

# Nuclear Bunkum

Don't panic: bin Laden's WMD are mythical, too.

By John Mueller

ACCORDING TO Defense Secretary Robert Gates, every senior government leader is kept awake at night by “the thought of a terrorist ending up with a weapon of mass destruction, especially nuclear.”

This is, I suppose, understandable. It was in 1995 that the thoughtful analyst Graham Allison declared that “in the absence of a determined program of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out.” Unabashed, he maintained in an influential 2004 book that “on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not.” And it was on “60 Minutes,” on Nov. 14, 2004, that former CIA analyst Michael Scheuer assured his rapt interviewer that the explosion of a nuclear or dirty bomb in the United States was “probably a near thing.”

In contrast to such bold proclamations, the evidence about the degree to which al-Qaeda—the only Islamic terrorist organization that targets the U.S. homeland—has pursued, or even had much interest in, a nuclear-weapons program is limited and often ambiguous. Still, the shards that exist have been routinely parlayed and exaggerated by a parade of official and unofficial alarmists.

For example, in 2004, the 9/11 Commission insisted that “al-Qaeda has tried to acquire or make nuclear weapons for at least ten years.” The only substantial evidence it provided for this assertion comes from an episode that supposedly took place around 1993 in Sudan, when Osama bin Laden's aides were scammed

as they tried to buy some uranium. Information about this caper apparently came entirely from Jamal al-Fadl, who defected from al-Qaeda in 1996 after he had been caught stealing \$110,000 from the organization. He tried selling his story around the Middle East, but only the Americans were buying. In his prize-winning *The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright relays the testimony of the man who allegedly purchased the substance for bin Laden, as well as that of a Sudanese intelligence agent. Both assert that, although there were various other scams going around at the time that may have served as grist for Fadl, the uranium episode never happened.

It's possible, of course, that Fadl—a “lovable rogue” who is “fixated on money” and “likes to please,” according to an FBI debriefer—is telling the truth, or at least what he thinks is the truth. But his allegations, now endlessly repeated, have gone from a colorful story relayed by an admitted embezzler on the lam to unquestioned fact. We know, it is repeatedly declared, that bin Laden tried to purchase weapons-grade uranium in Sudan. Qualifications, even modest ones, concerning the veracity of the evidence behind that declaration have vanished in the retelling.

Various sources suggest that there were radical elements in bin Laden's entourage interested in pursuing atomic weapons or other weapons of mass destruction when the group was in Afghanistan in the 1990s. Yet the same sources indicate that bin Laden essentially sabotaged the idea by refusing to fund a WMD project or even initiate plan-

ning for one. Analyst Anne Stenersen notes that evidence from a recovered al-Qaeda computer shows that only some \$2,000 to \$4,000 was earmarked for WMD research, apparently for very crude chemical work to make biological weapons. For comparison, she points out that the millennial terrorist group Aum Shinrikyo appears to have invested \$30 million into manufacturing sarin gas.

To show al-Qaeda's desire to obtain atomic weapons, many have focused on a set of conversations that took place in Afghanistan in August 2001 between two Pakistani nuclear scientists, bin Laden, and three other al-Qaeda officials. Pakistani intelligence officers characterize the discussions as “academic.” Reports suggest that bin Laden may have had access to some radiological material—acquired for him by radical Islamists in Uzbekistan—but the scientists told him that he could not manufacture a weapon with it. Bin Laden's questions do not seem to have been very sophisticated. The scientists were incapable of providing truly helpful information because their expertise was not in bomb design but in processing fissile material, which is almost certainly beyond the capacities of a non-state group. Nonetheless, some U.S. intelligence agencies convinced themselves that the scientists provided al-Qaeda with a “blueprint” for constructing nuclear weapons.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the apparent mastermind behind the 9/11 attacks, reportedly said that al-Qaeda's atom-bomb efforts never went beyond searching the Internet. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, technical experts from the

CIA and the Department of Energy examined information uncovered in Afghanistan and came to similar conclusions. They found no credible proof that al-Qaeda had obtained fissile material or a nuclear weapon and no evidence of “any radioactive material suitable for weapons.” They did uncover, however, a “nuclear related” document discussing “openly available concepts about the nuclear fuel cycle and some weapons related issues.” Physicist and weapons expert David Albright concludes that any al-Qaeda atomic efforts were “seriously disrupted”—indeed, “nipped in the bud”—by the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. After that, the “chance of al-Qaeda detonating a nuclear explosive appears on reflection to be low.”

Rumors and reports that al-Qaeda has managed to purchase an atomic bomb, or several, have been around now for over a decade. One story alleges that bin Laden gave a group of Chechens \$30 million in cash and two tons of opium in exchange for 20 nuclear warheads. If any of these reports were true, one might think the terrorist group (or its supposed Chechen suppliers) would have tried to set off one of those things by now or that al-Qaeda would have left some trace of the weapons behind in Afghanistan after its hasty exit in 2001. Yet absence of evidence, we need hardly be reminded, is not evidence of absence. Some intelligence analysts defensively assert that although they haven’t found most of al-Qaeda’s leadership, they know it exists. Since we know Mount Rushmore exists, maybe the tooth fairy does as well.

