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The Death of Isolationism: U.S. Foreign Policy and Afghanistan

Alexandria Currier¹

September 11, 2001, has created a distinct memory within modern politics. The destruction of the World Trade Center—both physically and symbolically—emboldened twenty-first-century Americans to shape a new political identity defined by retribution. Within this cataclysmic episode of U.S. history, a narrative emerged in which the United States stood at the forefront of neutralizing global security threats. This narrative, however, obscures the inherent negligence of the late twentieth-century United States government in prioritizing globalized terrorism as a national security threat.

Academic literature published after 9/11 has maintained that the growth of terrorism within Afghanistan was not very significant to the United States government until the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. History monographs such as *The History of Terrorism* and *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* have attributed this minimization to a lack of legitimate discussion surrounding transnational threats in the early 1990s.² They argue that the American government was dismissive due to the lack of interaction with the subject and the incredibility of threats related to terrorism, which in turn categorized foreign policy with Afghanistan as a low, distant priority. Additionally, edited volumes such as *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan* express that not only was Afghanistan negligible to United States foreign policy in the 1990s, but that “stateless terrorist networks diverted attention from [Afghanistan].”³ This is furthered by historian Terry Anderson in *Bush’s War*, which argues that the 1990s saw “numerous terrorist organizations with evil designs against the West.”⁴ These perspectives support the idea that the sheer number of international terrorist organizations diluted Washington’s ability to focus on Afghanistan-born terrorism and that if the U.S. government knew about the threats at all, they would not have been distinct or noteworthy from any others. Regardless of specific justifications, the consensus in many post-9/11 publications is that American foreign policy was both

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² Gérard Chaliand and Arnaud Blin, *The History of Terrorism* (University of California Press, 2016), pp. 411-412; Timothy Naftali, *Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism* (Basic Books, 2005), pp. 263-264.

³ Richard H. Immerman, “Intelligence and the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” in *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, ed. Beth Bailey and Richard H. Immerman (New York University Press, 2015), p. 80.

⁴ Terry H. Anderson, *Bush’s Wars* (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 46.

uninformed and unconcerned with Afghanistan in the 1990s. Terrorism from Afghanistan existed in an extensive list of threats against the United States and, therefore, was never the top priority.

These publications also suggest that 1998 is a major turning point for U.S. foreign policy towards terrorism within Afghanistan. John Lynn II's monograph, *Another Kind of War: The Nature and History of Terrorism*, notes that "security analysts, journalists, and scholars still debate the degree to which al-Qaeda conducted attacks against America before 1998" however "the bombings of two U.S. embassies...moved al-Qaeda toward the top of the Clinton administration's security agenda."⁵ Anderson in *Bush's War* reinforces this claim, stating that "it was the embassy bombings on August 7, 1998, that shifted Clinton's response to terrorism into high gear."⁶ By categorizing the U.S. embassy attacks as the point of consciousness towards terrorism and Afghanistan, these studies support the narrative of security threats being relatively unknown before 1998. In contrast with these conclusions, this study argues that the United States government had a greater depth of awareness towards terrorist organizations within Afghanistan than has previously been documented, including cognizance of terroristic threats before 1998. It may additionally be noted that this study focuses from the time of initial United States involvement in 1979 to the death of Al-Qaeda founder Osama Bin Laden in 2011.

Introducing Afghanistan

The region which holds the current political entity of Afghanistan has historically been cloaked in abstraction; with a legacy as the "Graveyard of Empires", it carries with it a connotation of coldness and individuality.⁷ Geography and climate have long been used to explain Central Asia's supposed isolation from European culture. They have also provided an excuse for outside scholars to ignore the complexity of its populations. Islam is Afghanistan's central political, economic, and social foundation. Existing in all facets of life, Islam has served to alleviate differences and unify Afghans under a central Muslim identity. Additionally, it is also the primary structure in which the monarchy of Afghanistan (1919-1973) operated.⁸ One of the ways in which it ignited political allegiance is through the notion of

⁵ John A. Lynn II, *Another Kind of War: The Nature and History of Terrorism* (Yale University Press, 2019), p. 297.

⁶ Anderson, *Bush's Wars*, p. 49.

⁷ Milton Bearden, "Afghanistan, Graveyard of Empires," *Foreign Affairs*, 1 November 2001, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2001-11-01/afghanistan-graveyard-empires>

⁸ Thomas Barfield. *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*. (Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 12.

jihad, which most contemporary scholars attempt to translate as synonymous with a “struggle” or “strive”.⁹

In the 1960s, Afghanistan did not have significant ties with the United States. In fact, it was generally unimportant to both the United States and the Soviet Union, as it stood as an unaligned state within the first few decades of the Cold War. When the United States did seek out political interaction with Afghanistan, it primarily used “combinations of aid and diplomacy.”¹⁰ However, as neither nation could reliably indicate Afghanistan as an enemy or an ally, both dismissed it almost entirely. Despite Afghanistan’s alienation from the major Cold War powers, it was involved in several political alliances with fellow Islamic nations, which were seen as allies to the greater sentiment of jihad and the Afghan monarchy. One of these nations was Pakistan, which had been placed under an arms embargo by the United States because of an attempted rebellion within Indian Occupied Kashmir to overthrow India’s control within the region. The monarchy of Afghanistan actively assisted by purchasing American weapons and smuggling them into Pakistan.¹¹ The involvement of the Afghanistan monarch within Pakistan’s political affairs existed as an act of “solidarity”, which was shared with “their fellow Muslim Pakistanis locked in confrontation with Hindu India.”¹² This event not only solidified Afghanistan’s initial role within political developments adjacent to the ongoing Cold War but is also an example of Afghanistan’s political authority supporting Islamic allies before the 1970s.

When tensions rose again in 1971, the existing conflict expanded beyond India and Pakistan. Afghanistan continued to quietly rally behind Pakistan, now to the detriment of Cold War relations with the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union began to take a considerable interest in “the carving up of Pakistan” and the larger Indo-Pakistani war in the 1970s, leading to its support for India and the consultation of Afghanistan’s monarchy as an ally in defeating Pakistani forces.¹³ Given the existence of Afghanistan as a substantial territory along the southern border of the U.S.S.R., it posed not only a strategic resource alliance but would have maintained security for long-term international relations.

⁹ Amanda Kretsch, “The Misconception of Jihad in America,” *Loyola Marymount University Undergraduate Library Research Awards*, no. 3 (2016), p. 2-3.

<https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ulra/awards/2016/3>

¹⁰ Robert Rakove, “New book unveils untold story of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan prior to Soviet invasion,” interview by Gabriella Ermanni, *Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation*, 10 July 2023,

<https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/news/new-book-unveils-untold-story-us-engagement-afghanistan-prior-soviet-invasion#:~:text=A%20prime%20example%20is%20the,worsened%20in%20the%20late%201970s>

¹¹ Azeem Tariq and Muhammad Owais, “A Case Study of Operation Gibraltar and Indo-Pak War of 1965: An Application of Decision-Making Models,” *Journal of Indian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2020), p. 119; Ralph H. Magnus and Eden Naby, *Afghanistan*, (Westfield Press, 1998) p. 116.

