

Bin Laden comes home to roost

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By Michael Moran

NEW YORK, Aug. 24, 1998 — At the CIA, it happens often enough to have a code name: Blowback. Simply defined, this is the term describing an agent, an operative or an operation that has turned on its creators. Osama bin Laden, our new public enemy Number 1, is the personification of blowback. And the fact that he is viewed as a hero by millions in the Islamic world proves again the old adage: Reap what you sow.

Before you click on my face and call me naive, let me concede some points. Yes, the West needed Josef Stalin to defeat Hitler. Yes, there were times during the Cold War when supporting one villain (Cambodia's Lon Nol, for instance) would have been better than the alternative (Pol Pot). So yes, there are times when any nation must hold its nose and shake hands with the devil for the long-term good of the planet.

But just as surely, there are times when the United States, faced with such moral dilemmas, should have resisted the temptation to act. Arming a multi-national coalition of Islamic extremists in Afghanistan during the 1980s - well after the destruction of the Marine barracks in Beirut or the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 - was one of those times.

BIN LADEN'S BEGINNINGS

As anyone who has bothered to read this far certainly knows by now, bin Laden is the heir to Saudi construction fortune who, at least since the early 1990s, has used that money to finance countless attacks on U.S. interests and those of its Arab allies around the world.

As his unclassified CIA biography states, bin Laden left Saudi Arabia to fight the Soviet army in Afghanistan after Moscow's invasion in 1979. By 1984, he was running a front organization known as Maktab al-Khidamar - the MAK - which funneled money, arms and fighters from the outside world into the Afghan war.

What the CIA bio conveniently fails to specify (in its unclassified form, at least) is that the MAK was nurtured by Pakistan's state security services, the Inter-Services Intelligence agency, or ISI, the CIA's primary conduit for conducting the covert war against Moscow's occupation.



Zaheeruddin Abdullah / AP file

Taliban militiamen watch as one of their tanks light up an opposition position northeast of Kabul on Aug. 15.

By no means was Osama bin Laden the leader of Afghanistan's mujahedeen. His money gave him undue prominence in the Afghan struggle, but the vast majority of those who fought and died for Afghanistan's freedom - like the Taliban regime that now holds sway over most of that tortured nation - were Afghan nationals.

Yet the CIA, concerned about the factionalism of Afghanistan made famous by Rudyard Kipling, found that Arab zealots who flocked to aid the Afghans were easier to "read" than the rivalry-ridden natives. While the Arab volunteers might well prove troublesome later, the agency reasoned, they at least were one-dimensionally anti-Soviet for now. So bin Laden, along with a small group of Islamic militants from Egypt, Pakistan, Lebanon, Syria and Palestinian refugee camps all over the Middle East, became the "reliable" partners of the CIA in its war against Moscow.

WHAT'S 'INTELLIGENT' ABOUT THIS?

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Though he has come to represent all that went wrong with the CIA's reckless strategy there, by the end of the Afghan war in 1989, bin Laden was still viewed by the agency as something of a dilettante - a rich Saudi boy gone to war and welcomed home by the Saudi monarchy he so hated as something of a hero.

In fact, while he returned to his family's construction business, bin Laden had split from the relatively conventional MAK in 1988 and established a new group, al-Qaida, that included many of the more extreme MAK members he had met in Afghanistan.

Exiled Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden is seen in this April, 1998 photo in Afghanistan.

Most of these Afghan vets, or *Afghanis*, as the Arabs who fought there became known, turned up later behind violent Islamic movements around the world. Among them: the GIA in Algeria, thought responsible for the massacres of tens of thousands of civilians; Egypt's Gamat Ismailia, which has massacred western tourists repeatedly in recent years; Saudi Arabia Shiite militants, responsible for the Khobar Towers and Riyadh bombings of 1996.

Indeed, to this day, those involved in the decision to give the Afghan rebels access to a fortune in covert funding and top-level combat weaponry continue to defend that move in the context of the Cold War. Sen. Orrin Hatch, a senior Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee making those decisions, told my colleague Robert Windrem that he would make the same call again today even knowing what bin Laden would do subsequently. "It was worth it," he said.

"Those were very important, pivotal matters that played an important role in the downfall of the Soviet Union," he said.

HINDSIGHT OR TUNNEL VISION

It should be pointed out that the evidence of bin Laden's connection to these activities is mostly classified, though its hard to imagine the CIA rushing to take credit for a Frankenstein's monster like this.



AP file

It is also worth acknowledging that it is easier now to oppose the CIA's Afghan adventures than it was when Hatch and company made them in the mid-1980s. After all, in 1998 we now know that far larger elements than Afghanistan were corroding the communist party's grip on power in Moscow.

Even Hatch can't be blamed completely. The CIA, ever mindful of the need to justify its "mission," had conclusive evidence by the mid-1980s of the deepening crisis of infrastructure within the Soviet Union. The CIA, as its deputy director Robert Gates acknowledged under congressional questioning in 1992, had decided to keep that evidence from President Reagan and his top advisors and instead continued to grossly exaggerate Soviet military and technological capabilities in its annual "Soviet Military Power" report right up to 1990.

Given that context, a decision was made to provide America's potential enemies with the arms, money - and most importantly - the knowledge of how to run a war of attrition violent and well-organized enough to humble a superpower.

That decision is coming home to roost.

International Editor Michael Moran writes a weekly column on foreign affairs.

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