

Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001

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Provides a comprehensive overview of the CIA's and other covert agencies' operations in Afghanistan, from the Soviet invasion in 1979 through the summer of 2001, detailing the rise of the Taliban and bin Laden, the secret efforts of the CIA to capture or kill bin Laden since 1998, and their failure to stop bin Laden, al Qaeda, and the events of September 11th. Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* offers revealing details of the CIA's involvement in the evolution of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the years before the September 11 attacks. From the beginning, Coll shows how the CIA's on-again, off-again engagement with Afghanistan after the end of the Soviet war left officials at Langley with inadequate resources and intelligence to appreciate the emerging power of the Taliban. He also demonstrates how Afghanistan became a deadly playing field for international politics where Soviet, Pakistani, and U.S. agents armed and trained a succession of warring factions. At the same time, the book, though opinionated, is not solely a critique of the agency. Coll balances accounts of CIA failures with the success stories, like the capture of Mir Amal Kasi. Coll, managing editor for the *Washington Post*, covered Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992. He demonstrates unprecedented access to records of White House meetings and to formerly classified material, and his command of Saudi, Pakistani, and Afghani politics is impressive. He also provides a seeming insider's perspective on personalities like George Tenet, William Casey, and anti-terrorism czar, Richard Clarke ("who seemed to wield enormous power precisely because hardly anyone knew who he was or what exactly he did for a living"). Coll manages to weave his research into a narrative that sometimes has the feel of a Tom Clancy novel yet never crosses into excess. While comprehensive, Coll's book may be hard going for those looking for a direct account of the events leading to the 9-11 attacks. The CIA's 1998 engagement with bin Laden as a target for capture begins a full two-thirds of the way into *Ghost Wars*, only after a lengthy march through developments during the Carter, Reagan, and early Clinton Presidencies. But this is not a critique of Coll's efforts; just a warning that some stamina is required to keep up. *Ghost Wars* is a complex study of intelligence operations and an invaluable resource for those seeking a nuanced understanding of how a small band of extremists rose to inflict incalculable damage on American soil. --Patrick O'Kelley

Steve Coll, winner of a 1990 Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism, has been managing editor of the *Washington Post* since 1998 and covered Afghanistan as the *Post's* South Asia bureau chief between 1989 and 1992. Coll is the author of four books, including *On the Grand Trunk Road* and *The Taking of Getty Oil*.

Other Books

Zero-Sum Victory. The military expert and author of *Leadership* presents "the most thoughtful analysis yet of America's recent conflicts--and future challenges" (Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal). Why have the major post-9/11 US military interventions turned into quagmires? Despite huge power imbalances in America's favor, capacity-building efforts, and tactical victories, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq turned intractable. The US government's fixation on zero-sum, decisive victory in these conflicts is a key reason why these operations failed to achieve favorable and durable outcomes. In *Zero-Sum Victory*, retired US Army colonel Christopher D. Kolenda identifies three interrelated problems that have emerged from the government's insistence on zero-sum victory. First, the US government has no way to measure successful outcomes other than a decisive military victory, and thus, selects strategies that overestimate the possibility of such an outcome.

Second, the United States is slow to recognize, modify, or abandon losing strategies. Third, once the United States decides to withdraw, bargaining asymmetries and disconnects in strategy undermine the prospects for a successful transition or negotiated outcome. Relying on historic examples and personal experience, Kolenda draws thought-provoking and actionable conclusions about the utility of American military power in the contemporary world—insights that serve as a starting point for future scholarship as well as for important national security reforms.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . For background on former Popalzai king Shah Shuja , see William Dalrymple . Return of a King : The Battle for Afghanistan , 1839-42 (New York : Vintage Books , 2013) . 16. Coll , Ghost Wars , 286-287 . 17 . "