

A not dissimilar article in *The Guardian*, by David Leigh and Jamie Wilson, was more subtle. Headlined 'Counting Iraq's Victims', their 'analysis' began by associating famous propaganda tales about 'dead babies' from the First World War and the Gulf War with contemporary United Nations studies that conclude that half a million Iraqi children have died, mostly as a result of the blockade. Astonishingly they wrote that the 'dead babies of Iraq' never existed and were 'a statistical construct... the claims of America's critics'. They then contradicted this by acknowledging the UN and other authoritative sources. Their objection, it seemed, was that Osama bin Laden had used the conclusions of these studies to further his own propaganda, the logic being that a truth, however documented, was tainted when someone you did not like used it. Quixotically, they added, 'Bin Laden... does perhaps have a point.' To the casual reader, seeds of doubt had been sown. If Iraq's dead and dying babies were merely a 'statistical construct', why not bomb?"⁹⁶

The most important 'evidence' of Iraq's complicity with September 11 is that the alleged leader of the Twin Towers suicide hijackers, Mohamed Atta, was supposed to have met an Iraqi intelligence agent in the Czech Republic. In the British press, the intelligence agent was promoted from being 'low level' (*The Guardian*) to 'mid-ranking' (*Independent*) to 'senior' (*Financial Times*) to the 'head of Baghdad's intelligence services' (*The Times*). Only the *Financial Times* questioned whether the 'meeting' took place at all, or had anything to do with the destruction of the Twin Towers.⁹⁷ On the BBC's *Newsnight*, Mark Urban, the Foreign Office correspondent, revealed that there was 'secret information' about 'a missile Saddam Hussein was planning to launch'. He provided no evidence

The speciousness of the 'Iraq connection' was, in contrast, never headline news. Only the *Daily Telegraph* reported, on December 18, 2001, that Czech police denied that Mohamed Atta had ever visited the Czech Republic. Silence also prevailed when the *New York Times* of February 5, 2002, disclosed, 'The Central Intelligence Agency has no evidence that Iraq has engaged in terrorist operations against the United States in nearly a decade, and the agency is also convinced that President Saddam Hussein has not provided chemical or biological weapons to al-Qa'ida.'



Omission is the most virulent form of censorship. In much of the reporting of Afghanistan, the American assault on one of the world's poorest countries was justified with potent images evoking the Taliban's 'evil'. The persecution of women provided deeply offensive pictures of women shrouded in tent-like burqas, denied the most basic human rights. Although occasional reference was made to the Anglo-American role in the creation of the fanatical jihadi groups which spawned the Taliban, there was no mention of an extraordinary period in the recent past of this benighted society, an understanding of which would have cast 'our war for human rights and civilised values' (Blair) in its true perspective.

In the sixties, a liberation movement arose in Afghanistan, centred on the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), which opposed the autocratic rule of King Zahir Shar and eventually overthrew the regime of the king's cousin, Mohammad Daud, in 1978. It was, by all accounts, an immensely popular revolution. Most foreign journalists in Kabul, reported the *New York Times*, found that 'nearly every Afghan they interviewed said [they were] delighted with the coup'⁹⁸ The *Wall Street Journal* reported that '150,000 persons... marched to honour the new flag... the participants appeared genuinely enthusiastic.'⁹⁹ *The Washington Post* said that 'Afghan loyalty to the government can scarcely be questioned.'¹⁰⁰

The new government outlined a reform programme that included the abolition of feudal power in the countryside, freedom of religion, equal rights for women and the granting of hitherto denied rights to the various ethnic minorities. More than 13,000 prisoners were freed and police files publicly burned.

Under tribalism and feudalism, life expectancy was thirty-five and almost one in three children died in infancy. Ninety per cent of the population was illiterate. The new government introduced free medical care in the poorest areas. Peonage was abolished; a mass literacy campaign was begun. For women, the gains were unheard of; by the late 1980s, half the university students were women, and women made up 40 per cent of Afghanistan's doctors, 70 per cent of its teachers and 30 per cent of its civil servants.

