

# America's Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda

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An address given to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council  
On September 22, 2011 by

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Well thank you, everyone. It's great to be here in Southern California tonight. I thought I'd spend a few minutes tonight just talking a little bit about the book that my colleague Thom Shanker and I have written. It really came about a few years ago when we were working on some stories looking at counter-terrorism strategy and operations that were ongoing in Iraq and Afghanistan at the time, and looking at how things had really changed since we had started covering that subject together.

The whole idea of writing a book about it took hold, and as we started looking at this subject itself of terrorism and how you would defeat terrorism, many experts were telling us [that] you really have to go back to the beginning. In this case the beginning of our book really starts on 9/11. And we came away with two important themes right away to explore, one of which is how little the United States government really knew about Al-Qaeda and about terrorist networks in general on 9/11.

Just to illustrate a small point, when we were talking with some of the people in the White House – the Bush White House – about that fateful day, and how it became clear as the day wore on that this group called Al-Qaeda was responsible for the attacks. There were people actually in the White House, our sources were telling us, who were saying, "Al-who?"

Of course there were niches of the government, niches within the intelligence agencies that knew well, of course Al-Qaeda had been responsible for the first attack on the World Trade Center Towers; the bombing of the USS Cole. But in a broad sense this was a

government, this was a country that really didn't know a whole lot about terrorism in general. Terrorism was something that happened in other places, and if it affected US troops or Americans overseas, it was tragic, but it didn't really affect the homeland.

The other thing, the other major flaw that we identified was the initial reaction to those attacks; that perhaps understandable and instinctive reaction of the United States to use its military might and its intelligence forces to see if it could try to kill and capture its way to victory over enemies in both Afghanistan and Iraq. As we got into the reporting of this, it became clear that it took a couple of years for the government really to understand that this approach wasn't working. In fact, looking around to see how they could come up with a better approach in doing this.

It was actually an important memo that then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld wrote in December of 2003 – and at this point I have to always caution, as I do with my editors, just because Don Rumsfeld said it doesn't mean it was wrong. Because in this case Rumsfeld had something very important – really pivotal – to say in this December 2003 memo to his top civilian and military advisors. The question he posed to them was this: “Are we actually, with our operations in Iraq... are we actually creating more militants there than we are taking off the battlefield? And if we are, we need to have a new strategy to go after this new type of enemy.”

So here was Rumsfeld, really putting his finger on an important position and an important current that we will be following through this book. As we kind of sketch out, over the next decade, it becomes clear that the United States government did and does understand Al-Qaeda much better than it did on 9/11, and understands terrorist networks much better. It's not a perfect understanding by any means, because this is a rapidly changing organization. It's a morphing organization.

We also talk about the government itself and how it responds to that; how it combats this enemy's change from the important use of just military might and intelligence forces which are still a vital component in this fight. But it's a broader, what we call “whole-of-government” approach to combating terrorism. It sweeps in other agencies. It looks at the FBI, not just looking at their counter-terrorism mission here in the United States, but

the scores of agents they have deployed overseas working with their foreign counterparts there. It's looking at agencies like the Treasury Department, [which is] now the lead agency in the US government responsible for choking off the finances of terrorist networks and finding ways about that.

So how did this happen? How did this evolution take place? What are some of the key moments that you can identify as saying that this is where some changes were taking effect? Well, we identified a couple of people an unlikely duo in the Pentagon for one of these moments: A young man named Matt Kroenig, who at the time was a doctorate, PhD. candidate studying at UC Berkley in classic cold-war deterrence theory. He teamed up with a veteran Pentagon bureaucrat, a cold-warrior named Barry Pavell. And together, these two guys were looking at a question that got to what Rumsfeld was talking about.

They were looking at this idea: can you look at a case of classic cold-war deterrence, that is, the position – the approach – that kept that tense peace between the Soviet Union and the United States for so many decades? Are there elements of that deterrence theory that you can pull out, expand, adapt, and put toward fighting against terrorism today? Are there elements of that?

