

Praise for *How We Missed the Story*

"Roy Gutman, a tireless reporter, has written a deeply researched and fascinating account of the various U.S. foreign policy failures that helped account for the rise of the Taliban and al Qaeda in Afghanistan before the 9/11 attacks. Gutman also explains how so many institutions in the United States, from the media to the national security establishment, largely missed what would turn out to be one of the most important stories of our time."

—Peter Bergen, author of *Holy War, Inc.* and *The Osama bin Laden I Know*

"In a detailed account and analysis of Afghanistan events after the Soviet military left in 1989, Roy Gutman shows how the world's abandonment of interest in the country led not only to horrors there but also to the spread of terrorism worldwide. His book provides graphic and valuable background to today's problems—and a warning of tomorrow's dangers from ignoring such troubled areas."

—Henry Bradsher, award-winning journalist and author of *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union* and *Afghan Communism and Soviet Intervention*

"This well-written, on-the-mark book is an informative and entertaining read. No other study that examines the events leading up to 9/11 is as persuasive in placing the blame where it belongs—on the failure of three successive U.S. presidents to provide the foreign policy leadership and direction needed to address the politics, philosophy, and disposition to violence of Islamist extremism."

—Thomas E. Gouttierre, Dean, International Studies and Programs, University of Nebraska, Omaha

*"In the early 1990s, the United States turned a blind eye to the civil strife in Afghanistan. In *How We Missed the Story*, Roy Gutman traces U.S. inaction amid civil war, the Taliban's ascension, and Osama bin Laden's rise in riveting detail. To truly understand and combat the threat we face, Gutman's exploration of missed opportunities and lessons learned is essential reading."*

—Lee H. Hamilton, president and director, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, cochair of the Iraq Study Group, and vice-chair of the 9/11 Commission

"Roy Gutman has succeeded admirably in exposing the missed opportunities and serious errors of U.S. policymakers that led them to misjudge the threat that became all too real on September 11, 2001. Writing in a highly informative and readable style, he explores many of the intelligence failures and policy predispositions that are not so clearly or so thoroughly examined elsewhere. Additionally, his extensive and well-chosen interviews offer new insights and convey scholarly objectivity."

—Marvin Weinbaum, Middle East Institute

How We Missed the Story

How We Missed the Story

Osama bin Laden, the Taliban,
and the Hijacking of Afghanistan

Roy Gutman



UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE
Washington, D.C.

The views expressed in this book are those of the authors alone. They do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace.

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*To the memory of Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan,
who spoke up for those who had no voice:
the refugees, the displaced,
and the victims of war and war crimes*

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Foreword

Journalism, as former *Washington Post* editor Phil Graham famously put it, is best considered “a first rough draft of history.” That is, despite journalism’s noble ideals, even the best journalism tells only part of any given story. The true scope, scale, and significance of even a major event can only be understood with a certain distance provided by time and context. But as we are learning about the origins and impact of the surprise attacks of September 11, 2001, sometimes a story of profound import has neither been gotten first nor gotten right: sometimes the story simply has not been gotten.

How We Missed the Story: Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, and the Hijacking of Afghanistan represents one veteran journalist’s attempt to ensure that the fundamental story behind 9/11 is not only told but is told right. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on Serb atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Roy Gutman—a senior fellow at the Institute in 2003–04—focuses here principally on events in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Drawing on field research and numerous interviews with key individuals both in the United States and abroad, he advances a narrative that reveals the inner workings of U.S. foreign policymaking, the internal debates among key actors in and around Afghanistan during the 1990s, and the media’s lapses in coverage of Afghanistan during that period that might have put that situation higher up on our foreign policy agenda. His analysis highlights key strategic mistakes made by the West: first in allowing the Taliban to fill the power vacuum left in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal in 1989; and then, with the emergence of Osama bin Laden, in leaving strategic policies in the hands of counterterrorism experts rather than political and diplomatic officials.

It is essential that this history be closely examined for insights that can guide both U.S. policy and media planning in the present and future. Today, more than six years after the Taliban was forcibly removed from power, Afghanistan yet again is in danger of becoming a “hijacked” state. As the U.S. government and the UN Security Council have recently warned, the country’s fragile institutions of governance face threats not only from a booming illicit drug trade but also from a resurgent al-Qaeda-influenced Taliban. The Taliban continues to receive support from al-Qaeda and also from supporters in Pakistan and from wealthy Arab financiers. Equally troubling, the Taliban and other antidemocratic forces in Afghanistan are finding sanctuary in those regions of the country, and in Pakistan’s tribal areas, that lie beyond central government control. They are adopting brutal tactics honed by their insurgent brethren in Iraq, as evidenced by the dramatic number of suicide and improvised-explosive-device attacks within the country in the past two years; and they are waging a successful media campaign to build support for their cause.

