

This was a substantial increase in the war-making powers claimed by the president and resulted in the Pentagon carrying out dozens of strikes on

Colombian and Venezuelan boats that were said to be moving drugs, strikes that had killed some 150 people by early 2026. On March 3, 2026, the US military announced it had launched an operation in Ecuador against unnamed drug cartels that the Pentagon described as "Designated Terrorist Organizations." None of these war-like actions had been authorized by the US Congress.

After two US soldiers and an American contractor were killed in mid-December 2025 in Syria in an attack attributed to ISIS, the Trump administration authorized large-scale air strikes on ISIS targets in Syria. Then, on the symbolic date of Christmas Day 2025, President Trump authorized the first American strikes in Nigeria. Trump posted on Truth Social that "the United States launched a powerful and deadly strike against ISIS Terrorist Scum in Northwest Nigeria, who have been targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians at levels not seen for many years, and even Centuries!" In fact, ISIS's Nigerian victims included large numbers of Muslims, but the issue of Christians being killed by jihadists in Nigeria had become something of a cause célèbre in conservative circles in the United States.

Next, President Trump considerably ramped up his claims to act unilaterally as commander in chief in the name of the "war on terror" when on January 3, 2026, he ordered US special operations forces to capture Venezuela's president, strongman Nicolás Maduro, who the Trump administration alleged had partnered with some of the world's most violent "narco-terrorist" organizations. Despite the United States' dismal post-9/11 record of overthrowing dictators and then trying to bring some order to the "day after," following Maduro's capture President Trump asserted that the United States would, for some unspecified length of time, "run" Venezuela, a country of some 30 million people with a population around the same size as Iraq's in 2003.

Unlike the Bush administration's blunder during the American occupation of Iraq, when the tens of thousands of Iraqi Ba'athist officials who had been running the country were summarily fired in 2003, the Trump administration left in place almost the entire edifice of Maduro's incompetent, corrupt regime, which risked a different sort of blunder.

Trump officials engineered the installation of Maduro's vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, as the new Venezuelan leader. Months before removing Maduro from power, the Trump administration had opened a back channel

to Rodríguez. The Trump team believed that Rodríguez would comply with American interests and open up Venezuela's vast oil fields to US energy companies. The CIA had also prepared an intelligence assessment for senior Trump officials that Rodríguez would be the leader most likely to provide stability if Maduro was removed. As a result, the Trump administration made no effort to install the leaders of the democratically elected Venezuelan opposition who were widely regarded as the legitimate winners of the 2024 election in Venezuela that Maduro and his cronies had rigged in their favor. The installation of Rodríguez as the new Venezuelan leader was effectively a coup promoted by the CIA.

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Encouraged by what he termed the "brilliant" operation to remove Maduro from power, eight weeks later President Trump issued the order for Operation Epic Fury to attack Iran's ballistic missiles, armed drone capabilities, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and navy. US air strikes also aimed to destroy what remained of Iran's nuclear program after it had already been "obliterated"—in Trump's own words—by a wave of American strikes the previous June.

This echoed the way the relatively quick war to overthrow the Taliban after 9/11 had emboldened President George W. Bush to launch the war on Iraq a year and half later. But unlike Bush, who in the run up to the invasion of Iraq had repeatedly made the (largely false) case for the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Trump made virtually no effort to inform the American public about why he believed the Iran war was necessary.

Instead, in the run up to Operation Epic Fury, Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner and the president's longtime friend Steve Witkoff were conducting well-publicized negotiations with the Iranians about dramatically curtailing their nuclear enrichment program so that it would be limited only to civilian purposes. The proposals being discussed weren't greatly different from the 2015 agreement that the Obama administration had negotiated with the Iranians that prevented them from enriching uranium above 3.7 percent. You need 90 percent enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon. Trump had pulled the United States out of that nuclear deal in 2018 even though his own intelligence agencies had publicly assessed that the Iranians were sticking to the agreement.

It was during the renewed negotiations for a nuclear deal that Trump ordered the largest US military force assembled in the Middle East since Bush's invasion of Iraq to attack Iran. When the war began, Trump urged the Iranian people to rise up and take control of their country. Since the Iranian regime had all the guns and no qualms about turning them on their own people, there were few takers for this call to arms.

