

The Power of Nightmares: The Rise of the Politics of Fear, written and produced by Adam Curtis (2004)

Part III: The Shadows in the Cave [1998-2004]

These notes summarize the argument of the third part of "The Power of Nightmares," and add some additional historical information.

Radical Islamists

Toward the end of the 1990s Islamism had failed as a movement in the Arab world. **Osama bin Laden** (born 1957) and **Ayman Zawahiri** (born 1951) returned to Afghanistan, having adopted **jihad against the U.S.** as a new strategy. Their first action: the bombings of **Aug. 7, 1998, of U.S. embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.** Bombers were recruited from Afghan terrorist training camps, but were marginal to the main Islamist movement. — Bin Laden claimed no formal organization but the U.S. invented one in January 2001 in Manhattan by naming "al-Qaeda" a "criminal organization." This was done because of Mafia-inspired U.S. criminal statutes designed to reach the head of an organization in the absence of evidence of a direct link to the crime. In "a federal trial in New York City that ended in June 2001, Mohamed Rashed Daoud Al-Owhali, Mohammed Odeh, Wadih el Hage, and Khalfan Khamis Mohamed were convicted of perpetrating the Nairobi bombing and were sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole" (*Wikipedia*). The evidence for the existence of al-Qaeda as an organization was dubious testimony from **Jamal al-Fadl**, who was with bin Laden in the early 1990s. [The name "al-Qaeda" was "based on the name of a computer file of bin Laden's that listed the names of contacts he had made in Afghanistan" (*Wikipedia*).] The result was "the first bin Laden myth" (Jason Burke, author of *Al Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* [2004] and *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* [2004]). In reality, bin Laden was not a commander, and "there is no evidence bin Laden used the term al-Qaeda before September 11" (Curtis). Some of al-Fadl's testimony was false (Sam Schmidt, defense attorney in the 2001 trial). The idea that bin Laden ran an organization of which one could be a member is "a myth" — it "simply does not exist" (Burke). Neither Zawahiri nor bin Laden originated the Sept. 11 "Planes Operation," which was in fact the brainchild of **Khalid Shaikh Mohammed** (born 1964 or 1965), who came to bin Laden for financing and volunteers.

American Neoconservatives

The Sept. 11, 2001, attacks brought neoconservatives like **Paul Wolfowitz** (born 1943) and allies like **Donald Rumsfeld** (born 1932) back to power; they were being largely ignored in the early days of the Bush administration. But Sept. 11 seemed to validate their vision. They conceived of the **war on terror** in the same epic terms as the Cold War (1947-1991). Just as with the Soviet Union, with the Islamists "they took a failing movement that had lost mass support, and began to reconstruct it into the image of a powerful network of evil controlled from the center by bin Laden from his lair in Afghanistan. They did this because it fitted with their **vision of America's unique destiny to fight an epic battle against the forces of evil** throughout the world" (Curtis).

The U.S. war on Afghanistan was justified as the destruction of this supposed organization. Their principal ally was the Northern Alliance, a loose collection of warlords fighting the Taliban. To satisfy Americans, the Northern Alliance turned over, to the U.S., foreign fighters for the Taliban as members of al-Qaeda, but most of them had nothing to do with bin Laden. The Northern Alliance told the U.S. that bin Laden was hiding in Tora Bora, but the promised fortress was found not to exist; Arabs were sold to the U.S. as al-Qaeda "members." "The terrible truth was that there was nothing there, because al-Qaeda as an organization did not exist" (Curtis).

The real danger was in the Islamist idea, not the organization, which did not exist. "In looking for an organization, the Americans and the British were chasing a phantom enemy and missing the real threat" (Curtis). "People are looking for something that does not exist" (Burke).

After Sept. 11, the search for the network in the U.S. began. Thousands were detained. The government looked for and claimed to find " sleeper cells." "But in reality, there is very little evidence that any of those arrested had anything at all to do with terrorist plots" (Curtis). Evidence was flimsy and often bizarre, e.g. in **Detroit** a video of a tourist trip to Disneyland by teenagers. Two convictions obtained were cited by officials as successes, but were eventually overturned. In the **Buffalo** case, six young Yemeni-Americans traveled to Afghanistan in early 2001 and spent weeks in an Islamist training camp, then returned to Lackawanna, a suburb of Buffalo, and did nothing. When one of them, Mukhtar al-Bakri, sent an e-mail from Bahrain, it was interpreted as a coded message and led to arrests. But in fact it was merely a truthful report of al-Bakri's upcoming marriage. Other cases were even flimsier and more pitiful. "It's a fantasy that it was politically expedient to sell" (William Swor, defense attorney in the Detroit case). "**We projected our own worst fears.** . . . We have an exaggerated perception of the possibility of terrorism that is quite disabling; we have only to look at the evidence to understand that the figures simply don't bear out the way that we have responded as a society" (Bill Durodie, Director, International Center for Security Analysis, King's College). But the simplistic fantasy serves the interests of so many powerful groups that it goes unquestioned in media and government discourse.

Abu Zubaydah (born 1973), after his March 2002 capture, told interrogators stories based on Hollywood films; his testimony led to reports of the possibility of a "dirty bomb." In fact such a bomb poses a negligible danger to the public.

After Afghanistan, neoconservatives "found" previously unperceived links of terrorists to Saddam Hussein and used them as a justification for the invasion of Iraq. "The driving force was the power of a dark fantasy" (Curtis). The very nature of politics was changed. The ability of frightening visions became a source of political strength. "The fear of an imagined future" became a weapon for politicians like Tony Blair and George W. Bush.

From the point of view of public policy, this was a version of the **precautionary principle** developed by the Green movement: "not having the evidence that something might be a problem is not a reason for not taking action as if it were a problem" (Durodie). But this is a shift from an empirical to an imaginative basis for policy. U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft (born 1942) called this "the preventive paradigm" in testimony to Congress. The problem: this justifies acting without evidence. "Once you start imagining, there's no limit" (Durodie).

Neoconservatives and Islamists were "the last political idealists" (Curtis). Both have failed. But "together, they have created today's strange fantasy of fear" (Curtis). "In a society that believes in nothing, fear becomes the only agenda. . . . And a society that believes in nothing is particular frightened by people who believe in anything." (Durodie).

[Others interviewed in Part III of "The Power of Nightmares," not mentioned above: Victor Cannistraro (CIA Counterterrorism chief, 1988-1990), David Cole (Georgetown U.), John Prados (National Security Archive), Theodore Rockwell (nuclear scientist), Lewis Z. Koch (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists).]