Well, the initial reaction, of course, from most of their Pentagon colleagues, as well as many throughout the government was, of course not. We all know that terrorists are undeterrable. Why would you bother even pursuing such a line of inquiry? And to their credit, there was probably some merit to that argument. If you look, of course, the Soviets had physical things that we could hold hostage, the U.S. could. They had the Kremlin. They had military bases. You had the dachas of the politburo members where kept their ballerina mistresses. These were places that had addresses on them which the missiles, the ICBMs that the US had, could use to reach them if they needed to.

Well, terrorists didn't have any of that. Terrorists are state-less organizations; trans-national organizations. What could you hit? And what would you hold hostage, if you will, in order to deter them? Well it turned out that Kroenig and Pavell and some of their other colleagues – not only in the Pentagon, but within academia and other places – they're

looking at this and saying, well there are things that terrorists hold dear. It's just not what you might normally think about. They're things like prestige, and honor, and their place within Muslim society; the Ummah. And perhaps most important of all, their sense of success and being able to carry out their attacks in all this.

So, under our misunderstanding, Pavell and Kroenig actually worked on a series of slides and they got Rumsfeld interested enough that he actually took them in the Summer 2005 to President Bush at his ranch in Crawford, and presented them. So now, very quickly, this thinking is moving into the mainstream of main national security establishment. It's still very fresh. It's still developing. But it's there.

So how is this carried out in the field? That's, of course, the test. Does this actually work? How can you test it if it does? Let me give you a couple examples from my book. The first is in looking at one of the biggest threats that the US faced as it fought in the wars in Iraq in 2006 and 2007, as suicide bombers are coming in from all over the Middle East and North Africa. They're coming in through Syria and there's a pipeline of them funneling in into Iraq, and particularly around Baghdad.

Insurgency is really at its peak in '06 and '07, and what they found was, from key commanders working with intelligence officers and working with law enforcement was that at first they just tried to cut off this supply of suicide bombers, killing them by intercepting them along these routes that they came up. But it quickly became apparent that this route could be easily replenished with the actual bombers themselves. There were enough young men who were devoted to this cause to volunteer their lives to do this. But what they found out, the Americans did, was that before any of these young men would go forward with this kind of suicide attack, their mission had to be blessed by a cleric – a shari'ah Emir – in order for them of course to go to heaven and reap all the benefits of what they were going to be doing.

So the analysts said, let's try something different. Why don't we take out the Emirs? And sure enough, once they started capturing or killing some of these Emirs the suicide bombers stopped, because they weren't going to go forward with their attacks until they were blessed. And it was much, much harder to find qualified Emirs than it was to find

suicide bombers. And so here was one of the first examples of how, by disrupting and deterring, in this sense, the chain that led to suicide bombers, you could at least delay and perhaps diminish the number of bombers coming in. And we talk about this in the book as the “new deterrence,” because it’s not just cold-war deterrence and many stolid, cold-war deterrent theorists really take issue with us. But it really sweeps in other things like dissuasion, disruption, and ultimately destruction of a network that incorporates into this new definition.

I’ll give you another example of where this has been working. That is, in this whole realm of how you cut off the financing for terrorist networks. Now, it doesn’t cost very much money to keep one terrorist in business. But it actually takes a fair amount of resources to keep a whole network going. So what the U.S. did in Afghanistan – in Nangarhar Province – was, they started going after these ancient money exchanging systems called “hawalas.” These are family-run businesses that basically shift money around. They’re very common in the Muslim world. They’re no resemblance to the kind of accounting that we go through in the West, for instance. And it is very, very difficult to trace money using these.