¹² Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan*, p. 116.

¹³ Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan*, p. 117.

The response which the Soviets received from the King of Afghanistan, however, was a declaration that the nation could not attack a fellow-Islamic state and therefore denied assistance to opposing forces within the conflict.¹⁴

Despite active disagreement between Soviet and Afghan policy during the Indo-Pakistan wars, the deterioration in Soviet-Afghan relations were eased with the overthrow of Afghanistan's monarchy. Various crises, such as drought, infrastructure insecurities, and narcotics trafficking, emerged within Afghanistan as points of weakness for political stability.¹⁵ In the national backlash which enveloped Afghanistan's leadership, former Prime Minister Da'ud Khan emerged as an ally to the Parcham faction within the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).¹⁶ In the early morning hours of 17 July 1973, the PDPA would oust the existing monarchy and install Khan as Afghanistan's new political leader, offering Moscow the possibility of a new political relationship with the nation.

During this period of shifting Soviet interaction, Americans were still not actively looking to intervene or gain heavy involvement with Afghanistan. As described by author Robert Rakove, the 1973 coup did not present an immediate threat to the United States.¹⁷ Rather, the regime change resulted in Washington arguing for "continued diplomatic engagement" as "[Da'ud's] efficiency as a coup plotter and his credibility as a nonaligned statesman made recognition a foregone conclusion."¹⁸ The ambiguity of Khan's political philosophy had not only relieved mounting disagreement between Afghanistan and the U.S.S.R., but had additionally sustained the American government's low prioritization for intervention. Within the view of the American political sphere, engagement with Afghanistan beyond indifference appeared costly and inefficient. American leadership also argued that state-building in Afghanistan would be virtually impossible. Documents such as a declassified 1979 report from the National Foreign Assessment Center (an organizational department of the Central Intelligence Agency) attribute this difficulty to longstanding challenges in creating "a sense of national unity among the diverse peoples of Afghanistan."¹⁹ Similarly, modern Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid's book *Descent into Chaos* argues that "[the] process of state-building [in Afghanistan]...would take much longer and demand an even greater commitment from the West."²⁰ Both texts support the

¹⁴ Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan*, p. 117.

¹⁵ Robert B. Rakove, *Days of Opportunity: The United States and Afghanistan Before the Soviet Invasion* (Columbia University Press, 2023), p. 270.

¹⁶ Rakove, *Days of Opportunity*, p. 270.

¹⁷ Rakove, *Days of Opportunity*, p. 274-276.

¹⁸ Rakove, *Days of Opportunity*, p. 276.

¹⁹ National Foreign Assessment Center, "Afghanistan: Ethnic Diversity and Dissidence (U)," Central Intelligence Agency, 1 May 1979. https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000515454.pdf

²⁰ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (Penguin Group, 2008), p. 197.

idea that even if the United States had chosen to engage with Afghanistan through non-covert, interventionist means, it may still have been unsuccessful. As authors Magnus and Naby state, “no one, even the United States, was willing to use force to change the situation... the regime would exist as long as the Soviets wanted it to last.”²¹

The delicate separation of Afghanistan from the American political sphere would not be maintained. When the dominance of the Marxist-Leninist system appeared to falter, Soviet leadership perceived insecurity in their political influence within Afghanistan. Policies such as opening Afghanistan to member states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and disregarding Soviet policies which sought to limit foreign engagement stood as direct assaults on Soviet power.²² In 1978, a second coup d'état—led by factions of the PDPA with allegiance to Moscow—ousted Da'ud Khan. Khan's removal alarmed both the Soviet Union and the United States, as the political direction of Afghanistan appeared unknown.²³ The 1978 coup d'état led to the installation of General Secretary Nur Muhammad Taraki and Parliamentary representative Babrak Karmal, which dissatisfied several factions of the PDPA.²⁴ By September of 1979, General Secretary Taraki had been assassinated by the orders of Hafizullah Amin—a member of the PDPA faction in opposition to the administration—which only further generated disunity within Afghanistan and its political leadership.

Initially wanting to remain aware but uninvolved, U.S. officials were instructed to “play any question about recognition in as low a key as possible with a view to avoidance of seeming to approve or disapprove the new government.”²⁵ Calculated obliviousness was the primary recommendation for American diplomats in the hopes that it might maintain the ability to disregard Afghanistan's political unrest while still permitting the United States to prepare for shifts towards Soviet allegiance. On 25 December 1979, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in an effort to stabilize and regain influence in its political organization. Unlike previous confrontations between Marxist-Leninist politics and Afghanistan leadership, direct Soviet action meant that the United States could no longer afford neutrality towards Central Asia.

²¹ Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan*, p. 128.

²² Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan*, p. 121.

²³ Office of the Historian, “Intelligence Note RNAN-51 Prepared in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research” November 5, 1973, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E-8, Documents on South Asia, 1973–1976. Document 9.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve08/d9>

²⁴ Magnus and Naby, *Afghanistan*, p. 127.

²⁵ Office of the Historian, “Telegram 143450 From the Department of State to the Embassy in Afghanistan” 20 Jul 1974, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969–1976, Volume E-8, Documents on South Asia, 1973–1976. Document 6.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve08/d6>

The 1979 invasion marked a substantial shift in U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan. The concept of Soviet domination within Afghanistan was unacceptable, but the desire for neutrality towards Afghanistan's long-term development held back the American policymakers from public ventures. By instead using covert actions, the United States government could maintain some amount of control over the political outcomes of Afghanistan without full military involvement. Covert action, however, marked direct attention towards Afghanistan and the security risk it posed to the United States if taken over by the Soviet Union. Despite often being portrayed as a surprise to United States intelligence, the U.S. government had already forecasted the invasion of Afghanistan and its hypothetical response as early as six months in advance.²⁶ U.S. objectives for proposed covert action were described as "ranging from harassment to the actual overthrow of the present communist government," with the primary purpose being "to demonstrate to the Soviets and the Third World that the U.S. is not willing quietly to acquiesce in the absorption of another country into the Soviet orbit."²⁷ The Soviet Union's decision to invade Afghanistan would force the United States to act on its plans of covert operation. On 28 December 1979—only a few days after the Soviet Union launched its invasion—United States President Jimmy Carter signed off on foreign assistance which was described to "provide lethal military equipment either directly or through third countries to the Afghan opponent of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan."²⁸ In doing so, President Carter ensured that the American government would have some role in the future of Afghanistan and limit the expansion of the Soviet Union. It also maintained that the U.S. would be able to stop the initiative at any point. The leadership of the United States not only became involved in Afghanistan's political developments but prioritized the nation as a national security threat.

Following its 1979 stance of both supporting insurgency and minimizing the scale of Soviet invasion, the United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) would intensify its ongoing Operation Cyclone. This initiative, which began before the Soviet invasion of 1979, aimed to "[facilitate] the mobilization and training of Muslim fighters and [supply] weaponry for jihad" ultimately in the hopes

²⁶ Robert M. Gates, *From the Shadows: The Ultimate Insider's Story of Five Presidents and How They Won the Cold War* (Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1996), p. 146.

