

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

Part II: The Phantom Victory [1982-1998]

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

Radical Islamists

William Casey (1913-1987), director of the CIA, sends "stinger missiles and \$1 billion" to help the **mujahideen** fight in Afghanistan, who act as proxies for the U.S. in the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union, which sent troops to occupy Afghanistan in 1979. The mujahideen cross the Pakistan border after CIA training (including training in car bombing). Arabs also come to fight; **Abdullah Azzam** (1941-1989), known as the "emir of the Arab mujahideen" as well as "Godfather of Jihad" for his advocacy of global jihad, for his approach to recruitment and training, and for his contribution to the development of the al Qaeda movement, works out of Peshawar, Pakistan. His lieutenant **Osama bin Laden** (born 1957) arrived in Afghanistan in 1985. Many Middle Eastern states released radicals from prison in order to allow them to fight in Afghanistan; among them is the Egyptian **Ayman Zawahiri** (1951- ? [present whereabouts unknown]), a disciple of **Sayyid Qutb** (1906-1966) & bin Laden's future mentor.

Mikhail Gorbachev (born 1931), intent upon reforming the Soviet social, political, and economic system, decides upon a **Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan** in 1987; the U.S. refuses to facilitate this exit through negotiation. The mujahideen believe that the defeat of the Soviet Union in Afghanistan is due to them; in reality this victory is an illusion. The **Soviet Union collapses** beginning in 1989 due to independent internal factors, says Melvin Goodman, head of the CIA's office of Soviet affairs, 1976-1987.

After Afghanistan, a rift develops among Islamists between Azzam and Zawahiri. Bin Laden is seduced away by Zawahiri from Azzam; in 1989 the latter is assassinated in a car bombing in Peshawar. Islamists' political movements attempt to overthrow corrupt regimes politically and create Islamist states; their progress is stymied in **Algeria** (Islamist Salvation Front) and **Egypt** (Muslim Brotherhood) by state crackdowns circa 1991. Zawahiri feels vindicated by this demonstration of corruption and hypocrisy; he sets out to wage jihad against these governments. From a base on a farm in Sudan, bin Laden and Zawahiri aim at political leaders, but do not succeed in winning public support. They blame the corruption of the masses and begin to attack civilians. In Algeria, thousands are killed. A June 1997 attack on Western tourists at Luxor in Egypt leads to ceasefire in Egypt; in Algeria, internecine warfare breaks out. The jihad of the Arab mujahideen is failing.

In 1997, Zawahiri and bin Laden return to Afghanistan. Facing failure, they resolve upon a new strategy: **jihad against America**, announced in May 1998 — a "strategy of desperation," says Curtis.

American Neoconservatives

President Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) dedicates the Mar. 22, 1982, launch of the space shuttle Columbia to the "people of Afghanistan" as a sign of support for the struggle of the mujahideen "freedom fighters" against the Soviet-backed regime there. The **Reagan doctrine** aggressively aims to overthrow tyrannical regimes and to defeat, rather than contain, the Soviet Union. ("We are more like revolutionaries than conservatives," says Richard Perle.) Influenced by the doctrines of **Leo Strauss** (1899-1973), neoconservatives believe the people need simple, inspiring myths, and come to believe their own Manichaean myth of a good America fighting an Evil Empire.

Determined to press on, the neoconservatives are frustrated by the moderate ideology of President George H.W. Bush (born 1924; president, 1989-1993); they denounce Bush's failure to press on against President Saddam Hussein of Iraq after ousting him from Kuwait. Liberalism and relativism are blamed for moral rot in the fabric of U.S. society. Guided by **William Kristol** (born 1952), Vice President Dan Quayle's chief of staff during the Bush presidency, as a key ideologue, they set out to enlist the support of the religious right politically and begin the "culture wars." They are rather like a Leninist vanguard (in fact, many neoconservatives are former Trotskyists), as Michael Lind points out. In 1992 they succeed in gaining control of the Republican Party platform.

No sooner is Bill Clinton (born 1946) elected U.S. president in 1992 than neoconservatives set out to wage a **campaign to demonize Clinton** as a symbol of what is wrong with America. David Brock (born 1962) of the *American Spectator* helps in what he now calls "political terrorism," creating stories about Whitewater, Vince Foster's suicide, and Arkansas drug smuggling, while trolling through Clinton's sex life (Brock later repents of this). Clinton is forced to accept an independent prosecutor in the Whitewater inquiry. This is led by Kenneth Starr (born 1946), a lawyer with the right-wing Federalist Society. Starr stumbles upon Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky (born 1973); when the attempt to make this the basis of his removal from office fails, the corruption of the public is blamed by neoconservatives like William Bennett (born 1943).

[Others interviewed in Part II of "The Power of Nightmares," not mentioned above: Jack Wheeler; Milton Bearden, Abdullah Anas, Azzam Tamimi, Gilles Kepel, Michael Ledeen, Stephen Holmes, Robert Bork, and Joe Conason.]