To forestall a repeat of the 1990s and stave off a reinvigorated Taliban, the United States and other Western nations must renew efforts to build Afghan governance capacity at both the central government and local levels, devote much-needed resources for reconstruction and the provision of public services, and help stabilize areas of the country currently outside central government control. Collectively, such efforts can help the government in Kabul establish the legitimacy it vitally needs to gain public support.

While in a previous era distant conflicts may have been so far from American shores that they posed little threat to the United States, post-9/11 Afghanistan teaches us that in the current era of global interdependence and advanced technologies of communication, transport, and warfare, ostensibly local conflicts can harbor lethal threats to America's security. As Gutman states, "Obscure, faraway conflicts have given rise to the evils of this era."

The author's observation is relevant to a number of recent Institute publications which similarly highlight the need for the international community to pay close attention to the most far-flung conflicts. These recent volumes include *Council Unbound: The Growth of UN Decision Making on Conflict and Postconflict Issues after the Cold War*, by Michael J. Matheson; *Twenty-First-Century Peace Operations*, edited by William J. Durch; *Taming Intractable Conflicts: Mediation in the Hardest Cases*, by Chester Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall; *Preventing Violent Conflict: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*, by Michael Lund; *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, by John Paul Lederach; and *Engaging Eurasia's Separatist States: Unresolved Conflict and De Facto States*, by Dov Lynch.

In short, *How We Missed the Story* serves not only as a "first draft" of the pre-9/11 Afghanistan story but also as a natural complement to a number of volumes within the Institute's publication catalog. It also informs the applied programs of conflict management of the Institute's Afghanistan Working Group and activities in Iraq. Sure to attract a wide audience and to occupy a prominent place among the Institute's publications relevant to the role of media in conflict, *How We Missed the Story* makes an original, fascinating, and insightful contribution to the policy, academic, and public debate over how and why the Afghanistan story was missed in the leadup to 9/11. It also highlights the need for the West to get Afghanistan's present story right.

Richard H. Solomon
President
United States Institute of Peace

Preface

Almost everyone knows where he or she was on the morning of September 11, 2001. I was in the basement pressroom of a downtown hotel in Lima, Peru, waiting for U.S. secretary of state Colin Powell to emerge from talks. It was beyond any of us reporters who were accompanying him to assimilate the massive crime we watched unfold on the small screen. But no one was in any doubt where the attack had originated. "You had better send someone to Afghanistan," I said on the phone to my foreign editor. Flying into Andrews Air Force Base that evening, we could see the smoke rising miles away from the fire at the Pentagon.

The question gnawed at me: How did Osama bin Laden get the sanctuary to launch such an attack? The answer had to lie in politics, Afghan local politics. A few weeks later, Zalmay Khalilzad, the Afghan-born South Asia specialist on the Bush National Security Council, gave voice to my gut instinct. Speaking before a Washington think tank, he said bin Laden, a terrorist, had in effect "hijacked" a state. But that raised other questions: When did it happen? Was the U.S. government aware? Did they tell anyone? It would have made quite a headline; why had no reporter broken the story? I also felt culpable: Though I had never covered South Asia from the field, I had focused on so-called "small wars" throughout my reporting career. In the 1980s, I kept close tabs from a great distance on the epic struggle by Afghans to oust Soviet occupiers, and I wrote a book about the wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador. In the 1990s, I covered the wars in the Balkans and then cocodited *Crimes of War*, a book whose aim was to put a spotlight on obscure faraway conflicts where war crimes usually occur. How had I missed the cues?

With the help of Afghanistan experts, some of whom I had known since the Soviet-Afghan war, I developed a working theory. Bin Laden amassed power over the Taliban regime by supporting them in the civil war, which began the day they came to power in 1996 and lasted until their removal in 2001. From 1998, when bin Laden organized the deadly attacks on two U.S. embassies in East Africa, the U.S. government was fixated on bin Laden the terrorist, but bin Laden was preoccupied with building his power base and planning for more terror attacks. Bin Laden's support was in the strategic deployment of trained ground forces, which enabled the Taliban to capture territory from the renowned anti-Soviet guerrilla leader Ahmed Shah Massoud. To test the theory, I had to investigate the relationship between bin Laden and the Taliban in war. There was value in understanding what had just happened, but an explanation of Afghanistan's transformation into a sanctuary for bin Laden to attack the United States

might also offer, as a postmortem, insights into why the sole world superpower has to address small wars in the twenty-first century.

