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Fool's Errand: Time to End the War in Afghanistan

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After 16 years of writing about it, I thought I knew a lot about the war in Afghanistan, but Scott Horton's new book, *Fool's Errand: Time to End the War in Afghanistan*, showed me how much I didn't know – and that's quite a bit.

Did you know that the Taliban tried desperately to surrender, offering to turn over Osama bin Laden to the country of Washington's choice – but that George W. Bush would have none of it? I didn't.

Sit down for this one: Even before the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Taliban tasked their Foreign Minister, one Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil, to warn us that an attack on US soil was coming. Muttawakil's journey to deliver the warning to the US embassy in Peshawar, Pakistan, in July of 2001, was to no avail. The Americans weren't interested.

Although I had some idea of the extent of al-Qaeda's operations in the Balkans in the 1990s, during the Bosnia war, I had no idea that 9/11 ringleader Khalid Sheikh Mohammed fought on "our" side – the Bosnian side – in that war. Nor did I realize the extent of US support for al-Qaeda during the Clinton administration in other areas of the world, such as Chechnya, and even the Western-most provinces of China. Horton gives us a comprehensive – and little noted – account.

It's hard to shock me, but I did a double-take when I read that "for political reasons, the U.S. decided to blame the [1996] Khobar [Towers] attack on 'Iranian-backed Saudi Hezbollah,' thus letting the guilty" – al-Qaeda – "escape blame." Nineteen US Air Force personnel were killed in that attack, along with one Saudi. Then Secretary of Defense William Perry now says he believes al-Qaeda was the perpetrator: bin Laden himself took credit for the attack. Yet the Saudi propaganda machine, in collaboration with their Washington allies, still perpetuate the myth of Iranian involvement.

So how did the "blind Sheikh," Omar Abdel Rahman, leader of Egypt's Islamic Jihad outfit, who masterminded the first attack on the World Trade Center, in 1993, even get into the country when he was a known terrorist? The CIA – "who considered him an old friend from the 1980s" — made sure he got a visa. Does Ann Coulter know about this?

And then there's that time, after the first Iraq war, when G. H. W. Bush encouraged the Iraqi Shi'ites and Kurds to rise up, and then let them be slaughtered. But that wasn't the full extent of Bushian perfidy: according to one report, US helicopters landed on a highway to Baghdad in order to block a coup attempt by Iraqi army officers marching on the capital.

And that's just in the first 70 or so pages of the book! All this is extensively documented by Horton in a plethora of footnotes: you can check his sources as you read the book. I won't go into every bit of surprising information that I came across in *Fool's Errand* – that would require a 10,000-word essay. I'll let my readers discover this treasure trove for themselves.

Instead, I want to focus on the central theme of the book: the concept of the Afghan war as a trap that the US willingly fell into. It's constantly reiterated throughout the text, as on page 39:

"Their strategy was fairly simple, as bin Laden and [Ayman] Zawahiri repeatedly explained. They wanted to replicate their success against the Soviet Union by provoking America into invading the region outright, to bog the US military down and bleed its treasury dry, ultimately forcing complete collapse and withdrawal from the Middle East."

Horton cites bin Laden's own words, and they're worth reiterating here:

"All that we have to do is to send two mujahideen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al Qaeda, in order to make generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses without achieving anything of note other than some benefits for their private corporations. This is in addition to our having experience in using guerrilla warfare and the war of attrition to fight tyrannical superpowers, as we, alongside the mujahideen, bled Russia for ten years, until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat.... So we are continuing this policy of bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy."

Horton prefaces Chapter Two with this citation, and right below it quotes George W. Bush, speaking in September of 2001: "We're angry, but we're not stupid."

Except we *are* stupid, aren't we? Because sixteen years later we're still in Afghanistan, still falling ever deeper into bin Laden's trap – and that much closer to bankruptcy.

There's so much in this fact-jammed book that it's impossible to cover it all in a review; you need to get it and read it. It's accessible, not too long, and a real eye-opener. It's especially relevant now, with our clueless President launching yet another "surge" in Afghanistan – the history of these endless "surges" is told in detail by Horton, who shows why they failed and why they'll fail again.

By the way, Scott is our Opinion Editor here at Antiwar.com, and an invaluable asset for us. His wide knowledge is on full display in this book, his first. Extra bonus: he kept updating it right up until publication day, so it's not only the most comprehensive treatment I've seen, it's also got an analysis of all the latest developments. You can't ask for anything more!

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