

INTRODUCTION FOR NEW VERSION OF *UNHOLY WARS*
(October 2001)
(Replaces both the Preface and the Introduction to the October 2000 edition)

In September 2001, following the worst terrorist attack against it in its history, the United States for the second time in a generation became embroiled in an air and ground war in Afghanistan. This time, the war was not a proxy war against Russian invaders. It was a direct one, fought with allies who had various degrees of commitment, against the presumed terrorist attackers. By the winter of 2001-02, the new Afghan war had caused innumerable civilian casualties in Afghanistan. It had thrown many of the world's one billion or more Muslims into a state of new political ferment. The war, and the terrorist assault against America which caused it, had bred a state of global insecurity and instability, fed by fears of biological warfare after the autumn anthrax outbreaks in the US and had accelerated a global economic downturn which had begun long before the war, into a global economic recession.

This book aims to explain some of the reasons why all this came about.

Histories of World War II record that an American soldier, arriving in a devastated Normandy village evacuated by the Germans in June 1944, exclaimed, "We sure liberated the hell out of this place!" Many of the American or British commandos, searching a ruined Afghan village for Osama bin Laden and his men, or for his Taliban protectors, might have said the same, during the bitter new Afghan war which raged onward from the autumn of 2001.

The unprecedented and devilishly well-planned assaults by suicide terrorists crashing three hijacked American airliners against New York's World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon in Washington on September 11, 2001, had killed close to 5,000 people in those cities, hearts of a United States which had previously felt itself immune from such unthinkable violence. They triggered a retaliatory and punitive war, aimed at rooting out the presumed terrorist chiefs and their hosts. Once again, as during the 1980s war and afterward, Afghanistan's villages, towns, cities and countryside were laid waste. Millions of its unhappy people again fled in refugee tides, seeking food, shelter and safe havens amid Afghanistan's hills and mountains--or across the borders in Pakistan and Iran; or in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan. These last three lands had once been bases for the futile and fateful Soviet invasion

and occupation of Afghanistan in 1979-89. Now, some of their territory, along with that of America's once enthusiastic, but now highly reluctant ally, Pakistan, had become bases for the third invading army, that of the United States, with its junior political and military partner, Britain..

Britain had already lived through its own bitter experiences of Afghan history. In the mid-19th century, the fierce Afghan royal and tribal warriors inflicted stinging defeats on a British colonial army which thought it was protecting the flanks of the imperial British raj in India, and forced the British to take to their heels.

That Anglo-Afghan war of 1839-42 was precipitated by the fears of Lord Auckland, one of British India's colonial warlords. Auckland felt that the Russians were gaining ground in Afghanistan on the English, and so were winning "The Great Game," as the Anglo-Russian rivalry for empire in Asia came to be called. In a similar vein was President Jimmy Carter's fateful decision, urged by his Polish-born, Cold Warrior national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, to fight the Russian invaders of Afghanistan by proxy. It was prompted in a large measure by fear of a serious Russian threat to communication lines on the Indian Ocean and the nearby oilfields of Arabia and the Persian Gulf.

Although 16,000 British and Indian sepoy troops had succeeded in occupying Kabul in 1839-41, a popular revolt of most of the major Afghan ethnic groups forced their evacuation on January 6, 1942 and the headlong flight of most of them through the snowdrifts and bitter cold to the Khyber Pass. Of that British force of well over 12,000, most were massacred on the way home to India. Only 121 survived.

Looking back on that and several other ignominious defeats, in 1889 British statesman Lord Curzon wrote that "For fifty years, Afghanistan has inspired the British people with a feeling of almost superstitious apprehension...It is only with the greatest reluctance that Englishmen can be persuaded to have anything to do with so fateful a region...In the history of most conquering races is found some spot that has invariably exposed their weakness like the joints in armor of steel. Afghanistan has long been the Achilles' heel of Great Britain in the East."

Winston Churchill, wearing one of his hats as military historian, took matters somewhat less seriously, but recognized an important fact of Afghan life which yesterday's Russian generals learned and today's American and allied planners are learning again, to their grief. "Except at harvest time, when self-preservation

enjoins a temporary truce,” Churchill wrote in 1898, “the Pathan [Pushtun] tribes,” the majority of today’s Taliban and indeed, more than half of the entire Afghan population, “are always engaged in private or public war. The life of the Pathan is thus full of interest.”