In the days after 9/11, politicians were scrambling to find their equilibrium; the Defense Department was at sea, lacking even a contingency plan for intervention; the CIA had the only real contact with the only anti-Taliban force inside Afghanistan; the United Front was leaderless since Massoud's assassination just two days before 9/11; and the media, knocked off balance by the attack, was chasing events.

I took my proposal to the United States Institute of Peace, one of the capital's premier think tanks, and had the luck to be named a Jennings Randolph fellow starting in October 2002. I began by researching the crimes as well as the strategic turning points of the Afghan civil war. Crimes in war, I knew from the Balkans, was one way a journalist could interest the public in a seemingly obscure conflict. It also stood to reason that the side bin Laden attached himself to saw no obligation to protect civilians in conflict. My first finding was that the research was going to be some task. There had been almost no media reporting of the internal conflict, modest attention to the world's biggest humanitarian crisis, with four million refugees, and only a sporadic focus on bin Laden's fire-breathing threats from his Afghan base. Next I called upon the humanitarian aid organizations for which I had come to respect in reporting the Balkan wars: the International Committee of the Red Cross, the UN High Commissions for Refugees and Human Rights, and Médecins Sans Frontières to obtain their accounts of the internal conflict. No one in Geneva was more encouraging than Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, a former UN high commissioner for refugees and top UN representative in Afghanistan after the Soviet troop withdrawal, whose passionate concern and behind-the-scenes activism made a crucial, if unsung, difference during the Bosnia conflict. He urged me on with the project and suggested sources I would not have thought of; his untimely death in May 2003 robbed the world of one of its greatest humanitarian voices. In Pakistan, I pieced together a picture of that country's deep involvement in Afghanistan but found that nearly everyone, apart from a few journalists, claimed ignorance of the role bin Laden played in Afghan internal affairs. I spent about a month in Afghanistan and almost as much time in Pakistan, and I then returned to both countries again before beginning the final phase of research—approaching U.S. policymakers.

At the end of the day I concluded that Zal Khalilzad had stated a ground truth: A nonstate actor had hijacked a state. A number of key figures in the Clinton administration had reached that very judgment by early 1999, but they did not make it public at the time and did not press it effectively upon those at the top of the administration. No doubt the White House did not want to hear the news that bin Laden and the Taliban were inseparable, for the aim of U.S. diplomacy was to secure his

extradition. Successive administrations also were not interested in the political dimension of the saga. They preferred to view bin Laden as a lone terrorist to be extradited or assassinated, rather than as a political player who had planted deep cultural roots and created a wide political following. Washington's narrow focus precluded developing an overall strategy, as did the aversion prior to 9/11 to name a special envoy responsible only for Afghanistan. In fairness, it must also be noted: neither the experts inside the administration, the overseers on Capitol Hill, the watchdogs of the media, nor indeed the smart minds in think tanks around Washington figured out a way to challenge and change this state of affairs, not even Zal Khalilzad.

Could the media have gotten the story? Certainly not if reporters were not on the scene. There is no substitute for independent journalists going into the field and covering small wars. Without a media-trained spotlight on those places government would prefer to ignore, who will get public attention and focus the energies of government?

This one we missed.

Acknowledgments

This book would not have been possible but for the generous support of the United States Institute of Peace from conception to publication. I happen to have been in the Capitol the day Sen. Spark Matsunaga of Hawaii announced passage of the bill that he and Sen. Jennings Randolph introduced to set up the Institute. During the 1990s and the four Balkan wars, I was frequently in touch with experts at the Institute and its then executive director, Harriet Hentges, who were genuinely interested in developing an independent perspective about the facts on the ground. One of my best State Department sources on the region, fellow Haverford College alumnus Dan Serwer, moved to the Institute in 1998. I knew Richard Solomon, the current Institute president and a former assistant secretary of state, as one of the city's leading experts on Asian issues. Joe Klaitz, then director of the Jennings Randolph fellowship program, supported the project from my application to the completion of the book, and John Crist, the senior program officer, found every possible resource to allow me to do it right. Kay Hechler devoted her prodigious energies to promoting the book. The Institute's fellows program is outstanding, and it is a very lucky thing that one place is reserved for a journalist. My editors at the United States Institute of Peace Press, Nigel Quinney and later Kurt Volkan, were highly professional, efficient, and always supportive. I also thank copyeditor Roz Rosenberg for sorting out the footnotes and inconsistent spellings. Patti Taft, a very capable researcher, dug out every known bit of journalism on the period I was researching.

