



The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11

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A gripping narrative that spans five decades, *The Looming Tower* explains in unprecedented detail the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the rise of al-Qaeda, and the intelligence failures that culminated in the attacks on the World Trade Center. Lawrence Wright re-creates firsthand the transformation of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri from incompetent and idealistic soldiers in Afghanistan to leaders of the most successful terrorist group in history. He follows FBI counterterrorism chief John O'Neill as he uncovers the emerging danger from al-Qaeda in the 1990s and struggles to track this new threat. Packed with new information and a deep historical perspective, *The Looming Tower* is the definitive history of the long road to September 11.

--back cover

The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 Details

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Author : Lawrence Wright

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From Reader Review The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11 for online ebook

Lou says

I have a morbid fascination with terrorism and the reasons people behind it do what they do, but I have always wanted to learn more about their motivations and the ties to religion. It's crucial in today's world that more of us have an understanding of why this is happening, especially with events such as 9/11. Religion, politics and foreign policy are all of interest to me, all three feature in "The Looming Tower" in a large way.

Make no mistake, this is a challenging read! It could be categorised as a "non-fiction thriller" as it is a compelling and information rich book. I also found it highly thought-provoking and an eye-opener, Lawrence Wright certainly knows his stuff. The writing is exquisite and immensely detailed from the word go. Wright has clearly done a lot of research on this topic

I had no idea that the book had been made into a TV series but I plan on watching it and seeing how it compares to this. It is a topic that more people should be interested in learning, as it does impact us all and will for the foreseeable future.

Many thanks to Penguin Books (UK) for an ARC. I was not required to post a review and all thoughts and opinions expressed are my own.

Lobstergirl says

Thoroughly, painstakingly researched, extremely readable, well-written, riveting account of the genesis of al-Qaeda and some of the reasons why we failed to prevent 9/11 and their earlier attacks, by New Yorker contributor Wright. Long on narrative and short on analysis, although what analysis there is, is good and insightful. Wright used primary and secondary sources as well as personal interviews with hundreds of people. Where accounts differ, he explains in the endnotes that he chose one source's version over another source, though he doesn't always explain why.

The interesting tidbits are too many to note - Osama starting an a capella singing group as a youth; Osama's young sons, even in the decrepit conditions in Afghanistan, playing Nintendo; Osama's prettiest wife determined to stay in shape by jogging around the courtyard of their ramshackle abode. (In spite of these details, no, they really aren't a lot like us.)

Paquita Maria Sanchez says

People who *want* to be politicians are out of their goddamned minds. Attempting to clean up this mess alone—even just describing it as *a* single mess being, of course, a gross oversimplification—is a task of such a Sisyphean order, I have serious doubts that even a titan could manage it, let alone some dipshit human(s). I would write more about this, but "this situation" is way beyond my level of even abstract problem-solving, and probably everyone's levels of abstract problem-solving. Combined.

As you may have noticed, this book is so frustrating and overwhelming and anxiety-inducing and depressing,

rationale. We are now in a war that would appear to have literally no end, this “war of terror,” one that any sane person who recently traveled on an airplane can see the terrorists have won as we meekly surrender our civil rights to government agencies who now can tap phones, examine library records, collect data, cavity search, etc., in the name of some illusionary sense of safety, a theater of the absurd. In addition they convinced us, this tiny group of delusionary men (no women), to send thousands of troops to a hostile land and environment where they could be more easily picked off.

Wright traces the rise of anti-semitism in the Middle East to the influence of Naziism during WW II and especially afterwards when many Nazis fled to Egypt for sanctuary from the victorious allies. For centuries Jews had lived quite peacefully with their Muslim neighbors, but several events fueled a return to a fundamentalist, Islamicist view. The Six-Day war was used by these in a rather tortured logic to validate their position, i.e. that God had favored the Jews because Muslims had wandered away from the true Islam and the Caliphate. (This kind of perverted thinking is not unique to Islamists. It’s rampant among fundamentalist Christian groups such as the Westboro Baptists who insist that US military deaths are caused by God’s displeasure with current U.S. policies with regard to homosexuality. Other examples abound.) The war, which an overwhelming victory for Israel, humiliated Egypt, where, following Nassar’s death, Sadat needed to appeal to the fundamentalists to strengthen his government; so he released many who had been jailed from prison. Not a smart move.

