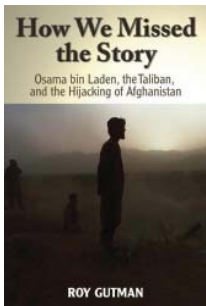

HOW WE MISSED THE STORY: OSAMA BIN LADEN, THE TALIBAN, AND THE HIJACKING OF AFGHANISTAN

GUTMAN, Roy Washington DC: United States Institute for Peace, 2008. 320 pages

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The Canadian Army's increased interest in Afghan history tends to focus on tactical analysis of the Soviet period from 1979 to 1989; on anything that can explain tribal dynamics; or the progress of the war since 9-11. Knowledge of what happened in the intervening years generally tends to be anecdotal and derived from the personal experiences or beliefs of Afghans who work alongside Canadians. That period, stretching from the Soviet withdrawal in 1989 to the mounting of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM in 2001, remains loaded with charge and counter charge of human rights violations, narcotics smuggling, conspiracy theories related to the UNCOL pipeline deal, and near-constant propaganda that the situation that confronted the West in 2001 was somehow the result of Western neglect after the

Cold War ended. We now have an important resource to help us understand the post-Soviet era and a starting point to get beyond the propaganda. Roy Gutman's *How We Missed the Story* is that resource.

Gutman, an experienced journalist who is best known for his work in the Balkans, is now a senior fellow at the United States Institute for Peace, and dedicated several years trying to sort out what exactly happened in the violent chaos of post-Soviet Afghanistan. What emerges is a documented and detailed portrayal of Pakistan's interference in Afghan affairs, Saudi Arabia's culpability in that exercise, a distracted not to mention diffuse American policy, and the exploitation of that state of affairs by Al Qaeda and the Taliban.


Most importantly, we see that the instability in present-day Afghanistan is also in part the product of choices made by Afghans.

It is clear that Gutman was initially interested in how the Clinton and Bush administrations failed to prevent 9-11, but realized during the course of his research that there were limits to American power (and attention span) and that there were other players more adroit than the Americans in their understanding of regional dynamics. The work is far from being a bleat about American lost opportunities: indeed, the behaviour of the Taliban from its inception to its regime phase to its insurgent phase closely resembles what all of us saw in the Balkans in the early 1990s—calculated ethnic cleansing, the gross abuse of human rights, and the activation of historical grievances to fuel power-driven agendas. Gutman provides substantial detail on the magnitude and scope of the Taliban agenda and its execution. It is difficult to conclude that Afghanistan in 1996 was radically different from Bosnia in 1992—there was just little or no media coverage of it at the time.

What also emerges is a more balanced depiction of Northern Alliance factional behaviour; hitherto, that behaviour was considered the moral equivalent of Taliban behaviour with atrocity rumour after atrocity rumour abounding within the media-sphere. Gutman demonstrates that the Northern Alliance leaders were no angels in their fight, but their behaviour was nothing compared to the malevolence of the Taliban agenda. Those seeking accommodation with the Taliban leadership today should take heed.

Gutman faults the Clinton administration for its lukewarm attempts to implement a proxy support approach to the Northern Alliance (similar to what it did with Croatia in 1995); but that criticism pales to his detailed criticism of Pakistan's manipulation of the Afghan civil war to achieve its own ends. We also learn that the Taliban's Mullah Omar did indeed have designs on Central Asia and was prepared to export radical Islamist revolution throughout the 'Stans using Afghanistan as a base. Exporting terrorist violence was, therefore, not an exclusively Al Qaeda project; but that remained undetected by the Clinton administration at the time.

Canadians involved in present-day Afghanistan will appreciate Gutman's discussion of how the Taliban took over the country and in particular how tribal elements change sides and under what conditions. The city-focused Taliban strategy of the 1990s is also worth contemplating in our present circumstances. Notably, the discussion on how the players in the Mujahideen "Commanders' War" interacted in 1992-93 will provide insight into exactly why ISAF's influence in Kabul in 2003-04 was so important. I highly recommend this book.



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