On the bright, sunlit morning skies of September 11, 2001 in New York’s downtown Manhattan financial district, and on the banks of the Potomac river dividing Washington, DC from northern Virginia, three suicidal pilots changed American and world history forever. With their fellow Muslim conspirators and supporters, they had quietly trained and prepared for this moment for years. They had betrayed few, if any, signs of religious hatred or fanaticism during their lives as quiet students in Hamburg and Bochum, Germany, and in flying schools in Vero Beach and Venice, Florida, and other American towns. The thunderous, fiery end of their lives, those of their passengers, and of thousands already at breakfast or at work in the fallen twin New York towers and in a wing of the Pentagon in Washington, brought to some thoughtful Americans apocalyptic flashbacks of the war they had commissioned others to fight in the 1980s, but had largely ignored themselves, except to think of it as a distant, but righteous campaign. Unlike the wars in Vietnam and Korea, which had cost the lives of upwards of 100,000 Americans, most ordinary Americans, apart from a few thousand Central Intelligence Agency and Army, Navy and Air Force special warriors who had served as trainers or instructors in guerilla and terrorist techniques in the Afghan war of 1979-89, knew or cared much about it.

Nevertheless, there is a direct chain of related events linking that seemingly distant war with the events in the United States and South Asia in the fall of 2001. That war ended in 1989 with a defeated Soviet army retreating across Afghanistan’s northern borders, just as the Afghans had sent the British across the Khyber pass back to British India in 1842. The chain is composed of political links, as well as military ones.

In describing these links, this book narrates the course and the consequences of a strange love affair which went disastrously wrong: the alliance, during the second half of the twentieth century, between the United States of America and some of the most conservative and fanatical followers of Islam.

World War II ended with the allies who had defeated the German-Italian-Japanese Axis seriously divided into two camps. In 1946 US President Harry Truman perceived the Soviet Union as the main threat to American interests. For the next half-

century, US administrations regarded “world communism,” embodied in dictator Joseph Stalin’s system of Soviet hegemony, as their arch-enemy. Western Europe’s leaders, under the American-forged shield of the NATO alliance since 1949, in general thought the same way. The new Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), seeking counter-measures, recognized that religion was one, if not the most important, of atheistic Communism’s foes. In France, Greece and Italy in particular, it gave massive financial aid to Rightist, often Christian-oriented parties, like Italy’s Christian Democrats, to enable them to defeat the Communists.

Soon it became apparent to the Western planners that the fast-growing, dynamic religion of Islam was as resolutely anti-Communist, if not more so, than even the Roman Catholic Church. The tendency of the post-war US governments to support the colonial status quo in overseas possessions of Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy was paralleled, and often contradicted, by a flirtation with Muslim groups which had politicized their religion. In Egypt, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood, formed in the 1920’s, opposed President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his “Arab socialism,” which the West perceived as a handmaiden of Communism because Nasser accepted Soviet economic aid and Russian armaments.

The Islamist politicians and groups like the Muslim Brothers began in the 1950s to receive covert, usually modest, American aid when they were engaged against local or Soviet Communists. By the mid-1960s, the Saudi Arabian kingdom, had become a fountainhead of support for Islam and political Islamists everywhere. It was, of course, America’s main oil supplier and political ally in the Arab Middle East (as opposed to the State of Israel, by 1967 the principal US ally in the entire region). There was talk of an anti-Nasser and anti-Soviet “Islamic Pact,” led by the ultra-conservative and hyper-religious Saudi monarchy. Such talk, echoed by the military rulers in Islamic Pakistan, alarmed the Hindu-Muslim, but secularly-ruled giant state of India, which fought repeated battles and three wars with Pakistan over Kashmir, as well as the less-conservative and secular-run Arab states like Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

The American flirtation with Islamism now became a more serious affair. Britain and France, in particular, helped the US to conduct this affair. Their governments and information media often sought to represent their colonial or post-colonial wars in Asia and Africa—Britain in Kenya or France in Algeria, for example—as part of the struggle against “communism,” therefore worthy of US support. In a somewhat similar way, the US today seeks support of its friends and

allies for the “war against terror,” as President George W. Bush named it following the murderous attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York and Washington, by reminding those friends and allies that terrorism threatens them too.

The US and its allies, including Britain, France and Portugal, with the aid until his overthrow in 1979 of Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlevi of Iran, waged proxy wars in Africa and Asia against adversaries, considered as real or token allies of Moscow. Such proxy wars required no commitment of ground troops. They entailed few of the risks of casualties of the magnitude suffered by the United States and France in Southeast Asia from the 1950s through the 1970s, or by France during the Algerian revolution in 1954-62.

The fateful Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was the event which was the fateful first link in the chain of dark destiny which has led the United States to its present serious crisis. The invasion was decided by a tiny coterie in the Brezhnev politburo. It jolted President Jimmy Carter and his administration (1977-81) out of their relative indifference to events in South Asia, then considered secondary to the main drama, the Arab-Israel conflict, which Carter and his advisors had applied mighty efforts to resolve, and had succeeded in inducing Israel and Egypt to sign peace in that same year of 1979.