So what U.S. forces did, again working law enforcement, intelligence, and now beginning to use Afghan allies was, they went into a community in Nangarhar Province and they shut down about half a dozen of these hawalas. They’re family-run businesses, remember. And then they turned to the dozens of other hawalas and said to them, “Look what we’ve just done to your family, your friends here, and your colleagues in this business. We understand that these are valuable businesses to you. You have nice homes because of them. You’ve got nice gardens in these homes. You have nice standards of living for your families and your children doing this. But if you continue to do business, this money changing with the Taliban, we will take away your business, just as we did from these half a dozen hawalas; these neighbors of yours.”

And within a matter of weeks, again, the amount of business that was transacted with the Taliban – the hawalas in the area were strong enough – that it forced the Taliban to move on to other areas. Again, this was something episodic, and it has to be sustained.

But it was another element where you could look at and say, “Wow this is really working on the ground to some extent.” So that’s the notion of deterrence starting to take hold.

The other thing that is very important in understanding – the evolution we talk about in our book – is the thinking of the US government of how to combat these foes on the ground by understanding that this is a very thinking and adaptive enemy. In order to combat that, the government has to work more closely together, too. The military has to work more closely with the CIA. The CIA has to work more closely with the FBI. And you basically need to have better information to fight this network that is out there.

Thus counter-terrorism becomes a campaign for the fight for intelligence and getting inside the cycle of intelligence for these attacks that they’re carrying out. This approach is underscored by me, in writing the book, of how you go about attacking a network with this new intelligence. And it also brings in this theory of deterrence that we were just talking about. And if you think, going back to one of my original comments, of course Osama Bin Laden probably was not somebody who could be deterred from carrying out attacks, just as suicide bombers are probably undeterrable.

But what American analysts were discovering was, they weren’t the only parts of this chain to carry out attacks. There are others that we called enablers or supporters. These are the logisticians; the gun-runners; the financiers in this network. People like those hawalas that we talked about. And if you target some of these networks, some of these cogs in the network, you can disrupt the chain that leads to an attack in the first place. And sometimes, these people – these people in the middle, these supporters – they’re not ideologically driven like the suicide bombers. They’re in it largely for the money. And if you can go after them, like those troops went after the hawalas, you’re going to take them out of the equation and make it more difficult for the terrorists to continue to operate as they were.

It may not stop it altogether, but it may well delay it. Or they may have to turn to a different type of explosive because they can’t get the grade they want. So they’re having to turn to a lesser alternative – all part of the process of degrading this network.

So how does this work in practice? How does this play out? How do you take out pieces of the network? One of the examples we talk about in the book is how the United States was trying to track down a particularly troublesome militant leader in part of Iraq. Normally what the Americans would do in this case, they would set a bounty on the head of one of these individuals. In this case, I'm going to call this militant leader "Achmed." And they said, "In this case, let's try something different, because we can't find Achmed by raising the price of the bounty. Let's do something different. Let's lower the price of the bounty and then spread the word quietly on the street that Achmed isn't worth as much anymore. He's not as important as we originally thought.

Well you can imagine that once this started spreading to Achmed's friends, they start calling him up and saying, "Hey Achmed, have you heard what the Americans are saying about you? You're just not cut out for this work anymore."

Well, Achmed gets so pissed off he starts getting on his cell phone and calling all his friends saying, "I'm still very important. In fact, I'm going to start launching attacks pretty soon." Well, within a week the Americans who thought they had a bead on who this guy was, had identified his cell phone, had captured him, and they rounded up all the people – all the buddies that he'd called. So here was an instance again, where they're praying on that honor and prestige so, without firing a shot, they're able to grab up some of these guys.

Another approach that the US has honed in its campaign against terrorism over the past decade is attacking terrorists where they operate and perhaps their ultimate safe-haven, which is the internet; cyberspace. This is the area where they often conduct recruiting; they raise money. They even conduct plots using virtual online games, the same kind of war games that maybe some of your teenagers that you know operate.

Or two guys would get on at a pre-appointed time. They'd start playing the same war-game, and all the vernacular is the real thing. But they've attached code words within that vernacular that actually represent specific plots that they're about to carry out; very difficult for the American – in this case the National Security Agency – to track and combat.