The actions of the Egyptians, following the assassination of Sadat, solidified a diverse, incoherent movement. He flatly states that 9/11 was born in the torture chambers of the Egyptian government which created an appetite for revenge and turned moderates into extremists, not to mention destroyed any notion that western society actually practiced the ideals of freedom and human rights they espoused. Communism, Zionism, and Imperialism were all lumped together as the great western enemy of Islam and the only solution was to use violence to try to create an Islamic theocracy. By throwing all of the anti-government groups together in prison, many individuals and groups which had been unaware of the other’s existence were now thrown together and molded into a more coherent movement. Torture was an instrument of humiliation, revenge and punishment as well as information gathering and Ayman Zawahiri emerged as the new leader of the group.

I was astonished how intertwined the Bin Laden family, wealthy beyond measure from lucrative construction contracts, was with Saudi government and culture. That said, Osama comes across as a pathetic little man whom, for some bizarre reason, we have inflated to mythic proportions. He left a long trail of words that Wright has used effectively to build a comprehensive picture of the man that Afghans, in the fight against the Russians, thought was rather pathetic, but who was adopted by the United States and supported. Another example of how certain actions taken for a variety of reasons can have long-range negative effects. How one might ever develop the perspicuity to avoid making such mistakes remains a mystery to me.

If there are any heroes in this book, it’s the field officers of the FBI and one John O’Neill (who tragically died in the World Trade Center.) They had been concerned that the Islamic fundamentalists would try something spectacular but got little support from Washington. One Minneapolis supervisor, admonished for his reports and concerns, simply said back to the bosses in DC that he was simply ““trying to keep someone from taking a plane and crashing into the World Trade Center.” This in August of 2001

Wright has done a magnificent job of melding detail and the broader picture to present a better understanding of why we are where we are today. The title, drawn from the Koran is ironic in light of Osama’s killing by American troops: ““Wherever you are, death will find you, Even in the looming tower,” a quote from one of Osama’s many videos.

After-note: Read a couple of the one-star reviews on Amazon to get a feel for psychotic thinking.

Previously written: "Therefore when you induce others to construct a formation while you yourself are formless, then you are concentrated while the opponent is divided... Therefore the consummation of forming an army is to arrive at formlessness. When you have no form, undercover espionage cannot find out anything, intelligence cannot form a strategy." Sun Tzu, 500 B.C.

For some reason, I failed to get very far into this book and was reminded of it when I read an excellent column recently at Salon (<http://www.salon.com/news/feature/201...>) regarding the costs of our obsessiveness with regard to airline security. I was reminded that Wright discussed Al Qaeda strategy at some length. It was quite simple. Bin Laden knew he couldn't maintain an attack on U.S. soil so he needed to get us to come to him. And he has succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. We send troops and treasure over to him to be whittled away at. His first attempt to draw us in was the U.S.S. Cole; Clinton failed to fall into the trap as did Reagan after the 200 Marines were killed in Lebanon. Bush swallowed the bait hook, line and sinker. Iraq and Afghanistan have cost more than a trillion dollars of borrowed money in the first unfunded war in our history. And we spend more hundreds of billions searching for the latest object in someone's crotch for the illusion of security. Wait till someone detonates a small bomb in a TSA security line or at a McDonald's. We will then lose all our freedoms in the name of maintaining an empire we cannot afford.

Hadrian says

"Wherever you are, death will find you, even in the looming tower."
-The Qu'ran, Sura 4:78

Hiraba (?????), the Arabic word for terror, piracy, or unlawful warfare. To be punished with the strictest penalties.

SEE the young men in their white tunics go out, and charge from the trenches against Soviet tanks, and the suited FBI and CIA men squabble on matters of 'jurisdiction' and 'sensitive information', and self-appointed holy men and saviors meditate in caves on how to save the words of prophets, and their followers drink in action movies and dream of being holy Rambos and warrior priests.

Lawrence Wright has done the Western World a great service, stringing together this narrative from bloody sinews of history. He retells the history and ideology of early Islamic fundamentalist internationalism, and the biographies of many chief 'founding fathers' - Ayman al-Zawahiri, Muhammad Omar, Osama bin Laden.