When Soviets troops seized Kabul at Christmas 1979, murdering the incumbent Afghan president, Hafizullah Amin, some of Carter’s advisors resolved on counter-measures. They would use the strategy and tactics of proxy warfare, already tested and applied in places like Angola, Somalia and Ethiopia, to say nothing of Central America. Carter’s team, spearheaded by the viscerally anti-Communist and activist, Polish-born National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, perceived the foolhardy Soviet invasion not only as an international threat. They also saw it as an opportunity to undermine the already tottering Soviet empire lying north of Afghanistan, where huge Muslim populations stirred restlessly under Communist rule.

So the American love affair with Islamism was now raised another notch in intensity. It became a marriage of convenience. It was consummated in an alliance with General Zia al-Haq, the Islamist military dictator of Pakistan. He was desirous for his own reasons to cleanse Afghanistan of the Soviets and their Afghan satellite regime in Kabul and, if possible, advance Pakistan’s strategic and commercial influence northward into South Asia. The Pakistani theorists reasoned that American support would strengthen Pakistan’s position in Kashmir, and in general with India,

the bigger adversary which had already defeated Pakistan on the battlefield in 1947, 1965 and 1971.

In cooperation with Zia al-Haq's military and intelligence services, the CIA, with Saudi finance as well as Pakistani logistical support, managed the raising, training, equipping, paying and sending into battle against the Red Army in Pakistan of a mercenary army of Islamist volunteers. Eventually, this army would eventually be drawn not only from Arab and Muslim states everywhere, but also from minority Muslim communities in Western countries, including the United States. Many of those from the African or Asian continents were religious, political or criminal fugitives from their own governments. Others were simply soldiers of fortune.

It came to pass that the last quarter-century of conflict in South Asia had, as a centerpiece, this jihad or holy war against the Russian invaders of 1979. Now, as the year 2002 arrives, there is an ironic reversal of history: the United States and Russia, formerly Cold War enemies, have become *de facto* allies. Their common foe is what both perceive as a terrorist threat of near-cosmic dimensions from the same radical Islamists, and their successors and those trained by them, who fought and ruined Afghanistan in the 1979-89 war.

In 1989, the Soviet invaders of Afghanistan were defeated and sent home. There they faced a collapsing Soviet society and empire. The war had in no small measure brought about the collapse, which Mikhail Gorbachev, during his presidency (1985-91) fought desperately to manage the collapse and to impart a semblance of order and even a timid beginning of democratization.

In 1989, under the presidency of George Herbert Bush (1989-93), the CIA celebrated its victory with champagne. Nevertheless, the "holy" alliance of the Americans and Islamist forces against the Russians in South and Central Asia had ended in a series of distinctly unholy clan and tribal wars, affecting much more than the ex-Soviet Union. Afghanistan itself lay in ruins, wasted by the jihad. Its society and people were ravaged by drugs, poverty, and horrific war injuries from fighting and land mines.

This wasting process has continued almost incessantly, ever since the CIA "victory" of 1989. Two-thirds to one-half of the Afghan population, over four million people, became refugees in Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia, or beyond. As the new war began in October 2001, after the terrorist attacks in the United States, new tides of refugees from the American bombardments surged through the Afghan countryside

and across the frontiers into its neighbors. Much of Kabul, the capital and other main cities had already been rubble since the 1980s. The surviving population was further tried by a disastrous drought in the late 1990s. The new war created new rubble, new homeless, and new human tragedies of all descriptions. By the end of 2001, there was little work, food or proper homes for most Afghans. Many depended on begging and whichever international charities could brave the war to help keep them clinging to life.

Worse, the two Islamic powers who had become the uneasy allies of the United States in the new war of 2001-2002, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, had by 1994 hatched a monster of Islamist extremism, the Taliban movement, which the George W. Bush administration in 2001 asked these allies to combat. The first Taliban were religious students, armed by Pakistan's intelligence services, and former mujahiddin or holy warriors of the anti-Soviet war. For a time they brought some order and stability to regions ravaged by warlords and bandits. The price paid by the remnants of Afghan society, however, was horrendous. It included the virtual enslavement and sequestration of women, and the crushing of all opposition to the Taliban's super-rigorous, pretended Sunni Muslim, laws and protocols of conduct. Transgressors suffered the harshest punishments systematically inflicted since Europe of the Middle Ages and the Inquisition. There were: beatings or floggings for violations of dress codes for men or women, or of prescribed beard lengths or shapes for men; amputation of hands and feet for theft; stoning to death for adultery; burial alive for sodomy—punishments carried out in public.

The cruelest punishment of all, for women and for the society as a whole, as the Taliban conquered most of Afghanistan from their ethnic foes by the fall of 1998, was total exclusion of women from the work place, including teaching and medicine.