So what analysts are doing instead, they are infiltrating Arabic-speaking; Farsi-speaking, other-speaking; analysts are infiltrating some of these militant chat rooms. They are posing as militants themselves, and oftentimes simply posing provocative questions.

“Brothers,” they may ask, “Why is it that that bombing of the wedding party in Oman, Jordan that killed hundreds – scores at least – of innocent Muslim men, women, and children... How does that advance our goals – the goals that Osama Bin Laden taught us?” It’s meant to raise doubt. Raise doubt and confusion in the ranks. Just as when they hacking into now; they are hacking into the cell phones of terrorist leaders sending out contradictory and confusing messages, so that the militants who are following are thinking, “We don’t know if this guy has lost his marbles or what. We don’t know who to follow here. Maybe we should rethink the path that we are on here.”

The American government has even gotten to the point where they are able to replicate the watermarks, the trademark Al-Qaeda watermarks that go out over all their internet messages, again to sow confusion and dissent and raise doubts about the leadership and what’s going on here.

So far, I’ve talked largely about the advances that the government has made in this campaign against terrorism. But clearly, there is a long way to go; a long fight to be had. One of the areas where the American government has really fallen short is combating the Al-Qaeda narrative – counter-messaging, if you will. It’s a simple message, but it’s been quite effective that Al-Qaeda’s used over the years. And that is: the West is at war with Islam. It’s an argument that they carry out almost every day. It’s certainly the subtext even this week, with the debate going on in New York in the UN General Assembly over the whole question of Palestinian statehood – trying to raise doubts and issues, whether it is troops in Iraq, American troops in Afghanistan or American support for Israel. This is the narrative that Al-Qaeda is hammering on.

And America has been, the government – both Bush and Obama administrations – it’s been very difficult for them to combat this narrative, in part because the United States doesn’t have a whole lot of credibility on the Muslim street. So whatever message it sends out officially is not going to carry a lot of weight with people on the street.

Particularly those, young alienated young men and women who perhaps are most vulnerable to Al-Qaeda's intrigues.

So what's happening now? You have difficulty crafting these counter-messages – and a message you would think would be able to carry out these type of things, when the enemy in this case is beheading, and blowing people up. So what we did in our book is again look back and see, as the government in Washington is perhaps struggling to find a message. It's struggling to find credible Muslim voices to help amplify those voices in the Muslim world.

In the street, what they are doing is something different from in the field. In our book we cite the work of an American general named Lieutenant General Mark Hurling who takes... He's combating a quite devious network of suicide bombers in northern Iraq at the time. These are female suicide bombers, much more difficult – since most of the troops the U.S. has in Iraq at that time were male – for them to search women.

So what Hurling did was, he's found a case of a young girl named Ronya – 15 years old – who was pushed out and meant to be a suicide bomber, but her explosive vest didn't detonate. So he was able to take her as an example. She told her story to both American and Iraqi analysts. And she in turn pointed them to six other; half-a-dozen other women who were in line to be suicide bombers. They happened to be widows of suicide bombers. And, sure enough, Hurling had the idea with his troops of using these women – these credible voices – and pairing them up with a local female radio personality in this part of Iraq. This woman was almost like an Iraqi Oprah. She was telling the stories of these young women and what they were doing, and the effect was so powerful on the ground, Iraqis hearing it from young women – Iraqis. Not just the American message, but Iraqi women – that the number of female suicide bombers in that part of Iraq dramatically decreased over the next several months. Not eliminated, but dramatically decreased.

When we asked Hurling about this, we said, "You know, that sounds like a great story of how you try and win over hearts and minds." And he said, "You know I really don't like that phrase. I think it's insulting and obviously it has connotations going back to

Vietnam.” He said, “I use the phrase ‘trust and confidence.’ I’m trying to win their trust and confidence; their trust and respect. I think that would be a much more effective way of going about this.”