²⁷ Office of the Historian, "Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency for Members of the Special Coordination Committee" 28 February 1979. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan. Document 38.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v12/d38>

²⁸ National Security Archive, "Special Coordination Committee meeting, "Iran and Afghanistan," 9:00-9:45 a.m., White House Situation Room, December 28, 1979, Secret, 4 pp.; with attached Presidential Finding on Afghanistan signed by President Carter, Undated, Secret/Sensitive, 1 pp." 28 December 1979.

<https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30885-document-6-special-coordination-committee-meeting-iran-and-afghanistan900-945-am>

of forcing out Soviet influence.²⁹ These fighters would come to be known as the Mujahideen, a term that generally refers to persons actively engaged in jihad.³⁰ While the United States incurred direct costs from financing the program, mujahideen factions often downplayed the scale of U.S. support and rather credited it to other nations on account of the United States channeling support through third-party actors, such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.³¹ Both the usage of covert operations by the United States government and the collaboration of delivering support through third-party actors gave the United States plausible deniability within the conflict; however, post-9/11 documents are unable to ignore the role of the American government in the facilitation of mujahideen groups. Al-Qaeda, which would become one of the most infamous terrorist organizations following the September 11th attacks, was itself initially created “to document mujahideen fighters and their resources.”³²

The Soviet-Afghan War lasted until 1989; the legacy of the conflict was not only devastating to the U.S.S.R. morale but had also left Afghanistan in political disarray. In the words of researcher Julie Lowenstein, “the conflict solidified the concept of global jihad, provided a platform for the emergence of Al-Qaeda, and precipitated the rise of the Taliban regime.”³³ Directly following the war’s conclusion, the United States government returned to its avoidance of political involvement with Afghanistan. It also placed blame on the Soviet Union for the power vacuum and subsequent extremism that developed in post-war Afghanistan, despite the reality that actions of the United States within the war were far from minuscule and should not be obscured by claims of inculpability. The U.S. Office of the Historian remarks, “the Soviets left a shattered country in which the Taliban, an Islamic fundamentalist group, seized control, later providing Osama bin Laden with a training base from which to launch terrorist operations worldwide.”³⁴ This narrative argues that the U.S. had a minimal role in both the destabilization of Afghanistan and the later emergence of the Taliban. However, as established in the previous paragraphs, the United States government played an active role

²⁹ Muhammad Haniff Hassan. “Mobilization of Muslims for Jihad: Insights from the Past and Their Relevance Today.” *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses* vol. 5, no. 8 (2013), p. 11.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/26351173>.

³⁰ Hassan. “Mobilization of Muslims for Jihad: Insights from the Past and Their Relevance Today.” p. 11.

³¹ Hassan. “Mobilization of Muslims for Jihad: Insights from the Past and Their Relevance Today.” p. 11.

³² Narasingha P. Sil, “Osama Bin Laden Forms al-Qaeda,” EBSCO Research Starters. EBSCO, 2023. <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/history/osama-bin-laden-forms-al-qaeda>

³³ Julie Lowenstein, “US Foreign Policy and the Soviet-Afghan War: A Revisionist History” (2016). Harvey M. Applebaum ’59 Award. 9. https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/applebaum_award/9 pp. 13.

³⁴ Office of the Historian, “The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978-1980.” Accessed 30 November 2025.

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/soviet-invasion-afghanistan>

in the Soviet-Afghan War and the supplementation of arms for groups which would become terrorist organizations. In addition to actively distancing itself from the destabilization of Afghanistan, American leadership also voiced hollow calls for diplomatic and financial nourishment to the war-torn nation. President George H. W. Bush, who was Vice President throughout the duration of the Soviet-Afghan War, called upon the international community to help “reconstruct” Afghanistan following the withdrawal of Soviet troops.³⁵ However, the American government did little to interact within Afghanistan throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s; the 41st president focused most foreign interest on Iraq and the First Gulf War.

The 1990s: Unclear Initiatives

The presidential administration of William (Bill) Clinton—which began in 1992—was defined by its focus on domestic policy and international conflict avoidance. In the shadow of the Persian Gulf War and the fall of the Soviet Union, the Democratic and Republican parties both platformed with a focus on “[restoring] our nation’s greatness at home” and bringing home American military forces from “the frontiers of the Cold War”.³⁶ The shifting focus towards domestic policy further isolated Washington’s priorities for matters involving Afghanistan and the rise of terrorist organizations, despite the Clinton Administration having direct interaction with both entities. The 1993 World Trade Center bombing, which occurred just months after Clinton was sworn in, generated minimal response from the president despite its centrality as one of the first foreign attacks on U.S. soil. As described by Professor Karen Feste, “[Clinton] said little about enemy aggression, nothing about blaming anyone, and focused solely on hardship and American suffering.”³⁷ In addition to the minimal response initiative from the Executive Branch, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation and various media reports would draw attention to the connection between Ramzi Yousef and Al-Qaeda somewhat soon after the attack itself.³⁸ The most these reports garnered was a quick acknowledgement on the

³⁵ George Bush, Statement on the Soviet Withdrawal From Afghanistan Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/247837>

³⁶ Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Republican Party Platform of 1992 Online,” The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273439>; Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, “Democratic Party Platform of 1992 Online,” The American Presidency Project, University of California Santa Barbara, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273264>

³⁷ Karen A. Feste, “Bill Clinton: Conflict Avoidance Strategy. In: America Responds to Terrorism” in *The Evolving American Presidency Series*. (2011). Palgrave Macmillan, New York. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230118867_8

³⁸ Feste, “Bill Clinton: Conflict Avoidance Strategy. In: America Responds to Terrorism” in *The Evolving American Presidency Series*. p. 166

President's Radio Address the day afterwards, once more contributing to the larger effort of United States officials to brush off threats from Afghanistan.³⁹

In 1993, the Clinton administration treated the World Trade Center attack as an isolated event.⁴⁰ This, in turn, discouraged early counter-terror initiatives and translated to American leadership once again disregarding the development of terrorist organizations despite its own intelligence sectors emphasizing them. As early as 1994, international terrorism was found to be “a serious and deadly problem which threatens the interests of [the United States]”, as seen within a draft Congressional legislation focused on chapter 113B of Title 18 of the U.S. Code.⁴¹ It even adds specific reference to “attacks within the United States by, for example, bombing the World Trade Center in New York.”⁴² Additionally, in every year from 1994 to 2001, the Director of Central Intelligence specifically identified terrorism as a “significant threat” to United States security during the annual threat assessment given to Congress. By 1998, it was ranked as the top threat.⁴³ Despite these continuous documented warnings, virtually nothing was done to combat the rising terrorist threat from Afghanistan before 1998.