From where does terrorism arise? Not solely because of our freedoms, as the Bush-men so stupidly proclaim, but the systematic denial and repression of their own, the lack of civil society, dictatorship, political stagnation, and poverty. The view that political leadership is corrupt, and that they prostitute themselves to foreign powers. Smart young men seeing the necessity of change, and choosing the most violent path possible. And then we have our own American ignorance and heavy-handedness contributing to our own disastrous foreign image.

A necessary introduction. Much more is to be done.

Mike says

This book is really worth reading, even if you think you've had your fill of Al Qaeda, 9-11 et al. The

histories of Bin Laden and Zawahiri are interesting and surprising, and this book really lays out how the CIA and FBI blew their chances to stop 9/11. If you're not already disgusted by them, this will get you there. Despite its depressing subject matter, the book is actually a pleasure to read, because the writing and storytelling are so good. This dude has knowledge!

Jessica says

Lawrence Wright is one of those guys who could easily put novelists out of business, and this book made me question why I read fiction at all. The locations, characters, and events in *The Looming Tower* are so much more fascinating than anything an author could invent, and the fact that they're real makes them seem important in a way fiction almost never does. I loved this book, and my picayune quibbles -- a few recurring awkward sentence constructions, inexplicably referring to domestic terrorists who bomb clinics and murder doctors as "protesters" -- just need to be dispatched with here so people know I actually read this book, and am not just brainlessly screaming about how good it is because someone's slipped me a Samsonite suitcase stuffed with cash.

I never would've read this, actually, if it hadn't been assigned for school, because I purposely avoid everything written about the terrorist attacks of 9/11/01. Having to read this book was good because it made me think a lot more about why I do that, plus most of it wasn't really about 9/11, but about the development during the last century of Islamist terrorism and formation of al-Qaeda, which is infinitely more interesting to read about anyway.

As a very provincial, ignorant person who hasn't traveled a lot, I don't know much about Islam or the Arab world and am thus highly susceptible to a romantic Orientalist-type fascination. And so the descriptions in this book of Egypt and Saudi Arabia (and Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan and a bunch of other places I can't even vaguely visualize without remedial assistance of the sort provided here) in the mid-to-late twentieth century were instantly riveting to me, as were Wright's patient and highly readable narratives of various key players' actions and lives. Partly because the people and places described were so exotic to me, the book had a quality of the mythic to it, and I'll admit that my ignorance and naivete about the rest of the world contributed to my enjoyment of this. For instance, his description of Saudi Arabia at mid-century, just as oil is being discovered, was at least as thrilling and evocative as some fantasy adventure story. The account of Mohammad bin Laden's construction in 1961 of a road uniting the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had all the suspense and narrative power of incredible fiction... and the details of Mohammad's polygamous practices were too lurid and insane to have been made up.

No, Hollywood with all its big budgets and CGI effects can't compete with this book's images of antsy Arab jihadists holed up in Afghanistan, mid-eighties Peshawar filling with the chaos of the Afghan war's overflow, a jihadi/US Army sergeant/al-Qaeda member/would-be CIA agent's adventures stateside, a Sudanese general's selling bin Laden fake uranium that was really cinnabar, the shadowy worlds of international intrigues and terrorism and American intelligence's determined bureaucratic obstructionism of itself... and of course all the violence, which is so pervasive and twisted and sadistic beyond even the most famously filmed gore. YOU JUST CAN'T MAKE THIS SHIT UP! Would that we had to...

Okay, but Lawrence Wright didn't write his book just to entertain but also to inform. This stuff really did happen, and we're supposed to think something about it, I guess. Obviously part of what demands the comparison of this book to fiction is the over-the-top drama of its story: the "clash of civilizations" apparently driving these men to mass murder for reasons that seem so foreign and incomprehensible to me.

I guess the main reason I avoid reading about the 9/11 attacks is that I feel profoundly embarrassed by my

nation's reaction to them. Not only by our political and military response, but by our cultural processing, and what we've made of these events. Reasons for my discomfort with the political and military stuff is pretty obvious; throughout *The Looming Tower*, Wright makes clear that a goal of the terrorists was to provoke a repressive response: to make the United States behave more like, say, Egypt, where dissenters and suspected terrorists were rounded up and tortured without any due process, a practice many point to as a factor in Ayman al-Zawahiri's increasingly bloodthirsty radicalization. Well uh, yeah -- as the old cliché points out, clichés become cliché for a reason, and "the terrorists have won" out in many ways, not least in our country's treatment of suspected terrorists. Score one for the away team!