Authorizing war is supposed to be the constitutional prerogative of Congress. That's because America's Founders did not want a system where a king-like president alone could launch the United States into a war. The framers of the Constitution would have been quite alarmed by Trump's claim to the *New York Times* in January 2026 that his only restraint as commander in chief was his "own morality."

Trusting in his moral clarity, Trump didn't seek congressional authorization for his war against Iran, unlike Bush, who did seek Congress's approval for his invasion of Iraq. This was particularly anti-democratic since most Americans opposed the war with Iran, a conflict that had less public support when it began than American wars going back to World War II: two days into the Iran War only 41 percent of American were in favor of the conflict. Even the disastrous Iraq War was supported by three quarters of Americans when hostilities began in 2003, while in the months after 9/11 the Afghan War was supported by more than 90 percent of Americans.

With his attacks on Iran, Trump greatly expanded the post-9/11 war-making powers that the US commander in chief claimed for himself. However, the groundwork for this had already been laid by his predecessors with Bush's "preventive" war against Iraq and Obama's sharply ramped-up campaign of drones attacks outside of conventional war zones in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen, as well as his 2011 campaign to overthrow the Libyan dictator Muammar Gadhafi, which he had ordered without a congressional authorization.

Trump's rationales for his war of choice in Iran resembled those of President Bush and his top aides for their war of choice in Iraq. Before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq, Bush's Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had ominously warned about Saddam Hussein's regime: "We don't want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud." More than two decades later Trump

asserted that the Iranians were building up their nuclear weapons capabilities; in addition, they sponsored terrorist groups, brutally repressed their own people, and their ballistic missiles could "soon reach the American homeland." Witkoff, a real estate billionaire who was Trump's top negotiator on the thorniest foreign policy issues, claimed that Iran was "a week away" from having "industrial-grade bomb-making material."

As was the case for President Bush's war in Iraq, Trump's war against Iran was, in good part, based on false claims: Iran's ability to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons had been largely destroyed by the US airstrikes in June 2025 and while their ballistic missiles could hit targets anywhere in the Middle East, they had no capacity to threaten the United States itself.

More than two weeks into the Iran War, the US director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard delivered written testimony to the Senate Intelligence Committee on March 17. It stated that "Iran's nuclear enrichment program was obliterated. There has been no effort since then to try to rebuild their enrichment capability." However, when she testified during the committee's widely televised March 18 public hearing, Gabbard omitted those conclusions from her testimony—her boss was an avid cable news consumer—since they would have undercut Trump's key rationale for the war.

When questioned at the hearing about the supposed imminence of the Iran threat, Gabbard, said, "The only person who can determine what is and is not an imminent threat is the president," adding, "It is not the intelligence community's responsibility to determine what is and is not an imminent threat." This was an astonishing statement: US taxpayers pay around $100 billion a year to intelligence agencies precisely for them to assess what constitutes important threats to the United States, just as the CIA had done during the summer of 2001 when it had repeatedly warned senior Bush administration officials about the growing threat posed by Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda.

While the Trump administration's claims about Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile reach were false, Iran had, however, long supported terrorist groups such as the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Following Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, the Houthis had unleashed a barrage of attacks against ships in the Red Sea through which transited about 15 percent of global trade. Also undebatable was the Iranian

regime's ruthless repression of dissent: in late December 2025 a wave of protests spread across Iran, and the regime killed many thousands of their subjects.

But why now? That was the question many Americans puzzled over when Trump ordered his war against Iran because there was no evidence that the Iranian regime posed any pressing threat to the United States. The Twelve-Day War that the Israelis had launched against Iran in June 2025, combined with simultaneous American airstrikes, had already greatly damaged Iran's key nuclear sites and military capabilities.

Three days into the Iran War, Trump's Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, explained the purported urgency of launching the attacks on Iran when he briefed reporters saying, "We knew that there was going to be an Israeli action. We knew that that would precipitate an attack against American forces, and we knew that if we didn't preemptively go after them before they launched those attacks, we would suffer higher casualties."