One initiative which evolved from the 1993 World Trade Center bombing was the 1996 Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act (AEDPA). While the added lawmaking of the AEDPA may have appeared to be a large step towards combatting terrorism—and was championed by President Clinton as such—it fell short of foreign policy application. The AEDPA not only laid a new foundation for the way in which United States courts could interact with those accused of terrorist activity but also defined the criteria of a “foreign terrorist organization”.⁴⁴ Under the AEDPA—or rather Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which is modified by the AEDPA— a foreign terrorist organization is understood to meet the criteria of being a foreign organization, engaging in terrorism, terrorist activities, “retain the capability and intent to engage in terrorist activity or terrorism”, and threaten the security of “U.S. nationals or the national defense, foreign relations, or economic interests of the United States”.⁴⁵ Passage of the AEDPA, however, did nothing to heighten U.S. concerns about

³⁹ William J. Clinton, The President's Radio Address Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/219510>

⁴⁰ “World Trade Center History,” 9/11 Memorial and Museum, accessed 30 September 2025. <https://www.911memorial.org/learn/resources/digital-exhibitions/world-trade-center-history>

⁴¹ Draft, United States Congress, 1994, folder “Terrorism [2],” OA/ID 273, Sean Darragh, Office of Global Affairs, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁴² Draft, United States Congress, 1994, folder “Terrorism [2],” OA/ID 273, Sean Darragh, Office of Global Affairs, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁴³ Amy B. Zegart, “September 11 and the Adaptation Failure of U.S. Intelligence Agencies,” *International Security*, 29, No. 4 (2005), pp. 78-111, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137498>

⁴⁴ Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, S.735, 104th Cong., § 1189 (1996).

⁴⁵ Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, S.735, 104th Cong., § 1189 (1996).

the evolved mujahideen groups in Afghanistan. United States awareness of the mujahideen groups which culminated into Al-Qaeda and the Taliban had been submerged under the narrative that international turmoil, including conflict in Afghanistan, had ceased following the decline of the Soviet Union and the end of the Gulf War.⁴⁶ Al-Qaeda was not added to the U.S. Department of State's list of foreign terrorist organizations until 1999, thus contributing to the narrative that U.S. government officials had little awareness of the threat the organization (and those like it) posed to American domestic security before 1998.⁴⁷

While the late inclusion of Al-Qaeda on the Bureau of Counterterrorism's foreign terrorism organization list has been used to support the idea that the United States government was simply unaware of Al-Qaeda, the National Security Council had multi-page reports titled "Usama bin Ladin" as early as March 1979.⁴⁸ Similarly, a partially declassified document from the National Security Council reveals that American intelligence agencies understood Afghanistan to be the largest source of "state-sponsored terrorist incidents" in 1986, 1987, and the first six months of data in 1988 (see fig. 1).⁴⁹ While the document is undated, its lack of data from the second half of 1988 suggests that it may have been authored in late 1988 or early 1989.

⁴⁶ Library of Congress, "Al Qaeda: Background, Current Status, and U.S. Policy," *Congressional Research Service*, Last Updated 6 May 2024.

https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF11854/IF11854.6.pdf

⁴⁷ "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," Bureau of Counterterrorism, accessed October 12, 2025.

<https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations>

⁴⁸ Withdrawal/Redaction Marker, 18 March 1979, folder "Miscellaneous CT [Counterterrorism] [8]", OA/ID 3927, Steven Simon/Daniel Benjamin, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁴⁹ Diagram, n.d., folder "Terrorism - General [1]", OA/ID 1500, Randolph Eddy, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

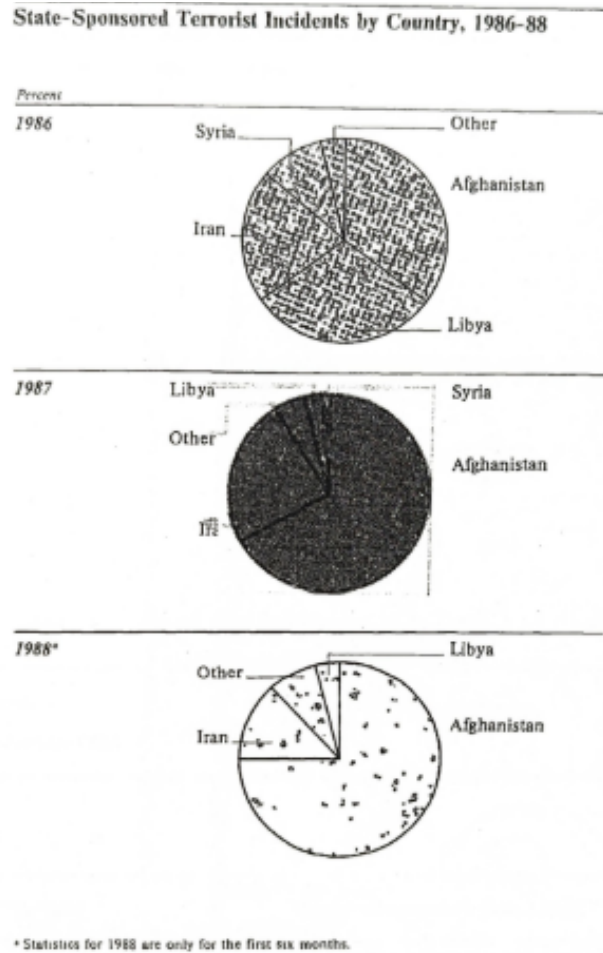


Figure 1. Graph of *State-Sponsored Terrorist Incidents by Country, 1986-88* (Washington: Office of Transnational Threats, n.d.), depicting the proportional makeup of terrorist incidents originating from Afghanistan, Iran, Libya, Syria, and others from the years 1986, 1987, and the first half of 1988.⁵⁰

Although this publication does not prove that Washington understood the full extent of transnational terrorism in Central Asia, fig. 1 shows that the intelligence community was documenting threats of terrorism and Afghanistan's position as a facilitator of terrorist activity. As Al-Qaeda had been operating in Afghanistan as early as 1989, this table most likely incorporates the organization in

⁵⁰ Diagram, n.d., folder "Terrorism - General [1]," OA/ID 1500, Randolph Eddy, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

its findings.⁵¹ Furthering this idea is a publication authored by the U.S. Department of State in 1992 titled *Patterns of Global Terrorism*. Within this booklet, a section on Afghanistan notes,

The Governments of Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia have repeatedly claimed that members of Islamic opposition groups received training in Afghanistan while fighting with mujahidin, and may continue to receive some support. These governments claim that these fundamentalists are now using their acquired skill to undertake terrorist attacks in their own countries.⁵²

Despite later academic claims that “there was relatively little talk of terrorism” in the early 1990s, these documents reveal that the United States had published intelligence which supported conclusions of terroristic threats originating from Afghanistan.⁵³ By May of 1993, reports from the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (under the Central Intelligence Agency) were being transmitted to American embassies about Osama bin Laden, whom they described as an “Alleged Saudi Terrorist Supporter” who was suspected of financing “three dangerous terrorist organizations...particularly the ‘Afghan Rebels Organization’.”⁵⁴ The National Security Council was not only aware of the threats which existed but also actively warned government entities about terrorism hailing from Afghanistan as early as 1993.

