

# The Faithful Spy: A Novel

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"A well-crafted page-turner that addresses the most important issue of our time. It will keep you reading well into the night."-Vince Flynn

A New York Times reporter has drawn upon his experience covering the occupation in Iraq to write the most gripping and chillingly plausible thriller of the post-9/11 era. Alex Berenson's debut novel of suspense, *The Faithful Spy*, is a sharp, explosive story that takes readers inside the war on terror as fiction has never done before.

John Wells is the only American CIA agent ever to penetrate al Qaeda. Since before the attacks in 2001, Wells has been hiding in the mountains of Pakistan, biding his time, building his cover.

Now, on the orders of Omar Khadri-the malicious mastermind plotting more al Qaeda strikes on America-Wells is coming home. Neither Khadri nor Jennifer Exley, Wells's superior at Langley, knows quite what to expect.

For Wells has changed during his years in the mountains. He has become a Muslim. He finds the United States decadent and shallow. Yet he hates al Qaeda and the way it uses Islam to justify its murderous assaults on innocents. He is a man alone, and the CIA-still reeling from its failure to predict 9/11 or find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq-does not know whether to trust him. Among his handlers at Langley, only Exley believes in him, and even she sometimes wonders. And so the agency freezes Wells out, preferring to rely on high-tech means for gathering intelligence.

But as that strategy fails and Khadri moves closer to unleashing the most devastating terrorist attack in history, Wells and Exley must somehow find a way to stop him, with or without the government's consent.

From secret American military bases where suspects are held and "interrogated" to basement laboratories where al Qaeda's scientists grow the deadliest of biological weapons, *The Faithful Spy* is a riveting and cautionary tale, as affecting in its personal stories as it is sophisticated in its political details. The first spy thriller to grapple squarely with the complexities and terrors of today's world, this is a uniquely exciting and unnerving novel by an author who truly knows his territory.

Alex Berenson is a reporter for *The New York Times* who has covered topics ranging from the occupation of Iraq to the flooding of New Orleans. He graduated from Yale University in 1994 with degrees in history and economics. This is his first novel. He lives in New York City. Chapter 1

Present Day

North-West Frontier, on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan

sheikh gul scowled at his congregation. "These days every Muslim must fight jihad," he said in Pashtun, his voice rising. "When the Mongols invaded Baghdad, it didn't help the people of Baghdad that they were pious Muslims. They died at the swords of the infidels."

The sheikh threw his hands over his head.

"Now Islam is under siege again. Under siege in the land of the two mosques, and the land of the two rivers"-Saudi Arabia and Iraq. "Under siege here in Pakistan, where our leader works for Americans and Jews. Everywhere we are under siege," said the sheikh, Mohammed Gul. He was a short, bearded man with a chunky body hidden under a smooth brown robe. His voice seemed to belong to someone much larger. Inside the mosque, a simple brick building whose walls were covered in flaking white paint, the worshippers murmured agreement and drew together. Brothers in arms. But their assent enraged the sheikh further.

"You say, 'Yes, yes.' But what do you do when prayers are finished? Do you sacrifice yourselves? You go home and do nothing. Muslims today love this world and hate death. We have abandoned jihad!" the sheikh shouted. He stopped to look out over the crowd and wipe his brow. "And so Allah has subjugated us. Only when we sacrifice ourselves will we restore glory to Islam. On that day Allah will finally smile on us."

Except it sounds like none of us will be around to see it, Wells thought. In the years that Wells had listened to Gul's sermons, the sheikh had gotten angrier and angrier. The source of his fury was easy to understand. September 11 had faded, and Islam's return to glory remained distant as ever. The Jews still ruled Israel. The Americans had installed a Shia government in Iraq, a country that had always been ruled by Sunnis. Yes, Shias were Muslim too. But Shia and Sunni Muslims had been at odds since the earliest days of Islam. To Osama and his fellow fundamentalist Sunnis-sometimes called Wahhabis-the Shia were little better than Jews.

Al Qaeda, "the Base" of the revolution, had never recovered from the loss of its own base in Afghanistan, Wells thought. When the Taliban fell, Qaeda's troops fled east to the North-West Frontier, the mountainous border of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Wells had narrowly escaped an American bomb at Tora Bora, the last big fight of the Afghan war. He liked to imagine that the bomb had been guided by Glen Holmes, who had swung it away from the hut where Wells hid.

But the United States hadn't closed the noose at Tora Bora, for reasons Wells had never understood. Thousands of jihadis escaped. In 2002, they reached the mountains of the North-West Frontier, so named by the British, since the area was the northwest border of colonial India. The North-West Frontier was a wild land ruled by Pashtuns, devout Muslims who supported Qaeda's brand of jihad, and was effectively closed to Pakistani and American soldiers. Even the Special Forces could operate there only for short stretches.

So Qaeda survived. But it did not thrive. Osama and his lieutenants scurried between holes, occasionally releasing tapes to rouse the faithful. Every few months the group launched an attack. It had blasted a train station in Madrid, blown up hotels in Egypt and subways in London, attacked oil workers in Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, it fought the American occupiers. But nothing that had shaken the world like September 11.