Two weeks before the attacks on Iran were launched, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had visited the White House on February 11, where he spoke to Trump for around three hours about their plans to jointly destroy the Iranian regime, long a dream of Netanyahu's. It was the culmination of a year-long campaign by Netanyahu to persuade Trump to jointly attack Iran. As the attacks on Iran were launched, Netanyahu exulted to the Israeli public in Hebrew: "This coalition of forces allows us to do what I have yearned to do for forty years: smite the terror regime."

However, the notion that the United States only launched one of the largest attacks in US military history because the Israelis were going to attack Iran unilaterally and American forces would then get caught in the crossfire was implausible given the high degree of military coordination that Israel and the United States had already demonstrated during the June 2025 strikes on Iran.

President Trump threw in another rationale for his war. Referring to Iran's leaders as "lunatics," he told reporters, "It was my opinion that they were going to attack first." Trump's press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, told reporters that the president "had a good feeling that the Iranian regime was going to strike United States' assets and our personnel in the region." This "feeling" was also nonsense: the Iranians knew from the air strikes in 2025 that Israel and the United States enjoyed near-total air superiority over the

skies of Iran, so they were hardly going to supply the casus belli that could mean suicide for the regime's leaders.

On February 27, 2026, Trump gave the order to the Pentagon to attack: "Operation Epic Fury is approved. No aborts. Good luck." During just the first four days of the war, US forces working in tandem with the Israeli military struck some 2,000 targets in Iran. CENTCOM commander Admiral Brad Cooper described those attacks as "nearly double the scale" of President Bush's 2003 "shock and awe" campaign against Iraq. The targeting for those strikes was significantly enabled by AI tools and systems provided by Anthropic and Palantir, the first time that the United States had employed these tools at scale in a war.

Among the early victims of the war were more than 170 people—mostly girls—who died at an elementary school in southern Iran, almost certainly killed by a US strike that was based on faulty intelligence. Even though there were no American boots on the ground in Iran at the beginning of the war, six American soldiers were killed at a base in Kuwait, while more than more than 140 were wounded, some severely.

During the first hours of the war, Iran's eighty-six-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was targeted in Israeli airstrikes that were based on many months of intelligence gathered by the CIA. It was the type of targeting that the agency had honed during the long war on terror. Khamenei was killed while he was meeting with many of his top advisers at his fortified compound in Tehran. Also killed were Iran's defense minister and the commander of its Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the shock troops of the regime, along with more than forty other Iranian religious and military leaders in locations across Iran.

Trump said that he should have a role in choosing Iran's next leader, while his officials hoped to install an Iranian leader in the mold of Venezuela's compliant new president, Rodríguez. However, there was no indication that prior to the war Trump officials had made contacts with any putatively malleable candidates in the Iranian regime as they had done in Venezuela.

Instead, Iran's "Assembly of Experts" installed a hereditary theocracy, appointing Khamenei's son Mojtaba Khamenei to be Supreme Leader, a

cleric at least as hardline as his father and three decades younger. He had long been close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the paramilitary force that effectively ran Iran. Along with his father, Mojtaba Khamenei's wife was also killed by the airstrikes at the beginning of the war, which suggested that the younger Khamenei would not be in any mood to compromise with the United States. Khamenei was also injured in the strikes and did not appear in public. Given the capabilities of American and Israeli spy agencies, this was likely a sensible precaution.

Trump not only failed to install a more palatable leader in the mold of Rodríguez, but Iran's response was to appoint a hardline cleric who Trump had said would be an "unacceptable" choice to run the country. The message from the Iranian regime was clear: We will fight on.

Within days of the launch of hostilities, bills to halt the Iran War failed to pass in both houses of the Republican-controlled US Congress. The message from the Republican party: We are all-in with our commander in chief.

What kind of war was Trump, and therefore the United States, embarking on? All the various rationales offered publicly for the Iran War by the Trump administration largely omitted the most likely reason: rather than posing some kind of imminent threat to the United States, in fact, the Iranian regime had never been weaker.