While the mention of terrorist organizations in the *Patterns of Global Terrorism* publication and the transmitted reports from the United States intelligence community may appear as isolated examples of a larger discussion of terrorism, both documents adhere to guidelines set within the U.S. Department of States’ publication “State’s Role in Counterterrorism”.⁵⁵ This document acknowledges the significance of both the annual *Patterns of Global Terrorism* publication and the work of the U.S.

⁵¹ “Background: Al Qaeda,” Frontline, archived 20 February 2014, at <https://web.archive.org/web/20140220165507/https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/network/alqaeda/indictment.html>

⁵² Report on “Patterns of Global Terrorism”, 1992, folder “Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1992 [1],” OA/ID 1500, Randolph Eddy, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁵³ Chaliand and Blin, *The History of Terrorism*, p. 412.

⁵⁴ Report on “Activities of Alleged Saudi Terrorist Supporter”, May 1993, folder “Executive Order 13099 [3],” OA/ID 1926, William Wechsler, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁵⁵ Report on “State’s Role in Counterterrorism”, 9 September 1996, folder “CT [Counterterrorism] Budget Amendment,” OA/ID 3189, Roger Cressey, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

embassies in “[supporting] and [facilitating] FBI investigations of terrorist incidents.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the mention of Afghanistan within these facets was undeniably seen as a principal factor in counterterrorism initiatives and supports the argument that these threats were discussed seriously prior to 1998.

In addition to U.S. State Department Publications and email correspondence with U.S. Embassies, an existing relationship between the United States Intelligence Community and concern towards Afghanistan can be seen in texts such as *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* by Steve Coll. The author acknowledges the fall of Afghanistan within the National Security Council’s priorities and the CIA’s Operating Directive in the mid-1990s, however he also draws attention to a continuous role of both organizations before and after this shift.⁵⁷ An example of this is found within Coll’s exploration of a meeting between CIA Officer Gary Schroen and Ahmad Shah Massoud in 1996, in which Schroen alludes to “[reopening] the relationship” between the CIA and the Northern Alliance of Afghanistan on account of the United States’ concerns towards terrorism.⁵⁸ Later in the publication, Coll adds details about former United States Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet’s knowledge of Osama bin Laden and support for “the small bin Laden tracking unit in the Counterterrorist Center” in 1997, as well as plans to capture Osama bin Laden, which were provided by Clinton aides in the Spring of 1998.⁵⁹ In each of these examples, there is an importance placed on Afghanistan and United States national security initiatives, even if they are not the official directives of the United States government.

The perceived lack of awareness from senior officials of the Clinton administration—as well as the President himself— is directly conflicted by the reports which were being authored prior to 1998. Even in post-9/11 publications, such as Richard Clarke’s *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror*, it has been maintained that “the Clinton administration did not think about bin Laden or al Qaeda, because they did not know that terrorist or his organization existed.”⁶⁰ However, U.S. correspondence with foreign allies, the notification of security threats to U.S. embassies, and the documented interaction of United States Intelligence Officials with the Northern Alliance of

⁵⁶ Report on “State’s Role in Counterterrorism”, September 9, 1996, folder “CT [Counterterrorism] Budget Amendment,” OA/ID 3189, Roger Cressey, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁵⁷ Steve Coll. *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001*. (The Penguin Press, 2004), pp. 5-15.

⁵⁸ Coll. *Ghost Wars*. pp. 5-8.

⁵⁹ Coll. *Ghost Wars*. pp. 366-376.

⁶⁰ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) p. 88.

Afghanistan suggest that there was both an awareness and fear surrounding the danger of terrorism related to Osama bin Laden or Afghanistan. In a similar vein, the 9/11 Memorial describes that U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies “...had been monitoring bin Laden and Al-Qaeda during the 1990s, warning senior government officials of a growing threat,” but were dismissed as a result of “senior U.S. policymakers” not considering Al-Qaeda to be a priority.⁶¹ In the early 1990s, Afghanistan, as well as the rise of terrorist organizations within it, had been overlooked. As Coll remarks, “The National Security Council at the White House had no Afghan policy behind a vague wish for peace and prosperity.”⁶² In the hopes that the post-war nation would eventually settle into stability without the United States getting involved, constant warnings surrounding the growth of terrorism were swept away, even though they were included in standard operating procedures for transnational threats. The actions of the United States government were not uninformed; they were negligent.

A major shift in U.S. policy towards Afghanistan occurred in 1998; the bombing of the U.S. embassy buildings in Kenya and Tanzania devastated any notion of separation between the United States and foreign terrorism. The United States was no longer impermeable to distant actors and their grievances. The 1998 bombings, coordinated heavily by Al-Qaeda, devastated American security and posed a serious risk to diplomatic operations moving forward. Unlike previous attacks or threats, the Clinton administration was unable to simply disregard the bombings. In response, the United States government took decisive action against Al-Qaeda through retaliatory strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan.⁶³ In a 1998 fact sheet, the Office of the National Security Advisor claimed that the reasoning for the strikes (code-named “Operation Infinite Reach”) was to attack facilities which were “central to the [Bin Laden] network’s ability to conduct acts of terror around the world.”⁶⁴ The document also specified that “The [Bin Laden] Network supports terrorists in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya,

⁶¹ “Warning Signs of an Attack.” 9/11 Memorial and Museum. National September 11 Memorial & Museum, accessed 9 October 2025.

<https://www.911memorial.org/lesson-plans/warning-signs-attack#:~:text=Following%20the%20Soviet%20withdrawal%20from,terrorist%20threats%20before%209/11>

⁶² Coll. *Ghost Wars*. p. 5.

⁶³ Federica Bisone “KILLING A FLY WITH A CANNON.” *New York Law School Journal of International and Comparative Law* 20, no. 1 (2000), pp. 93-95. Available at https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/journal_of_international_and_comparative_law/vol20/iss1/4?utm_source=digitalcommons.nyls.edu%2Fjournal_of_international_and_comparative_law%2Fvol20%2Fiss1%2F4&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages

⁶⁴ Fact Sheet on “The Attacks on the Usama Bin Ladin Terrorist Network”, August 20, 1998, folder “[Afghanistan/Sudan]-” Operation Infinite Reach,” Notebook, 20 August 1998 [2],” OA/ID 1474, James Steinberg, Office of the National Security Advisor, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

Tajikistan, Somalia, Yemen, and now Kosovo.”⁶⁵ After the largely inconsequential 1993 World Trade Center Bombing, as well as the virtually uninterrupted progression of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in the mid-1990s, the 1998 retaliatory strikes ignited a new phase in which the United States government had decided to act against international terrorism and actively recognized its role within Afghanistan.