Meanwhile Wells and his fellow jihadis eked out a miserable existence. In theory, Qaeda's paymasters had arranged for Pashtun villagers to house them. In reality, they were a burden on desperately poor families. They had to earn their keep like everyone else. Wells and the half dozen Arabs living in this village, just outside Akora Khatak, survived on stale bread and scraps of lamb. Wells did not want to guess how much weight he had lost. He had hardly recognized himself the few times he had seen himself in a mirror. The bullet hole in his left arm had turned into a knot of scar tissue that ached unpredictably.

The winters were especially difficult, even for Wells, who had grown up playing in the Bitterroot Range on the Montana-Idaho border. The cold sank into his bones. He could only imagine what the Saudis thought. Lots of them had been martyred in these mountains, but not from bombs or bullets. They'd died of pneumonia and altitude sickness and something that looked a lot like scurvy. They'd died asking for their mothers, and a few had died cursing Osama and the awful place he'd led them. Wells ate fresh fruit whenever he could, which wasn't often, and marveled at the toughness of the Pashtuns.

To keep sane he practiced his soldiering as much as possible. The local tribal leader had helped him set up a small firing range on flat ground a few miles outside the village. Every few weeks Wells rode out with a half dozen men and shot off as many rounds as he could spare. But he couldn't pretend he was doing anything more than passing time. They all were. If America vs. Qaeda were a Pop Warner football game, the refs would have invoked the mercy rule and ended it a long time ago.

Gul stepped into the crowd of worshippers. He looked at the men around him and spoke again, his voice low and intense. "The time for speeches is done, brothers," he said. "Allah willing, we will see action soon. May Allah bless all faithful Muslims. Amen."

The men clustered close to hug the sheikh. Waiting his turn, Wells wondered if Gul knew something or was just trying to rally the congregation. He poked with his tongue at a loose molar in the back of his mouth, sending a spurt of pain through his jaw. Dental care in the North-West Frontier left something to be desired. In a few weeks he would have to visit the medical clinic in Akora to have the tooth "examined." Or maybe he'd just find a pair of pliers and do the job himself.

Lately Wells had dreamed of leaving this place. He could hitch a ride to Peshawar, catch a bus to Islamabad, and knock on the front gate of the American embassy. Or, more accurately, knock on the roadblocks that kept a truck bomb from getting too close to the embassy's blastproof walls. A few minutes and he'd be inside. A couple days and he'd be home. No one would say he had failed. Not to his face, anyway. They'd say he had done all he could, all anyone could. But somewhere inside he would know better. And he would never forgive himself.

Because this wasn't Pop Warner football. The mercy rule didn't exist. The men standing beside him in this mosque would happily give their lives to be remembered as martyrs. They were stuck in these mountains, but their goal remained unchanged. To punish the crusaders for their hubris. To take back Jerusalem. To kill Americans. Qaeda's desire to

destroy was limited only by its resources. For now the group was weak, but that could change instantly. If Qaeda's assassins succeeded in killing Pakistan's president, the country might suddenly have a Wahhabi in charge. Then bin Laden would have a nuclear weapon to play with. An Islamic bomb. And sooner or later there would be a big hole in New York or London or Washington.

Anyway, living here had a few compensations. Wells had learned the Koran better than he ever expected. He had a sense of how monks had lived in the Middle Ages, copying Bibles by hand. He knew now how one book could become moral and spiritual guidance and entertainment all at once.

After so many years in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Wells found that his belief in Islam—once just a cover story—had turned real. The faith touched him in a way that Christianity never had. Wells had always been skeptical of religion. When he read the Koran at night on his bed alone he suffered the same doubts about its promises of paradise as he did when he read the apostles' description of Christ rising from the dead. Yet he loved the Koran's exhortations that men should treat one another as brothers and give all they could to charity. The umma, the brotherhood, was real. He could walk into any house in this village and be offered a cup of hot sweet tea and a meal by a family that could barely feed its own children. And no one needed a priest's help to reach the divine in Islam; anyone who studied hard and was humble could seek enlightenment for himself.

But Islam's biggest strength was its greatest weakness, Wells thought. The religion's flexibility had made it a cloak for the anger of men tired of being ruled by America and the West. Islam was the Marxism of the twenty-first century, a cover for national liberation movements of all stripes. Except that the high priests of Marxism had never promised their followers rewards in the next world in exchange for their deaths in this one. Wahhabis like bin Laden had married their fury at the United States with a particularly nasty vision of Islam. They wanted to take the religion back to the seventh-century desert. They couldn't compete in the modern world, so they would pretend that it didn't exist. Or destroy it. Their anger resonated with hundreds of millions of desperately poor Muslims. But in Wells's eyes they had perverted the religion they claimed to represent. Islam wasn't incompatible with progress. In fact, Islamic nations had once been among the world's most advanced. Eight hundred years ago, as Christians burned witches, the Muslim Abbasids had built a un...

#### Other Books

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