The protests across Iran that had begun in late December 2025 had been ferociously repressed by the regime, but they showed that there was widespread popular discontent with the brutal, incompetent reign of the ayatollahs. The Twelve-Day War against Iran by Israel and the United States in June 2025 had revealed the weaknesses of its air defenses. Following the attacks by Iran-backed Hamas on Israel during the fall of 2023, Israeli attacks had significantly weakened Iranian proxies in the region: Many of Hezbollah's leaders and foot soldiers had been killed in Lebanon and the leadership of the Houthis in Yemen had been decimated by American and Israeli strikes, while Iran's close Syrian ally, Bashar al-Assad, had also been deposed.

Trump and Netanyahu both saw themselves as historic leaders in the mold of Churchill and the seeming opportunity to destroy the much-

weakened Iranian regime was all too tempting. As an Athenian general in Thucydides's history of the Peloponnesian War long ago observed, "The strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Stephen Miller, a key advisor to Trump, made much the same point when he told CNN's Jake Tapper in early January 2026, "We live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power. . . . We're a superpower. And under President Trump, we are going to conduct ourselves as a superpower."

President Trump, who had spent much of his career in politics railing against foreign entanglements, had in two months decapitated two regimes on two different continents. During the first fifteen months of his presidency Trump had also authorized military operations against dozens of boats in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific that were suspected to be transporting drugs, as well as against targets in eight countries: Ecuador, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen. The "America First" president elected by many Americans who wanted to end the United States' overseas military operations was proving to be a very aggressive commander in chief.

Too aggressive, certainly, for Joe Kent, a former US Special Forces officer and MAGA stalwart, who Trump had appointed to a top US intelligence role, as the director of the National Counterterrorism Center. On March 17, more than two weeks into the Iran War, Kent abruptly resigned, saying, "Iran posed no imminent threat to our nation, and it is clear that we started this war due to pressure from Israel." Kent's resignation dramatically undercut claims by Trump's senior officials about the imminence of the threat posed by Iran: as the nation's top counterterrorism official, Kent had access to high-level intelligence, while his MAGA credentials were unassailable.

The same day that Kent resigned, the Israelis announced they had killed the man widely believed to be the de facto leader of Iran, Ali Larijani, as well as the leader of the Basij, a domestic militia that repressed any dissent in Iran. It was a split screen moment: even while even some MAGA Republicans were withdrawing their support from the war, the Israeli and US militaries were proceeding apace, continuing to inflict losses on the regime.

The war quickly spread to Lebanon, as Hezbollah launched missiles into Israel to avenge the attacks on their benefactors in Iran. This produced a

ferocious Israeli response during which a million Lebanese were forced to flee their homes in southern Lebanon and some 1,000 were killed during the first couple of weeks of the war.

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Just as had been the case with Bush's 2003 overthrow of Saddam Hussein and Obama's US-led NATO air campaign against Gadhafi eight years later, the Trump administration made no plans for the "day after" the death of the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who had ruled over Iran for 37 years.

In Iraq, the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein had helped to precipitate a civil war between the Shia and the Sunni that eventually led to the rise of ISIS. It would take more than a decade and a half after the 2003 US invasion for Iraq to finally become a somewhat peaceful, somewhat democratic state.

After a UN resolution was passed in March 2011 that authorized the protection of Libyan civilians who were then being massacred by Gadhafi's army, President Obama ordered a US-led NATO air campaign to attack Gadhafi's forces. Obama said his biggest regret as president was not thinking through the "day after" in Libya, because the death of Gadhafi helped precipitate a civil war that lasted more than a decade and drew in seven other countries: Egypt, France, Qatar, Russia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States. Those nations all supported or attacked various factions and proxy forces in the Libyan civil war, which at one point even included ISIS. The terrorist army captured the Libyan city of Sirte in 2014 and held on to it for two years. A decade after the Libyan civil war had begun, two competing governments divided up Libya between themselves.

In Afghanistan the US-backed Afghan leaders, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, had come to power in elections that were marred by widespread fraud, but their administrations also sharply reduced child mortality, increased life expectancy, educated millions of girls, and nurtured a vibrant independent media. All of this was thrown away in the bipartisan fiasco in which the Trump administration negotiated with the Taliban a total US withdrawal from Afghanistan and President Biden went through with it.