While the 1998 strikes displayed a response of the United States towards Afghanistan’s growing terrorism issue, it is also the point at which most sources—both governmental and academic—recognize active negligence from the American government towards documented international threats.⁶⁶ These include history monograph *Another Kind of War*, terrorism monograph *The History of Terrorism*, and *The 9/11 Commission Report*, authored by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.⁶⁷ The retaliatory strikes which the United States took against Al-Qaeda initially appeared as the first time in which the threat of terrorism from Afghanistan was met with decisive action. However, the American government once again retracted from involvement in the country in the immediate aftermath of the operation. The assertion of 1998 as an example of U.S. negligence towards security threats in Afghanistan is credible, but it ignores the extent to which the U.S. government dismissed earlier threats of terrorist activity. The aftermath of the 1998 strikes on Afghanistan and Sudan would prove to be part of the longer history in which American policymakers have neglected Afghan security threats, not the beginning of the behavior altogether.

Within this period of inactivity following the strikes, Washington also attempted greater efforts to form relations with the Taliban. While this development may have appeared as a step towards counterterrorism focused on Afghanistan, it was employed with an intention of allowing American forces to remain separate from Afghanistan’s domestic affairs while seeking out reparation from Al-Qaeda. The Taliban primarily culminated from lingering mujahideen factions and Pashtun tribesmen.⁶⁸ By the 1990s, U.S. policymakers regarded the Taliban as the chief governing entity of Afghanistan and a possible ally to take on the burden of combatting Afghanistan’s growing terrorist networks. A 1999 declassified intelligence document reveals email correspondence primarily between

⁶⁵ Fact Sheet on “The Attacks on the Usama Bin Ladin Terrorist Network”, August 20, 1998, folder “[Afghanistan/Sudan]-” Operation Infinite Reach,” Notebook, 20 August 1998 [2],” OA/ID 1474, James Steinberg, Office of the National Security Advisor, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁶⁶ Bailey and Immerman, *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, 80; Chaliand and Blin, *The History of Terrorism*, 412; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 188-120.

⁶⁷ Bailey and Immerman, *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*, 80; Chaliand and Blin, *The History of Terrorism*, 412; National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 188-120.

⁶⁸ Lindsay Maizland, “The Taliban in Afghanistan”.

members of the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Department of Defense's Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies (NESA) which discusses a recommended course of action for combatting terrorism. The document notes that, "bin Laden and the [Al-Qaeda] organization are a major and immediate threat to the security of the United States...we attempted to get the Taliban's assistance on this matter."⁶⁹

While this statement acknowledges the awareness of the United States government towards the immediate need to neutralize Al-Qaeda, it also reveals the proposed utilization of the Taliban in combatting the organization. Involving Taliban leadership in the United States' fight against Al-Qaeda presented an opportunity for the American government to omit Afghanistan as an immediate policy priority while still maintaining oversight on growing terrorist networks. If the Taliban sought out punishment for bin Laden or Al-Qaeda, the U.S. would not have to. This point can be seen in the 2007 dissertation project of Dr. Abdul-Qayum Mohmand, a Professor of Political Science and Middle East Studies at the University of Utah. He argued that the United States supported the Taliban under the notion that the group would "disarm the warring factions in Afghanistan," and "drive out "international terrorism" from Afghanistan."⁷⁰ If the Taliban were able to achieve this, there would be no need for United States involvement.

By 2000, U.S. government officials had even begun referring to Afghanistan as "the Taliban" within official documentation.⁷¹ In a letter to President Clinton, Vice President Al Gore detailed his delivery of a six-month periodic report required by section 401(c) of the National Emergencies Act and section 204(c) for the International Emergency Economic Powers Act. Gore made a note in the document, which read "with respect to the Taliban (Afghanistan)."⁷² This note is interesting to compare to modern documents, which have been issued by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). In 2017, the CRS prepared a report for individuals of Congress in which they stated that "the United States withheld recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, formally

⁶⁹ National Security Council and NSC Emails, "Declassified documents concerning the 9/11 Commission Report," Clinton Digital Library, accessed 23 October 2025, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/47960>.

⁷⁰ Abdul-Qayum Mohmand, "AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY TOWARD AFGHANISTAN: 1919-2001" (PhD diss., University of Utah, 2007), p. 167, ProQuest (3271439).

⁷¹ Letter, Al Gore Jr. to Bill Clinton, June 30, 2000, folder "Afghanistan/Taliban," OA/ID 3578, Memorandum to the President, National Security Council, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁷² Letter, Al Gore Jr. to Bill Clinton, June 30, 2000, folder "Afghanistan/Taliban," OA/ID 3578, Memorandum to the President, National Security Council, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

recognizing no faction as the government,” during the Clinton administration.⁷³ Contrastingly, the documents shared between Vice President Gore, President Clinton, and the U.S. Congress showed that government officials habitually used “Taliban” as a metonymy for the government of Afghanistan. The United States government was aware of the Taliban and its control in Afghanistan; however, it did not want the narrative surrounding U.S. foreign policy to suggest that there was any acknowledgement of legitimacy for organizations now correlated to acts of terrorism.

It is important to note that the Taliban did not assist the United States in driving out Al Qaeda. Despite a lack of overwhelming support for Al Qaeda, the group has existed as an ally of the Taliban at times. United States Congressional Reports have attributed this relationship to Al Qaeda's allegiance pledged to the Taliban by Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, which then permitted bin Laden's basing of al Qaeda in Afghanistan.⁷⁴ Additional studies, such as that of Asfandiyar Mir's 2020 publication for the Middle East Institute, have identified that the Taliban and Al Qaeda have existed in the past as symbiotic organizations with a joint political goal of global jihad.⁷⁵ Even though the Taliban and al Qaeda are not necessarily aligned, a partnership between the U.S. and the Taliban in the 1990s would have broken the areas of agreement and historical overlap which the two groups share. In the same notion, forming an alliance with the United States would not have supported the political values of the Taliban, independent from those of Al Qaeda.

September 11th, 2001

The turn of the twenty-first century brought forth another election year within the United States, but it did not bring notable change in the realm of foreign policy towards Afghanistan. George W. Bush, the son of 41st President George H. W. Bush, campaigned under the banner of “humble foreign policy”, which sought to limit U.S. military intervention around the globe.⁷⁶ He argued that President Bill Clinton's administration had “overcommitted” the United States to foreign affairs, suggesting that

⁷³ Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” *Congressional Research Service*, 13 December 2017.

⁷⁴ Clayton Thomas, “Terrorist Groups in Afghanistan” *Congressional Research Service*, Updated 2 April 2024.

⁷⁵ Asfandiyar Mir, “AFGHAN TALIBAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH AL-QAEDA: THE TIES THAT BIND.” In *Afghanistan's Terrorism Challenge: The Political Trajectories of Al-Qaeda, The Afghan Taliban, and the Islamic State*. Middle East Institute, 2020.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28475.7>.