Indeed, so radical were the changes that they remain vivid in the memories of those who benefited. Saira Noorani, a female surgeon who escaped the Taliban in September 2001, said, 'Every girl could go to high school and university. We could go where we wanted and wear what we liked... We used to go to cafes and the cinema to see the latest Indian films on a Friday and listen to the latest Hindi music... It all started to go wrong when the mujaheddin started winning They used to kill teachers and burn schools... We were terrified. It was funny and sad to think these were people the West had supported.'¹⁰¹

The problem with the PDPA government was that it was supported by the Soviet Union. Although Stalinist in its central committee structure, it was never the 'puppet' derided in the West, nor was its coup 'Soviet-backed', as western propaganda claimed at the time. In his memoirs, Cyrus Vance, President Carter's Secretary of State, admitted, 'We have no evidence of any Soviet complicity in the coup.'¹⁰² On the other wing of the Carter administration was Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's National Security Adviser, who believed that the recent American humiliation in Vietnam required atonement, and that the gains of post-colonial liberation movements elsewhere presented a challenge to the United States. Moreover, the Anglo-American client regimes in the Middle East and the Gulf, notably Iran under the Shah, had to be 'protected'. Were Afghanistan to succeed under the PDPA, it would offer the 'threat of a promising example'.

On July 3, 1979, unknown to the American public and Congress, President Carter authorised a \$500 million covert action programme in support of the tribal groups known as the mujaheddin. The aim was the overthrow of Afghanistan's first secular, progressive government. Contrary to cold war mythology, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which did not happen until six months later, had nothing to do with it. Indeed, all the evidence is that the Soviets made their fatal move into Afghanistan in response to the very tribal and religious 'terrorism' that the Americans used to justify their invasion in November 2001.

In an interview in 1998, Brzezinski admitted that Washington had lied about the American role. 'According to the official version of history,' he said, 'CIA aid to the mujaheddin began during 1980, that is, after the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan... But the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise.'¹⁰³ In August 1979, the US embassy in Kabul reported that 'the United States' larger interests... would be served by the demise of [PDPA government], despite whatever setbacks this might mean for future social and economic reforms in Afghanistan.'¹⁰⁴

Thus, Washington began a Faustian affair with some of the most brutal fanatics on earth. Men like Gulbuddin Hekmatyar received tens of millions of CIA dollars. Hekmatyar's specialty was trafficking in opium and throwing acid in the faces of women who refused to wear the veil. Invited to London in 1986, he was lauded by Prime Minister Thatcher as a 'freedom fighter'. Between 1978 and 1992, the life of the PDPA government, Washington poured some \$4 billion into the mujaheddin factions. Brzezinski's plan was to promote an international movement that would spread Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia and 'destabilise' the Soviet Union, creating, as he wrote in his autobiography, a 'few stirred-up Muslims'.

His grand plan coincided with the ambitions of the Pakistani dictator, General Zia ul-Haq, to dominate the region. In 1986, CIA director William Casey gave the CIA's backing to a plan put forward by Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, to recruit people from around the world to join the Afghan jihad. More than 100,000 Islamic militants were trained in Pakistan between 1982 and 1992. (Taliban means 'student'.) Operatives, who would eventually join the Taliban and Osama bin Laden's al-Qa'ida, were recruited at an Islamic college in Brooklyn, New York, and given paramilitary training at a CIA camp in Virginia. This was called 'Operation Cyclone'.

In Pakistan, mujaheddin training camps were run by the CIA and Britain's MI6, with the British SAS training future al-Qa'ida and Taliban fighters in bomb-making and other black arts. This continued long after the Soviet army had withdrawn in 1989. When the PDPA government finally fell in 1992, the West's favourite warlord, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, rained American-supplied missiles on Kabul, killing 2,000 people, until the other factions agreed to make him Prime Minister.

The last PDPA president, Mohammad Najibullah, who had gone before the UN General Assembly to appeal desperately for help, took refuge in the UN compound in Kabul, where he remained until the Taliban took power in 1996. They hanged him from a street light.¹⁰⁵



On September 11, 2001, George W Bush told America: "I have directed the full resources of our intelligence and law enforcement communities to find those responsible and bring them to justice.'

Well over a year later, the 'full resources' of America's thirteen intelligence agencies have failed to secure the conviction of a single person in connection with September 11. Not one of the 22 men on the 'Terrorists Wanted' poster has been sighted; not a cent of the \$500 million reward money has been claimed. As failures go, the enormity of this has few historical equals. Yet, the heads of the two principal agencies, the CIA and the FBI, have not been dismissed or forced to resign, or shamed by Congress. For a while, George W Bush's popularity rating was at an all-time high.

What Bush never explained to his fellow Americans was that his and the previous Clinton administration had been warned that al-Qa'ida, or 'the Base', a network spawned in an American client state, Saudi Arabia, was planning audacious attacks on New York and Washington. Hidden from the public was the CIA's long relationship with Osama bin Laden during the mujaheddin war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and that the President's father still worked as a consultant to the immensely rich bin Laden family.