In short, the United States' record in the post-9/11 Middle East and Afghanistan did not inspire confidence that America's regime decapitation

project in Iran would have a happy ending. Early in the Iran war, Trump himself admitted: "the worst case would be . . . you go through this, and then in five years you realize you put somebody in who's no better." This grim prediction would come true in only a matter of weeks.

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When the Americans and Israelis attacked Iran in late February 2026, there was no meaningful armed opposition in the country. After the war commenced, Trump officials greenlighted the CIA to arm obscure Iranian Kurdish groups mostly based in Iraq who were opposed to the regime. This didn't seem to be a well-thought-out plan but rather a last-minute improvisation. By week two of the war, Trump publicly nixed this proposal since it risked triggering ethnic unrest. Meanwhile, the Shah of Iran's son, Reza Pahlavi, who had long lived in the United States, was positioning himself for a leadership role in Iran, although he hadn't been in the country for nearly half a century.

This was quite different from what had happened in Afghanistan in the months following 9/11, when a force of around five hundred CIA officers and US Special Forces allied with tens of thousands of Afghan fighters in the Northern Alliance had toppled the Taliban. Hamid Karzai led the armed insurrection in the south of Afghanistan, and when the Taliban surrendered, he was installed as the country's new leader, a decision that was endorsed by Afghan leaders across the country, as well as by neighboring Iran and Pakistan.

When Trump launched his war on Iran, there was no analogous opposition fighting force inside Iran nor a proven opposition leader who could appeal to a wide cross section of Iranians. Having spent almost half a century in power, the ayatollahs had made sure of that.

The lack of any "day after" planning for the Iran War was underlined when three days into the conflict the Trump administration issued an unprecedented warning to as many as one million Americans in fourteen countries across the Middle East: "DEPART NOW." By then, almost all commercial flights had been suspended. US embassies and consulates in Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were hit by missiles or drones launched by Iran or its proxy forces and those diplomatic facilities either closed, or all non-critical staff were ordered to leave. It was

an erosion of the US presence in the Middle East that bin Laden could only have dreamed of, and it was precipitated by the American president.

Immediately after the US assassination of Iran's key leader General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad in early 2020 and again after the US airstrikes against its nuclear facilities half a decade later, the Iranian regime had retaliated with only relatively small-scale, well-telegraphed attacks against American military bases in the Middle East. This seems to have affected Trump's calculations about the likely scale of the Iranian response to his war. The ayatollahs came to a very different conclusion: these kinds of performative Iranian strikes against US military targets in the region were not going to deter the Americans from Trump's oft-stated goal of regime change.

Facing a fight for its survival, in March 2026 the Iranian regime lashed out in ways that Trump publicly said he hadn't anticipated. The Iranian regime launched "Operation Madman" attacking oil and gas facilities in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. All those countries soon sharply reduced or halted their energy production.

The Iranians were taking a large gamble with this strategy since Qatar had long enjoyed close relations with the Iranians with whom they shared the world's largest natural gas field, while much of Iran's trade and financial transactions were routed through the Emirates. Even the Saudis, who had long considered the Iranians a mortal threat, had in the past couple of years made efforts at rapprochement with the ayatollahs. The Gulf states prized stability above all and now they were watching much of this literally going up in smoke.

Iran was making a world of enemies, which is rarely a winning strategy. Yet for Iran, it was all worth it, if sufficient pressure from the Arab Gulf states and other American allies could persuade Trump to end the war, which was damaging all of them.

The Iranians also effectively closed the Strait of Hormuz, the crucial passage for about twenty percent of the world's oil and gas to transit from the Gulf states, largely to Europe and Asia. All of this caused what the International Energy Agency described as "the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market." Prices at the gas pump surged in the

United States while oil climbed to over 100 dollars a barrel. The International Energy Agency announced it would release 400 million barrels of emergency oil reserves from its member states, the largest amount injected into the energy markets in history, but this was not a long-term fix as it amounted to only four days of global oil consumption.