⁷⁶ Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, “The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of Foreign's Foreign Policy,” *The Brookings Institute*, (April 2003) p. 1.
<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20030425.pdf>

domestic issues should take precedence to international policy involvement.⁷⁷ While Bush's initial campaign stances may have resulted from his own opinions on American interventionism, it was also likely impacted by his inexperience with international affairs. Within a 2003 publication titled *The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of America's Foreign Policy*, authors Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay highlighted the reliance of the president on senior policy advisors and his questionable personal knowledge. They presented an example from June of 2000, where Bush was asked about the Taliban; he was unable to remark on anything in particular about the organization.⁷⁸ After the interviewer clarified, "repression of women in Afghanistan" the presidential candidate responded, "Oh, I thought you said some band. The Taliban in Afghanistan. Absolutely. Repressive."⁷⁹

Despite his inexperience in the matter, President George W. Bush was not entirely unaware of the growing threats of terrorism. Similarly to his predecessors, however, he did little to draw attention to it as a national security issue. The 2003 report from Daalder and Lindsay additionally drew back to Bush's first campaign speech. In this proclamation, he vowed to prioritize terrorism detection and response; however, this speech became an isolated example as Bush failed to mention terrorism or counter-terrorist policies during any of the presidential debates leading up to the election.⁸⁰ The last of these debates occurred only days following the *U.S.S. Cole* bombing, which was also directed by Al-Qaeda operations in Afghanistan. Candidate Bush did not mention the *U.S.S. Cole* within the final presidential debate. This attitude of minimizing national security threats from foreign actors echoes that of the pre-1998 stance taken by President Clinton. George W. Bush could appeal to domestic policy hardliners by promoting inactivity against terrorism and avoiding a platform which would draw out foreign involvement. A staunch difference between Clinton and W. Bush, however, was the information available to each president at the time they took office. Clinton's administration may have lacked forewarning of Al-Qaeda, but it had already regarded Afghanistan as a state sponsor of terrorism and noted international concerns about the nation in the 1992 *Patterns of Global Terrorism* and 1993 U.S. embassy warnings.⁸¹ By the time George W. Bush took office in 2001, his administration

⁷⁷ Ivo H. Daalder and James M. Lindsay, "The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of Foreign's Foreign Policy," *The Brookings Institute*, (April 2003) p. 1.

<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/20030425.pdf> pp. 1-5.

⁷⁸ Daalder and Lindsay, "The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of Foreign's Foreign Policy," p. 3.

⁷⁹ Daalder and Lindsay, "The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of Foreign's Foreign Policy," p. 3.

⁸⁰ Daalder and Lindsay, "The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of Foreign's Foreign Policy," p. 5.

⁸¹ Diagram, n.d., folder "Terrorism - General [1]," OA/ID 1500, Randolph Eddy, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library; Report on "Patterns of Global Terrorism", 1992, folder "Patterns of Global Terrorism, 1992 [1]," OA/ID 1500, Randolph Eddy, Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

not only had access to these existing resources but also received new warnings from national security advisors.

In the months leading up to the 2000 election, several U.S. government agencies produced documents concerning U.S. policy towards the Taliban and the threats of Afghan-based terrorism. These publications recognize the perceived danger of Afghanistan and suggest actions to try and minimize terroristic activity. For example, the National Commission on Terrorism (also known as the Bremer Commission) would issue a formal statement that “Afghanistan should be designated a sponsor of terrorism and subjected to all the sanctions applicable to state sponsors” in June of 2000.⁸² The Bremer Commission served as a temporary, independent advisory board to the United States House of Representatives, which published recommendations about countering international terrorism.⁸³ In the same month, President Clinton issued a notice to extend Executive Order No. 13129, which sought to limit transactions between the Taliban and entities outside of Afghanistan, under the pretext that “the Taliban continues to allow territory under its control in Afghanistan to be used as a safe haven and base of operations for [Osama bin Laden] and the [Al-Qaeda] organization who have committed and threaten to continue to commit acts of violence against the United States and its nationals.”⁸⁴ June also saw the emergence of international concern surrounding terrorism in Afghanistan, as brought up within the Terrorism and Counterterrorism in Central Asia Conference.⁸⁵ This conference featured presentations by diplomatic delegations from Uzbekistan, Russia, Egypt, Spain, and the United States. By August, the United States and Russia were actively collaborating to

⁸² Report from the National Commission on Terrorism, June 6, 2000, folder “Terrorism Commission,” OA/ID 3932, Roger Cressey, Office of Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁸³ “The House Explained,” United States House of Representatives, U.S. Government Publishing Office, Accessed 3 December 2025.
<https://www.house.gov/the-house-explained#:~:text=frequently%20an%20investigation.-,Did%20You%20Know?,minority%20members%20of%20the%20committee.&text=Congress%20has%20created%20a%20wide,entities%20within%20the%20legislative%20branch>; Report from the National Commission on Terrorism, June 6, 2000, folder “Terrorism Commission,” OA/ID 3932, Roger Cressey, Office of Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁸⁴ Notice, William J. Clinton to the Federal Register, June 2000, folder “Afghanistan/Taliban,” OA/ID 3578, Mark Montgomery and Paul Kurtz, Office of Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁸⁵ Email, Erik K. Telleen to Paul B. Kurtz, 16 June 2000, folder “Central Asia,” OA/ID 3578, Mark Montgomery and Paul Kurtz, Office of Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton

counter the growth of the Taliban and condemned “terrorism emanating from Afghanistan.”⁸⁶ From there, the October bombing of the *U.S.S. Cole* would make Al-Qaeda headline news within the United States; terrorism was an undeniable, inescapable issue for the security of the U.S. and the world. By January of 2001—more specifically, Bush’s first week in office—the President was met with George Tenet, the Director of Central Intelligence. He told the nascent commander-in-chief, “Al Qaeda [is] one of the gravest threats facing the United States,” and that the risk posed was “immediate.”⁸⁷

George Tenet would not be the only advisor who expressed explicit concern over Al-Qaeda and the United States policy towards Afghanistan in 2001. In the same month, Richard Clarke would author a memorandum to Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s National Security Advisor. This memorandum, often referred to as the “Blue Sky Memo” urged for a Principal level review of Al-Qaeda and greater importance towards focused foreign policy against the organization.⁸⁸ Additionally, Clarke noted key decisions which were “deferred to the Bush Administration” by the Clinton Administration, including the role of United States assistance to the Afghan Northern Alliance and whether or not the U.S. should increase its assistance of Uzbekistan in combating al Qaeda threats.⁸⁹ This document showcases a side of the intelligence community which has often been overlooked within the wider conversation surrounding 9/11. The Blue Sky Memorandum is a direct showcase of documented concern towards Afghanistan, Al Qaeda, and the treatment of terrorism within “broader regional policy”.⁹⁰ It is also an example of active advisory towards foreign policy initiatives supported by intelligence officials such as Richard Clarke, with mentions of threat analysis, strategization, budget increases, and immediate action on funding for counterterrorist forces in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. This memorandum would later serve as a guidebook for post-9/11 operations, in which a CIA Special Activities Division team (led by aforementioned CIA Officer Gary Schroen) coordinated with Fahim Khan, the successor to the Northern Alliance’s Ahmad Shah Massoud.⁹¹

While foreign policy towards Afghanistan was a low priority for the 43rd President, it would quickly become the defining feature of Bush’s administration. Despite decades of covert operation, classification, and overall sensitivity when dealing with foreign relations towards Afghanistan, the

⁸⁶ Statement by Philip T. Reeker U.S.-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan, August 2, 2000, folder “Afghanistan/Taliban,” OD/IA 3578, Mark Montgomery and Paul Kurtz, Office of Transnational Threats, Clinton Presidential Records, William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

⁸⁷ Daalder and Lindsay, “The Bush Revolution: The Remaking of Foreign's Foreign Policy,” p. 14.