Among those who suggested sources were Mohamad Bazzi, *Newsday's* exceptional Middle East correspondent at the time, Ed Gargan, then *Newsday's* China hand, Mark Hosenball and Owen Matthews of *Newsweek*, and especially Ron Morcau, a cool head in the hottest of places, at the time *Newsweek* Islamabad bureau chief. Kashi Zaman, then with the *Newsweek* Pakistan bureau, pulled out every stop to be of help. Five reporters provided vital assistance in my research: Anthony Davis, the single most careful chronicler of the internal Afghan war, who gave me a strong critique of the chapter on Massoud; Stefan Smith, AFP's man in Kabul during the first part of the Taliban reign, who brought alive the reality of reporting in near Stalinist conditions; Hamid Mir, the independent minded print and television journalist in Islamabad, who is also bin Laden's biographer; Rahimullah Yusoufzai, the veteran reporter for the *News* and the BBC in Peshawar; and Sami Yousafzai (no relation) of *Newsweek*, one of the most intrepid reporters I have known. Asad Hayauddin, then the Pakistan embassy press officer in Washington, and Gen. Jehangir Karamat, the retired chief of staff, steered me toward the best sources in Pakistan.

On the ground in Pakistan, journalist Ahmed Mukhtar opened the doors to all the leading experts, including what may be the first U.S. reporter's interview with "Col. Imam," a key figure in Pakistan's activities in Afghanistan; and in Kabul, fixer-interpreter Sayed Wadood not only did his utmost to get me to the people I needed to meet but was a source of continuing encouragement long after I had left Kabul. Haron Amin, then of the Afghan embassy in Washington, was indispensable in providing introductions in Kabul. I also thank Jeff Bartholet, then Newsweek foreign editor, for his support as I got under way; Richard Sambrook of the BBC, for generously allowing me to look through archives of BBC broadcasts; attorney Joshua Dratel, for providing the material on the U.S. vs. bin Laden case in New York; Haroon Azizpour of Afgha.com, for guiding me to on-line information troves I could not otherwise have located; Rupert Colville of UNHCR, for opening his files and giving every assistance on untangling the events in Mazar-i-Sharif of August 1998; Sarah Horner, for unearthing her notes on the coverage of that event; Zahid Hussain, a veteran reporter in Islamabad; Hamid Wardak, a Georgetown University student who did his own on-the-ground investigations of the Taliban; Suzanne Bilello of UNESCO, for guiding me to sources on the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas; and Tom Blanton, for throwing open the stacks of declassified documents at the National Security Archive.

Among the former U.S. officials who generously gave their time to answering my questions were former national security adviser Sandy Berger, secretary of state Madeleine Albright, assistant secretaries Rick Inderfurth and Robin Raphel, and National Security Council senior director Bruce Riedel.

Those who critiqued the book included Wolfgang Hauptmann, my esteemed German colleague; Henry Bradsher, one of the great American Afghanistan experts; Sarah Chayes, the gutsy former NPR radio journalist who moved to Kandahar and set up a small organization to help local women; my cousin in Austin, Bernard Snyder, an astute student of history; AFP reporter Stefan Smith; Peter Bergen, who defined the bin Laden story with his book, *Holy War, Inc.*; and Marvin Weinbaum, one of the leading analysts of South Asia. I would also like to thank William Maley of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy in Canberra, whose work on the Taliban is second to none, for his support at several stages; and Tom Gouttierre of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, a pioneer of Afghan studies in the United States, for his guidance at critical moments.

For any errors, I assume sole responsibility.

Due to the paucity of media coverage, I relied to an extent way beyond my expectations on UN reports and the insights of UN personnel who served in Afghanistan during the Taliban era. My special thanks to Michael Semple, who helped save the people of Hazarajat during the worst days of the Taliban and who shared his unique insights into the nature of the

regime and of bin Laden; and to Mervyn Patterson and Eckhard Schiewek, who are examples of the difference determined individuals can make in monitoring human rights violations and of the UN system at its very best.

Last I thank my wife, Betsy, who showed not only forbearance but encouragement at every stage, despite the vicissitudes of job and house moves and the sacrifice of weekends, evenings, and holidays. To her I shall be forever grateful.

A Note on Styles

In the interest of transparency, I used footnotes throughout; both in my original research and in drawing on the work of others, I tried wherever possible to corroborate every fact of significance.

Transliteration of names and places from the two languages of Afghanistan, Dari and Pashtu, varies from expert to expert, and my rule of thumb was to adopt what seemed to be the most common usage. I refer to the ever-shifting military coalition led by Ahmed Shah Massoud after his ouster from Kabul by the name they preferred, the United Front, shorthand for the National Islamic United Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, rather than the name widely used by U.S. and Pakistani officials, the Northern Alliance.

How We Missed the Story