Like the Taliban themselves, the anti-Soviet jihad which gave rise to them was essentially the creation of Pakistan's powerful Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI). From the mid-1980s on, the ISI steered the jihad into a new and trenchant, sectarian turn. By then, pro-Iranian Shi'ite militants beholden to the revolutionary and clerical regime which had overthrown the Shah in 1979 were bombing US Marines and diplomats, and kidnapping Americans and other Westerners in Lebanon. In their sabotage and bomb attacks, they were already using methods which men like Saudi construction tycoon Osama bin Laden, allies of the CIA in the jihad of the 1980s, would perfect and apply later on. Fight fire with fire, was the US reasoning:

combat the militant Shi'ism of the Iranians with the even greater militancy and violence of some of the groups who considered themselves orthodox, mainstream Sunni Muslims.

This served well the Saudi Arabian rulers, troubled by Iran's power, even though that power had been reduced in Iran's virtual defeat by Saddam Hussein's Iraq. In 1988, Baghdad had been aided vigorously by the United States, Britain, France and Germany, mainly in the form of financial credits and surreptitious arms and scientific aid which benefited his missile, chemical, biological and nuclear warfare projects. All of these were very much on the minds of US planners, as they wondered what new targets to attack in the 2001-2002 American "war against terror."

So from the mid-1980s onward, the marriage of convenience between the United States and militant Sunni Islam became a more complicated, three-way working alliance—though a very uneasy one—of Washington with Islamabad and Riyadh. By the late 1990s, Russia, harassed by Islamist guerillas with links to Osama bin Laden in its breakaway Muslim state of Chechniya, became another partner. Neither the Americans, stung and exhausted after the wars of the CIA and the US armed forces in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, nor the Saudis, who hate to get involved in fighting anywhere, wanted to commit their own forces. So they let Pakistan's ISI do the donkey work. As government funds for the anti-Soviet jihad ran out, the financing of the war and, most crucially, the new ISI program of training its militant veterans and the new recruits they attracted, mostly from Algeria, Egypt and other Arab states, became "privatized"—financed by the private fortunes of men like Osama bin Laden, Islamic banks and charities, and the huge proceeds of the drug trade, which the CIA had helped to promote and which flourished during and after the war.

Although this book is mainly about the disastrous consequences of US policies in South Asia, those consequences are inextricably linked to the Palestine-Israel crisis. Osama bin Laden and his followers—despite the disavowals of bin Laden's group by Palestine Authority president Yassir Arafat's mainstream Palestinian movement in the Israeli-occupied territories—have shrewdly perceived that the Palestinian struggle for an end to Israeli occupation and for full Palestinian statehood is by far the most popular cause among the world's more than one billion Muslims.

Especially since the September 2001 attacks in the United States, bin Laden's followers have endeavored in their fatwas, communiqués and interviews loudly to proclaim the Palestinian cause as their own. Strong in the collective memory of the

Palestinians are generations of contradictory, often broken, American promises, both to the Arabs and Muslims, and to the Jewish and other supporters of the State of Israel. However, the US administration of George W. Bush, in order to hold together the shaky “coalition against terrorism” it tried to build in late 2001, to the dismay of Israel’s supporters in the US, has repeated old assurances by the Clinton and some earlier US administrations that they would, after all, support an independent Palestinian state. The proof of the pudding, said skeptical Arab intellectuals and other sympathizers with the Palestinian cause, will be in the eating. Has any US administration, they asked since the bold stand of President Dwight Eisenhower who in 1957 after the Anglo-French-Israeli Suez war against Egypt forced the Israelis to evacuate Egypt’s Sinai and the Gaza Strip, ever stood up to Israel, or supported any just Arab cause?

The intentions of some hawks in the Bush administration, especially in the Pentagon, in late 2001 to move militarily to destroy President Saddam Hussein’s despotic regime in Iraq in the “war against terror” could easily trigger a vicious new Arab-Israel war. Saddam has repeatedly proclaimed his intention to lead the Arabs in “the liberation of Palestine.” Israeli strategists have always yearned for a final, military solution to the problem of Iraq, which is the only Arab belligerent in the various Arab-Israel wars since 1948 never to sign peace, an armistice, or even a cease-fire with the Jewish state. Some of them would be only too delighted to see the United States help Israel do the job, even at the expense of a bloody and ruinous new war, which with the likely use of weapons of mass destruction. Such a war might make the previous Middle East conflicts look, by comparison, like minor regional skirmishes.

As I tried to warn in the first edition of this book in 1999, the societies and governments of both the Western and Islamic worlds have suffered mightily from their inattention and their lack of care about choosing and nurturing allies. These allies have been inclined to stab them in the back. Washington now finds itself battling them back in the same old arenas of South Asia, where millions of lives were lost and untold billions of dollars in damage was done in the savage unholy wars of the 1970s and 1980s. This book may succeed in some measure, if it reminds us all once again of the old historical truth that those who forget the mistakes of history are condemned to repeat them.

John K. Cooley, October 2001.