I mean, I really don't want to get into some boring stupid political rant, but reading this did make my own thoughts and feelings about all this stuff clearer to me. In some ways the book had a sort of cartoonish simplicity in its presentation of the battle between good and evil, but the thing is that you can't argue that al-Qaeda and these other similar groups aren't purely evil. They are evil. Intentional mass slaughter of innocent civilians is objectively evil, and so painting these guys as two-dimensional Saturday-morning animated villains is not wrong. The only part of the equation that's not so simple is the goodness-of-adversary part, and so maybe the battle is more like evil v. at-least-somewhat-less-evil. But whatever your issues with the United States and our tendency to have robots drop bombs on wedding parties halfway around the world and to perform extraordinary renditions to Syria or whatever, there are some very nice things about living here, such as the Taliban not running our zoo.

One thing I remember really clearly about being a kid was watching movies or reading books and always thinking that the bad guys were trying to destroy the good guys based on some misunderstanding -- that if the good guys sat down with the bad guys and they drank some apple juice together, the bad guys would realize that their vendetta was all just a silly mistake. Then I grew up, and came to understand that this was rarely the case. Violent hatred isn't usually based just in miscommunication or a lack of understanding; that's just a comforting myth we tell children because the truth kind of sucks. It's not that al-Qaeda hates me because they don't understand me. If they really knew me and what I'm all about, they'd hate me even more than they already do.

Anyway, my book report is willfully trying to turn itself into a moronic political rant -- sorry. Where I think I was going was that Wright also emphasizes how badly bin Laden wanted to lure the U.S. into war in Afghanistan, which he envisioned -- after the Russians' misadventure there -- as a guaranteed destroyer of empires. Well, it is truly baffling to me why anyone would ever want to fight a war in AFGHANISTAN -- from what I can see this is a country of MUTILATED, DRUG-DEALING TRIBAL WARLORDS WHO ARE PERFECTLY COMFORTABLE BEING SURROUNDED BY LANDMINES, and it seems like you'd have to be crazy go fucking around with people like that -- but there we are. Or rather, there are our troops, dealing with God only knows what, while the rest of us sit around at home getting fatter and updating our Apple products and spouting off uninformed opinions in online book reviews and occasionally still making some kind of pious, wounded noise about the excruciatingly painful national tragedy that was 9/11.

I mean, that's really why I avoid all the 9/11 stuff, and what I find so uncomfortably embarrassing about it. For me, in many ways what this book was about ultimately was violence, and about cultural understandings of violence and how it can be used. A lot of the things in here shocked me because of the nature of the violence described -- far before we actually got to jihad, the accepted levels of violence in a lot of these cultures was astounding. For instance, okay, yes, we still have the death penalty here, which also shocks me, but in Saudi Arabia -- who are our *friends* over there (well, more or less, as far as these things go) -- capital punishment is effected through *beheading*. BEHEADING! HOLY SHIT! Maybe you think it's culturally insensitive or something that I consider that more gruesome than lethal injection, but man, I sure do. That's just one example though: the wider culture that suicide bombers grow out of is one that seems to have a great deal more familiarity -- and thus perhaps, to some extent, comfort -- with actual violence than our own.

I say "actual" violence because there is a pretty great scene in here towards the end when -- I hope I'm not

getting the details wrong, I can't find it, sorry if this is wrong -- the al-Qaeda guys are sitting around in some caves in Afghanistan watching Arnold Schwarzenegger movies to get ideas for their hijackings. One unexpected impact this book, though its good v. evil presentation, had was in making me question my own culture in a different way than I usually do. I was raised to be critical of American values, even while being so obviously embedded within and formed by them that I couldn't even fully identify what they were. By explicating the terrorists' beef with the U.S. in such detail, Wright helped me see better why it is exactly that they "hate our freedoms," and what these freedoms are, and of which ingredients is brewed the American Kool Aid is that I was raised on... and remain ideologically committed to drinking.

Maybe the amount of sentimentalism and exceptionalism that goes along with American discourse about 9/11 bothers me so much because I secretly feel some of it too. There are embarrassing things about being an American in this era, and the 9/11 stuff makes me feel a lot of them strongly. As I said at the outset, I am provincial and sheltered, and in this I am fairly representative of my countrymen. I haven't traveled much, but I lived in New York for several years, and descriptions of mass death there do affect me more than those of even more horrific violence in far-off Afghanistan, Egypt, Algeria, or Kenya.