On March 18, Israel attacked Iran's South Pars gas field, the largest in the world, which it shares with Qatar. This spiked energy prices higher and provoked a furious response from the Gulf States, who believed that Israel had put an even bigger target on their backs. Within twelve hours of Israel's strike on the South Pars field, Iranian missiles attacked Qatar's Ras Laffan gas facility, the most important natural gas hub in the world, accounting for a fifth of global production. The massive facility, almost three times the size of Paris, was extensively damaged and was estimated to take three to five years to repair.

The sharply rising price of gas and oil benefited Russia, a major energy exporter which started earning about an additional billion dollars a week. Meanwhile, the Russians provided their Iranian allies with targeting intelligence about US aircraft, ships, and troops in the Middle East. The normally voluble Trump was largely silent about this, but his credulous chief foreign policy negotiator, Steve Witkoff, said that the Russian president Vladimir Putin—a former KGB officer who lied as effortlessly as he breathed—had denied this when he had spoken with Trump.

At the same time, Ukraine, which had greatly advanced the production of relatively inexpensive but effective armed drones as well as anti-drone technology in its war with Russia, offered its expertise and hardware to Arab Gulf countries and the United States. Meanwhile, America was providing battlefield intelligence to Ukraine about the Russians who had invaded their country. The United States was now—not for the first time—in a proxy war with Russia.

Before the war, Trump's war cabinet had considered the possibility that Iran might close the Strait of Hormuz but had calculated that the Iranians wouldn't do so because they needed to export their own oil and gas through the relatively narrow waterway. Trump's energy secretary Chris Wright told an interviewer on February 18 that he wasn't concerned that a war against Iran could torpedo global energy markets. Just before the Iran War was launched, two of the three US minesweepers assigned to the Middle East had sailed to Malaysia more than three thousand miles away. After the war

started Wright posted on social media that US Navy ships had already escorted a tanker through the Strait, a false claim he soon retracted, injecting further turmoil into the markets.

The Iranians had never closed the Strait before. This time with their backs against the wall they did, while continuing to let their own tankers transit the waterway. They also started monetizing their chokehold on the Strait, charging hefty fees to ships navigating the waterway that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps had vetted as friendly to the regime.

Trump's secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth, seemed completely at sea when he explained to reporters there was "no need to worry about" the closure of the Strait. Hegseth observed: "The only thing prohibiting transit in the straits right now is Iran shooting at shipping. It is open for transit should Iran not do that." Well, yes.

Short of a negotiated settlement with the Iranians, the only way to end Iran's blockade of the Strait was either to put a significant number of boots on the ground to seize Iran's coastline abutting the waterway, or to move US Navy warships into the Strait where they could find themselves to be sitting ducks in an Iranian "kill box." For those who might be willing to take the physical risks of transiting the Strait, insurance brokers massively increased the premiums for ships hazarding the journey.

Having spent years bullying and insulting close NATO allies, when Trump demanded that they help to police the Strait, they demurred. Germany's Defense Minister, Boris Pistorius, pointed out, "This is not our war. We did not start it." French President Emmanuel Macron piled on saying, "France did not choose this war, we are not involved in it." Other than Israel, the United States had gone to war with no allies. Since European governments had not been consulted about the impending Iran war, they were in no mood to help, particularly since they were democracies answerable to their publics, substantial majorities of whom were against the war. This was the polar opposite of the NATO-led coalition that George W. Bush had assembled after 9/11 to wage the Afghan War, or the large international coalition that Bush's father had organized to extirpate Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait in 1991.

The British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, the leader of the Labour Party, had no plans to go down in history as America's "poodle" on the Iran War, well aware of how a previous Labour prime minister, Tony Blair, had greatly damaged his reputation by going all-in with his support for Bush's

ill-fated Iraq War. Starmer said publicly that “one of the lessons from Iraq” was the need for “a viable thought-through plan with an objective that can be achieved.” He added, “This government does not believe in regime change from the skies.”

On March 20, Trump predictably lambasted America’s closest allies as “cowards” for not helping to open up the Strait of Hormuz, even though when he made this charge the US Navy had no ships in the waterway because it was too dangerous.