So where does that leave us now? I’d like to conclude with just some finishing thoughts before turning to your questions on where we are today, just a couple of weeks out after the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Well, to be sure, the Al Qaeda leadership in Pakistan, particularly after the death of Osama bin Laden and the Navy Seal raid in May, has taken some severe hits. Not only is bin Laden dead, but since that time there have been several other senior operatives and senior leaders of Al Qaeda who have also been killed by drones or captured, in this case by Pakistani forces.

So the threat of a major attack, like a 9/11 attack, plotted and carried out from the tribal areas of Pakistan on the border of Afghanistan, I think is greatly diminished. Where I think where we’re much more vulnerable, is a threat from affiliates of the main Al Qaeda that have sprouted in places like North Africa, in East Africa and Somalia, and in Yemen. And it’s Yemen that is probably the most troublesome place right now because this is the organization that has one of the, probably the leading bomb maker in the jihadi world right now. This is the guy who designed the bomb, the so-called “underpants bomb” used by a young Nigerian man who tried to blow himself up on a jetliner over Detroit Christmas of 2009. It’s the same outfit that organized, ten months later, a plot to put explosives into printer cartridges, put them on a couple of planes bound for Chicago and, but for a tip from Saudi intelligence, who knows what that might have lead to?

So again, Al Qaeda is probably right now – we argue in our book – is pursuing a dual-track strategy. On the one hand there is a small group that is eager and still trying to obtain weapons of mass destruction – perhaps a dirty bomb – but more likely are these kind of attacks, these smaller scale attacks carried out by these affiliates who have local grievances and they are trying to now link up with other small affiliates around the world.

The other threat that’s posed to American security is from the threat within this country. That is the threat of radicalized American citizens, be they individuals who are pure and maybe go and train in parts of Pakistan or in Yemen or, even harder to detect, are those

who are radicalized over the internet, often times by the English preaching of a man named Anwar al-Awlaki, who is an American-born cleric. He preached in mosques in Virginia and San Diego. He's now in hiding in Yemen, not only because he's one of their great English language propagandists, but he's also now one of their key operational planners. He was one of these guys who helped train the young Nigerian who tried to blow himself up. So the threat is there.

So what is this government doing about it now? We argue in our book that the next attack will come. The question of how big it is, or when it is, is unclear right now. We had, of course, the scare and an alert over the 9/11 tenth anniversary that didn't pan out, thankfully. But we argue is, what this government is really lacking and hasn't been honest and upfront with the public about is the debate about resilience. I don't mean resilience in the sense of how this country can rebuild after an attack; physically rebuild. If you have been down to Ground Zero in lower Manhattan, it's quite stirring and moving to see what's going on there. No, what we talk about in the book is a psychological resilience, the kind of resilience that the Brits and Israelis unfortunately have developed over time because of the attacks their countries have suffered from terrorists.

Fortunately this country has not had to deal with that, those kinds of attacks since 9/11. But politicians have not started this conversation because it's a very delicate one for them. If you raise the whole notion of resilience, you're basically acknowledging this country will be attacked again. In what form, we're not sure. What we argue is that conversation has to take place, and it has to start with the President.

President Obama did so. He actually started talking a little bit about resilience in his comments on the tenth anniversary. But it's very tricky because anybody who starts talking in that direction, instantly political opponents will come out and label you as soft on defense and perhaps even weak on terrorism. But this is the bottom line I think, because this country has to be lucky and good all the time to succeed. The terrorists only have to be lucky and good every now and then, as they were on 9/11, which was an amazing streak of luck, really if you look at it.



But that next attack will come and the question is: is this country prepared? Certainly we are now more mature about looking at the threat and we're now starting to have the debate on how much this country is willing to pay for, as the economic crisis sinks in.

How we react is another way, because the terrorists would like nothing better than for this country to overreact to the next attack when that comes. Anyway I thank you very much for your attention tonight and I look forward to your questions.

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