Lately -- before reading this book -- I've been troubled a lot by the thought that I'm not at all brave. One thing that got me started thinking about that was talking to men who'd served recently in Iraq and Afghanistan. These guys are very different from most of us Americans in that they have traveled to these places, and have witnessed and participated in violence there. They aren't motivated by religious fundamentalism; they go into dangerous situations hoping very much they won't get hurt or die, and I consider that very brave. But -- and I know this is no news flash, every idiot knows this -- while they were over there shooting people and having their convoys blown up we were all just back here buying shoes on the Internet and complaining about gas being expensive and acting like the events of September 11, 2001 were this completely isolated and exceptionally violent event that was so traumatic for all of us that our country just might never recover its emotional bearings. I mean, we're so removed from violence that the false memory of its rarity frightens us so badly that we can't even bring our shampoo on the plane. This bums me out so much because I don't want these jihadist assholes to be right about anything. I don't want them to be right thinking that we're not brave and that we're not a moral nation, but we haven't done that great a job proving them wrong in the years since this happened.

Okay, this review got away from me and I'm just babbling and it's really really stupid, and I'm sorry, but anyway, bottom line: this is a fantastic book and I couldn't put it down the whole time that I was reading it. Highly recommended, though maybe not for the plane.

* * * *

Okay, I had to chop off this already overly-long non-review, because I heard the screams of my neighbors and realized the Superbowl had started, so not wanting to be "against us" I had to run off to that. But now, having patriotically reaffirmed my faith in the greatness of my powerful nation by watching Cee Lo Green and Madonna lip sync "Like a Prayer," I thought I'd try to wrap up some of my irrelevant and incoherent non-thoughts.

I'm actually not sure what it is that I was trying to say here about violence. Maybe I'm saying that I think we need to be more consistent in our cultural understanding and application of it, but this book could be a warning about the dangers of consistency, which is perhaps not just the hobgoblin of little minds but also the lifeblood of fundamentalism. One thing I think Wright did a really good job of explaining was the lure that these ideas have for men who then blow up themselves and a whole bunch of innocent people. What's the trade-off, what do they get from it, aside from that rumored afterlife stacked with nubile virgins? Yeah I know these people are real different from the people I know, but they are still people, and I just don't think humans are wired for purely delayed gratification.

What they get from fundamentalism -- taken to murderous extremes, sure, but fundamentalism in general -- is the happy comfort of moral clarity, of a simplified world. Me, I just don't know what to make of all this. All the violence, all the pain, all the baffling overwhelming complexity of an insane world. It's hard enough figuring out what to think of any of it, let alone to know how to live every day in a way that doesn't feel like a series of idiotic and self-contradicting mistakes. But if you become one of these jihad guys, such confusion is no longer a problem you face. There's good, and there's bad, and you know what you must do. And what you must do does seem super batshit crazy and horrible to me, but to you it makes so much sense that you'd never even dream of questioning it, and that's gotta feel pretty great... maybe so much that it's a feeling worth killing and dying for.

But I am still disturbed by our culture's relationship to violence, which seems very hypocritical and problematic to me. Obviously there's something distasteful about letting our enemies define us, but if we are going to play that game and say we stand for the opposite of what they do, then what we stand for, what we do and believe should make sense. If they are for repression and we are for freedom, then we need to be free. If we are against violence, let us be against violence; if we are not against violence, then let's be honest about that, and not cry and whine so much when that violence touches our lives.

I don't know, it was easy for the terrorists to be consistent in their actions, because they were fundamentalists: they were willing to die in order to kill (though tellingly, bin Laden expressed in his will that he didn't want his sons to join al-Qaeda: it's understandably a lot easier to send someone else's kids off to die, as we see here at home when powerful people happily start wars that their sons won't have to fight). It is a lot harder for a diverse nation of people with wildly different ideas about morality and violence to agree about how we're going to see things and respond to something like terrorist acts. But it should start at least with our owning the consequences of our actions -- it should have started with much more responsible media coverage of this last decade's wars, for example. I mean that's just an example. I don't really know what else to say about it, except that I thought of some article a few months ago in one of those mainstream weekly news magazines -- *Time* or *Newsweek* -- about the United States military and how sealed off in many ways from the rest of the population they've become. I think that's a really important problem that points to a lot more than just itself. In my experience, it seems to me that a lot of us either tend to be lefty doves, who tend to be naive about certain global realities, or righty hawks, who can be cavalier about the effects of violence. It seems to me that Americans who have fought in the military and people who have grown up in really violent neighborhoods not surprisingly tend to be more realistic and less sentimental about violence, but is that what we want? As this book shows, once you get comfortable with violence things can quickly get horrific and disgusting.