In the first weeks after the start of the Iran War, Trump was wildly inconsistent about how long hostilities would last, declaring one day that the Iran War was “pretty well complete,” and another day that it could go on for several weeks, or until he felt it “in his bones.” Trump took to publicly calling the Iran war an “excursion” as if it were some kind of picnic. None of this was reassuring. Nor was the administration’s request two weeks into the war for an additional 200 billion dollars to pay for the conflict; this was shaping up to be quite an expensive excursion.

The Iran War was the foreign policy equivalent of Trump’s domestic tariff policies, which had imposed additional taxes on Americans. They now also faced sharply rising prices at the gas pump and when they took flights. Other inflationary costs loomed for goods made from gas and oil, such as fertilizers.

Iran’s leaders had decided to try and make the war so painful for American consumers and for key US allies that Trump would, they hoped, declare victory relatively quickly, allowing their regime to survive, even in a much-weakened state.

Indeed, three weeks into the Iran War Trump began publicly musing about declaring victory, saying it “was Militarily WON.” But as the United States had found to its dismay in Iraq, after the Obama administration had declared victory and removed all US troops from the country in December 2011, within two and half years ISIS took over much of Iraq. Similarly, the removal of all US troops from Afghanistan during the Biden administration quickly led to the Taliban taking over the country. Merely because a US president asserted that a war had ended, that didn’t mean that the conflict

then stopped, or that an even worse regime wouldn't spring up to replace the previous one, as Trump himself had said.

As the Iran War dragged on, the Israelis and the Trump administration had increasingly divergent goals for the conflict. Netanyahu seemed intent on collapsing the Iranian state, which he saw as a mortal threat to Israel: that was why he had ordered the attacks on Iran's key South Pars gas field, which the country depended on for its electricity. A month into the war, Trump, concerned about global energy prices, seemed increasingly interested in a negotiated settlement with the Iranian regime, but at the same time he also ordered thousands of additional US troops to the Middle East. Meanwhile, leaders of the Republican party were nervous about the conflict causing a possible global economic meltdown that would surely impact their chances of retaining both houses of Congress during the American mid-term elections in early November 2026.

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The new Supreme Leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, had served in the 1980s Iran-Iraq War when he was only seventeen. During that war, the Iranians had sent teenage boys into Iraqi minefields to clear them, convinced that they would attain martyrdom if they died. The Iran-Iraq conflict had lasted almost a decade and claimed as many as a million lives, ending in a bloody stalemate. The ayatollahs who ran Iran firmly believed that Allah was on their side. None of this history suggested that Iran's clerics would back down in the face of the determined American and Israeli campaign to remove them.*

And they didn't. This had been predicted in a classified US National Intelligence Council assessment that was prepared a week before the Iran War had commenced: they assessed that the regime would likely remain in place even in the face of a large-scale attack by the United States. Assessments by the National Intelligence Council are prepared by analysts drawn from across the 18 US intelligence agencies.

Trump and his acolytes in his administration frequently boasted that he was the only US president with the guts to launch a war against Iran. In fact, previous presidents had been rightly wary of the risks of going to war against a country with more than 90 million people ruled by well-armed religious fanatics.

Secretary of Defense Hegseth claimed victory early on during the Iran War crowing that "Iran has no air defenses, Iran has no air force, Iran has no navy." This echoed the claims of victory that Bush's secretary of defense, Donald Rumsfeld, had made more than two decades earlier, during the "shock and awe" first phase of the Iraq War. Hegseth and Rumsfeld confused the punishing tactical and operational successes that the United States had inflicted on its enemies with political and strategic victories.

Despite the destruction of many of its missiles and drone stocks, Iran continued to launch missiles in the fourth week of the war, attacking the Israeli towns of Arad and Dimona on March 21, injuring about 175 people. Dimona is the well-guarded location of Israel's main nuclear weapons facility, which had never been targeted before by Hamas, Hezbollah, or Iran. A day earlier, Iran had also launched two ballistic missiles at the joint American-British base on the island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, more than two thousand miles away, which was considerably further than was believed to be the range of Iranian missiles, though neither struck their targets. These strikes were signals by the Iranian regime that they were prepared to keep upping the ante: in Pentagon parlance, they were willing to keep going up the escalation ladder.