⁸⁸ Memorandum, Richard A. Clarke to Condoleezza Rice, 25 January 2001, from *The National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB147/index.htm>

⁸⁹ Memorandum, Richard A. Clarke to Condoleezza Rice. p. 2.

⁹⁰ Memorandum, Richard A. Clarke to Condoleezza Rice. p. 1.

⁹¹ Brian Glyn Williams, *The Last Warlord: The Life and Legend of Dostum, the Afghan Warrior Who Led US Special Forces to Topple the Taliban Regime* (Chicago Review Press, 2013). p. 210.

September 11th attacks propelled U.S. policies to be judged in full public display. Al-Qaeda no longer existed as a distant threat somewhere in Central Asia that high-ranking politicians could dismiss; it had attacked the United States on its own soil, with millions around the globe as witnesses. Although collaboration between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda had been recognized years prior and U.S. intelligence had been sounding the alarm over multiple presidential terms, 2001 would mark the clean break of U.S. isolationism towards Afghanistan.

Congress created the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States—also known as the 9-11 Commission—following the 2001 attacks. This committee was created to determine how the 2001 hijackings occurred and recommend steps for deterring similar attacks moving forward. It produced the *9/11 Commission Report* in 2004. One of the main conclusions of this piece is most prominently shown in its “Executive Summary”, where it affirms that,

The 9/11 attacks were a shock, but they should not have come as a surprise... Although [Osama bin Laden] himself would not emerge as a signal threat until the late 1990s, the threat of Islamist terrorism grew over the decade.⁹²

This excerpt represents yet another claim that the threats of terrorism within Afghanistan were not acknowledged until the latter half of the 1990s. While it attempts to recognize some amount of neglect towards international security threats, it does not make any allusion to documents which identify terrorism or the actions of Osama bin Laden before 1998. Comparably, the full version of the *9/11 Commission Report* acknowledges Osama Bin Laden as the leader of al Qaeda as early as 1988 and identifies the organization’s roots within Afghanistan.⁹³ The complete report additionally references a fatwa which “al Qaeda leadership” issued in 1992, subsequently followed by attacks against United States military forces in 1993-1996.⁹⁴ Compare this conclusion, authored by the members of the United States Executive Branch in 2004, to the later portrayals of intel related to al Qaeda and Osama Bin Laden. While it may be irresponsible to conclude that the American government fully understood the organization and movements of Bin Laden in the late 1980s and early 1990s, direct attacks against U.S. and allied military personnel would likely garner some amount of attention. Apart from isolated

⁹² U.S. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *9/11 Commission Report: Executive Summary*, by Thomas H. Kean and Lee Hamilton, no. 206229, Washington, D.C.: SPO, 2004, <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/911-commission-report-executive-summary>.

⁹³ U.S. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, by Thomas H. Kean and Lee Hamilton, SuDoc Y 3.2:T 27/2/FINAL, Washington, D.C.: SPO, 2004, <https://govinfo.library.unt.edu/911/report/911Report.pdf> p. 56.

⁹⁴ U.S. National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, pp. 59-60

military strikes in 1998, the threats of terrorism from Afghanistan were ignored; but they undoubtedly existed. The major change in U.S. foreign policy towards Afghanistan was September 11th. The loss of the World Trade Center (as well as perceived safety from foreign terrorism) would strip the U.S. of its ability to maintain non-involvement towards Afghanistan. Isolation in U.S. foreign policy was no longer an option.

Throughout the 2000s, the United States maintained military presence without waging official warfare using special military operations. Examples such as “Operation Mountain Viper” in 2003, “Operation Avalanche” in 2003, “Operation Mountain Storm” in 2004, “Operation Lightning Freedom” from 2004-2005, and “Operation Pil” in 2005 are all described as having “fought relatively low levels of insurgent violence” within Afghanistan during the immediate post-9/11 era.⁹⁵ These events display the full transition of United States foreign policy into one of direct intervention, in which troops were sent to contain or neutralize perceived threats from Afghanistan. As described by a congressional report detailing the governance of post-9/11 Afghanistan,

By late 2005, U.S. and partner commanders considered the insurgency mostly defeated and NATO/ISAF assumed lead responsibility for security in all of Afghanistan during 2005-2006. The optimistic assessments proved misplaced when violence increased significantly in mid-2006.⁹⁶

As a result of this major deterioration in containment, the United States military would increase its presence within the region for the remainder of George W. Bush’s presidency. By April of 2009, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan would increase from the initial 30,000 in 2006 to 39,000.⁹⁷ By December of 2009, the nascent administration of Barack Obama would announce a “surge” in U.S. forces deployed to Afghanistan, bringing the total to approximately 100,000 troops.⁹⁸ A drawdown of military personnel would not occur until 2011, following the killing of Osama bin Laden; an action which marked the gradual decline of United States intervention within the nation.⁹⁹

The rise of Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or figureheads such as Osama bin Laden are not the result of one administration, political party, or historical event. Rather, these entities emerged from the United States government consciously avoiding foreign policy towards Afghanistan over the course of multiple decades. United States foreign policy with Afghanistan has been characterized by a desire for distance. American policymakers historically rejected direct interaction with Afghanistan as they did not

⁹⁵ Katzman and Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban.” p. 24.

⁹⁶ Katzman and Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban.” p. 24.

⁹⁷ Katzman and Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban.” p. 24.

⁹⁸ Katzman and Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban.” p. 26.

⁹⁹ Katzman and Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban.” pp. 25-26.

perceive terrorism as a genuine threat. This dismissal of intelligence and warning was not merely isolated to the late 1990s but rather was a factor across multiple administrations and several decades. The study of United States foreign policy and negligence towards transnational threats should not be isolated to non-interaction following the 1998 Embassy bombings; that is not the starting point of conscious ignorance towards Afghanistan terrorism. Rather, the dereliction of state building following the Soviet-Afghan War and the disregard of Afghan domestic politics should be incorporated into the wider study of the Global War on Terror and the shortcomings of United States security initiatives leading up to the September 11th attacks. Without critical reflection on the treatment of transnational threats and the intentional disregard of foreign policy towards nations which act as state sponsors of terror, the United States government will be unable to deter security threats. Additionally, by continuing a narrative of ignorance, legacies and lessons from the 9/11 tragedy will remain sheltered if not entirely lost altogether. The dismissal of U.S. security threats in Afghanistan before 1998 cannot be changed—but they can be used to offer lessons about the role in which intelligence and the response of governmental institutions play in the wider deterrence of terrorism.