Blah blah blah blah. I don't know who I'm talking to or what I'm saying or why, I'm really just babbling -- procrastinating on homework. Sorry.

The final thing that I wanted to say about *The Looming Tower* was that I learned how all the terrorists would blend in and get legal status -- whether in California or Somalia or wherever -- by simply marrying a native woman. THIS SERIOUSLY FREAKED ME THE HELL OUT! Those who know me are aware that I have a reputation for poor judgment when it comes to affairs of the heart, and a weakness for swarthy men with an air of mystery about them... and so what am I supposed to do now with this piece of information!?? If I turn down dates with foreign guys named Muhammad does that mean the terrorists have won?

Ah, questions, troubling questions of "the post-9/11 world."

In any case: a truly great book.

Will Byrnes says

Lawrence Wright - from his site

Lawrence Wright looks at the players involved in the history and construction of Al-Qaeda, offering short bios of Sayyid Qtub, Ayyman Zawairi, bin Laden, John O'Neill, et al. It is a thorough and interesting work. As someone who has read quite a bit about the players here, my expectations were modest. But I was impressed with the clarity of the story-telling. It was also impressive in the level of detail he presents. Some of that was amusing, as in his depiction of O'Neill's female juggling act. He comes down hard on the unwillingness of the CIA and FBI to share meaningful information in a timely manner. It is clear from his descriptions that turf wars played a larger role than did the institutional barriers to sharing information, although the latter were not trivial. This is highly recommended for anyone interested in the background to the terror events of the 21st century, clear, compelling and informative. The Pulitzer Committee thought so, awarding Wright their 2007 award for general non-fiction. The book earned a slew of other awards as well.

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=====EXTRA STUFF

Links to the author's personal, Twitter and FB pages

Image from NewsMax.com

A nice article in Variety about the Hulu production

Jeff Daniels as John O'Neill in the Hulu production - image from IMDB.com

My personal experience of 9/11 seemed wrong to include in the review proper, so I am putting it here under a spoiler tag for any who have an interest. It is a slightly edited journal entry.

Many years before, in the late 80s and early 90s, I had worked at the World Financial Center, across the street from the WTC, passing through the WTC complex on my way to and from work every day. I would often stop into the WTC at lunchtime. There was a nice lunch place that had good, affordable chili and a video jukebox. In 1994, I was working across the river in Jersey City at one of the increasing number of skyscraping office towers that mirror Manhattan, reachable via PATH trains, the terminal being in the lower levels of the WTC. We felt the thud of the first attempt at the towers while at our desks.

My wife and I did not personally know any of the people who lost their lives on 9/11, but were only a couple of degrees removed from people who did. A friend lost a sister. A nephew knew one of the firemen who had died. We still grieved as New Yorkers, Americans and human beings.

(view spoiler)

Wright posted the ff in September 2014 in *The New Yorker*, about a significant omission in the *9/11 Commission Report*, removed at the behest of Dubya - The Twenty-Eight Pages - worth a look

Wright interviewed by Tom Ashbrook for *On Point*

4/21/18 - My wife and I just finished watching the 10-part miniseries of *The Looming Tower* on Hulu. It is amazing, informative, gut-wrenching, and rage-inducing. So much could have been prevented but for egos, turf-wars, downright stupidity, and willful blindness.

Max says

Two themes run through the book. First is the development of radical Islamist movements particularly in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan culminating in the formation of al-Qaeda. Included in the story are detailed accounts of the lives of Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and their ideological predecessor Sayyid Qutb. Second is the disjointed response of the CIA, FBI and national security apparatus in Washington to counter al-Qaeda and similar groups. American efforts are rendered ineffective by personality feuds, political infighting and protection of jurisdictional turf. As a case in point we get the personal story of John O'Neill, his love lives, and his abrupt off-putting and endearing behaviors that won allies and created enemies. O'Neill is a polarizing figure who the author feels had the right stuff to uncover the plot if left to his own devices. My take is he was the wrong man for the job, incapable of inducing cooperation and lacking the deftness to break through bureaucratic tangles.