In Iraq in early 2003 General David Petraeus had asked a reporter from the Washington Post, "Tell me how this ends?" While Trump and his war cabinet proffered their vision of a much-weakened Iran, they offered no clarity about the kind of country they hoped would emerge from the rubble once the guns fell silent. They never explained to the American public how the Iran War would end.

The US military has long been quite adept at breaking things and killing people, but when these tactics were not aligned with a clear strategy, the United States ended up in the quagmire of Vietnam, or the sectarian civil war in Iraq that eventually birthed ISIS, or precipitating a possible global economic recession caused by the Iran War. The United States, which had once prided itself on being the guarantor of global order, seemed now to be its chief disruptor.

There were clear American military goals in Iran: destroying much of Iran's navy, ballistic missiles, armed drones, and what remained of its

nuclear program. These were mostly achievable. But what came next was not clear at all: the Trump administration's aim seemed to be to replace the ayatollahs with a regime that was more amenable to US interests. That seemed considerably less achievable.

There had been little debate in Trump's war cabinet about whether going to war with Iran was a good idea. Trump embarked on the war based on the "feeling" in his much-trusted gut while consulting only a small circle of advisors including Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Vice President JD Vance, who had publicly opposed any war with Iran only a year and half earlier on the grounds that it would be a "huge distraction" and "massively expensive," which it certainly proved to be. Two weeks into the Iran conflict, Trump explained to a Fox News host how his war cabinet functioned: "We have some differences, but they never end up being much. I convince them all to let's do it my way."

Still, this was more consultative than George W. Bush, who never bothered to convene his war cabinet to ask them a basic question: Is invading Iraq a good idea? For his part, Biden had ordered the withdrawal of all US troops from Afghanistan in 2021 against the advice of his top generals, key NATO allies, and the elected Afghan government, all of whom had warned of a Taliban takeover of the country if he went through with his withdrawal. Among the post-9/11 US commanders in chief, Trump had no monopoly on trusting his own gut and making dismal judgments as a result.

The "war on terror" had morphed from Bush's "preventive war" doctrine to Obama's prolific use of armed drones in countries such as Pakistan and Yemen that were not at war with the United States, to Trump's claim that he could kill suspected drug cartel members at will and also capture a de facto head of state who he deemed to be a "narco-terrorist." And building on all those expansions of presidential powers was Trump's war on Iran, which was in the president's words, "the world's number one state sponsor of terror." That war was launched without a Congressional authorization, or public buy-in, or anything resembling an armed attack on the United States, while it was justified with a shifting set of rationales that were often false.

The increased power claimed by the US president to wage war against those he labeled terrorists had its roots in Congress's authorization to use force issued immediately after 9/11, but that power had only grown greater with the passage of time, even as 9/11 itself receded into the past.

During the quarter century of the war on terror, the United States had learned many important lessons: Counterinsurgency tactics, no matter how skillfully implemented, could not solve big strategic issues such as the Shia-Sunni conflict in Iraq or the Taliban's haven in Pakistan. Large conventional US troop deployments such as the 2007 surge in Iraq could tamp down the civil war but ultimately couldn't solve the country's political-religious divisions that eventually led to the rise of ISIS.

The killing of bin Laden and many of the other leaders of al-Qaeda and ISIS pointed to the increasing precision and lethality of special operations forces and drones, while the US war against ISIS showed the advantages of using a relatively small number of American advisors working with the ground forces of partner nations or proxy forces.

A lesson that the United States seemed not to have absorbed: Make real plans for the "day after" the war appears to be won, or you will likely lose the peace.

Above all, American presidents must correctly judge and establish the kind of war upon which they and the nation are embarking.

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* Trump's Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth seemed as convinced as the ayatollahs that God was on his side, quoting Scripture at a Pentagon press conference: "Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war and my fingers for battle." He also exhorted Americans to pray for victory "every day, on bended knee, with your family, in your schools, in your churches, in the name of Jesus Christ."

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NOTES

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