The book is a compelling read. Wright sprinkles in personal details about the protagonists to keep the narrative eminently human. Between the machinations of the various terrorist groups and Washington agencies we are always finding out something about the private lives of O'Neill, bin Laden and his widely extended family, as well as the character shaping events in the lives of al-Zawahiri and Qutb. This personal touch and straight forward journalistic style make Wright's history very accessible. But more important is the message, the shifting nature of terrorism, always morphing, always challenging established thought and practices and the total inadequacy of America's institutions to keep pace short of a massive military response. Based on this account, America's intelligence agencies were in need of deep reform and restructuring. Hopefully action has been taken to make America's counter terrorism agencies work together effectively because, as we look around us fourteen years after 9-11, the need has never been greater.

brian says

there are the books that make our heads explode, that make every minute of the day a chinese water torture of waiting for the chance to get the hell home and read some more, the books that live inside us all through the day, the books that make us excited to take a crap just so we can shut the door behind us (or not) and sneak in a few pages, the books which cause horn-honking at red lights from drivers irritated we're reading at the fucking wheel... *the looming tower* is one of 'em. as riveting and compelling as any novel i've read. only on page 230 and stamping with a fiver. fucking fantastic.

sweaty men trying to pluck the one shiny needle of truth from the haystack of rancid "intelligence" that the world of spy vs spy vs spy showers like golden rain bountifully, munificently, all over the place in this information-soaked fun-packed palace of stupefied over-eaters we call the western world. Three blind counter-terrorist agencies - see how they run - they all ran after the farmer's wife - which was a grave error as she knew very little about al-Qaeda, as it turned out, after some strenuous waterboarding.

Anyway, I couldn't hack it, it made me feel slightly ill. Too much stuff about two giant boys towns, one better dressed than the other one, but only slightly.

Dispiriting is not the word.

Disgusting may be.

This has been another bad-tempered rant from your friend Paul Bryant of Nottingham. He ought to know better, but he doesn't.

Thank you for your patience.

Bart says

What a great surprise this book was. I first read about *The Looming Tower* (the title comes from the Koranic verse Osama bin Laden used as a coded message to the 9/11 hijackers) in a number of political op/ed columns. Finally, though, it was conservative writer Jonah Goldberg's heavy reliance on *The Looming Tower* for an L.A. *Times* column that sent me looking for the book.

Lawrence Wright's treatment of the jihadist movement is thorough to the point of being almost sympathetic. It goes deeply into what Egyptian interrogation methods created so many Ayman al-Zawahiris. It explores the history of oil wealth in Saudi Arabia and an immigrant construction entrepreneur named Mohammed bin Laden whose seventeenth child, of fifty-four, would grow up to become the world's most ambitious terrorist.

It also walks readers through the tangled relationship between the United States and Afghanistan and the Taliban and al Qaeda and, yes, Saddam Hussein, and the Northern Alliance and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak.

It is fairly merciless in its treatment of the American bureaucracy that created figurative walls between the CIA and the FBI. It makes a somewhat cartoonish hero of an FBI agent named John O'Neill and a level-headed assessment of Richard Clarke.

This was the book that led to the interesting and needlessly controversial two-day miniseries called "The Road to 9/11". That series, like this book, points an accusatory finger at no one American, not Bill Clinton and not George W. Bush.

Why not? Well, because the book is too sophisticated for the mindless, thirty-second shout-a-thons that have passed for political discourse on both the political left and right since 9/11.

Anyone who is interested in an intermediate-level analysis of what made Osama bin Laden so notorious (and his rise has many parallels to that of Ernesto Guevara de la Serna) is well advised to read this book. At 475 pages, it is exhaustive but not exhausting.

Anyone who has "strong" feelings about what caused the rise of al Qaeda (and be warned, the network is a

lot smaller than one might think) on the world stage should read this book before the next time he raises his voice for/against a US politician.

The Looming Tower is not "complicated" (the cop-out word self-proclaimed intellectuals use at every turn) but detailed. It is not inciting but insightful. It is also highly recommended to any curious American.