A Pakistani journalist was brought in to interview bin Laden just a day or two before al-Qaeda fled Afghanistan. The published texts of what was said vary, but in one transcript bin Laden supposedly asserted, “If the United States uses chemical or nuclear weapons against us, we might respond with chemical and nuclear weapons. We possess these

weapons as a deterrent.” Bin Laden declined to discuss the weapons’ origins, but his second-in-command separately explained, “If you have \$30 million, go to the black market in the central Asia, contact any disgruntled Soviet scientist and ... dozens of smart briefcase bombs are available. They have contacted us ... and we purchased some suitcase bombs.” Given the military pressure that they were under at the time, and taking into account the evidence of the primitive nature of al-Qaeda’s nuclear program—if it could be said to have had one at all—these reported assertions were clearly a desperate bluff.

Bin Laden has pronounced on nuclear weapons a few other times, talking about an Islamic “duty” or “right” to obtain them for defense. Some of these oft-quoted statements can be seen as threatening, but they are rather coy and indirect, indicating perhaps an interest, not any capability. And as political scientist Louise Richardson concludes in *What Terrorists Want: Understanding the Enemy, Containing the Threat*, “statements claiming a right to possess nuclear weapons have been misinterpreted as expressing a determination to use them ... this in turn has fed the exaggeration of the threat we face.”

When examined, the signs of al-Qaeda’s desire to go atomic and its progress in accomplishing that exceedingly difficult task are remarkably vague, if not negligible. After an exhaustive study of available materials, Stenersen finds that, although al-Qaeda central may have considered nuclear and other non-conventional weapons, there “is little evidence that such ideas ever developed into actual plans, or that they were given any kind of priority at the expense of more traditional types of terrorist attacks.” There is no reason to believe, moreover, that the group’s chances improved after they were force-

fully expelled from their comparatively unembattled base in Afghanistan.

Glenn Carle, a 23-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency, where he was deputy national intelligence officer for transnational threats, warns about taking “fright at the specter our leaders have exaggerated” and argues that we should “see jihadists for the small, lethal, disjointed and miserable opponents that they are.” Terrorism specialist Bruce Hoffman remains quite worried about loose terrorist networks, but he also points out that they are likely to be “less sophisticated” and “less technically competent” than earlier terrorists.

In 1996, one of terrorism studies’ top gurus, Walter Laqueur, insisted that some terrorist groups “almost certainly” will use weapons of mass destruction “in the foreseeable future.” What was then the foreseeable future is presumably now history. In today’s reality, terrorists seem to be heeding the advice found in a memo on an al-Qaeda laptop seized in Pakistan in 2004: “Make use of that which is available ... rather than waste valuable time becoming despondent over that which is not within your reach.” That is: keep it simple, stupid. Although there have been plenty of terrorist attacks in the world since 2001, all—thus far, at least—have relied on conventional destructive methods. There hasn’t even been much in the way of gas bombings, even in Iraq where the technology is hardly a secret.

In sum, any notion that al-Qaeda is likely to come up with nuclear weapons looks far fetched in the extreme. We still have reason for concern or at least for watchfulness. But hysteria—not to mention sleeplessness—is hardly called for. ■

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# Bring Back the Bad Guys

The logical end of the democracy crusade

By Jeff Huber

CONQUERORS IMMEMORIAL have known that the secret to successful occupations is to let the guys who surrender stay in charge of the yokels. We are presently bogged down in two quagmires because we haven't learned that lesson.

Iraq's government and security forces are incompetent and corrupt, the Kurdish situation remains unresolved, and nobody seems confident that the country will ever be able to function as an independent state again. Oh, for the good old days under Saddam Hussein! Whatever you want to say about the son of a sand dune, he didn't need a field manual to figure out how to run his country. Neither did Mohammed Omar's Taliban need a book on how to run Afghanistan. They have lived in the neighborhood for a very long time.

Decapitating regimes through military force is the most foolhardy of foreign-policy acts. The Prussians discovered this the hard way in the Franco-Prussian War. They defeated the French Army at Sedan and took Napoleon III prisoner along with 140,000 of his soldiers. But the war dragged on for months because the French formed a new government and a new army and kept fighting. They didn't like the idea of Germans occupying their country. Imagine that.

Few military victories have been more stunning than the fall of Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom, but the fighting continues almost seven years later. We supposedly ousted the Taliban from Afghanistan eight years ago, and

we're still trying to oust them. We'd be better off by far if we had never invaded either but worked instead with the power structures already in place. As Tip O'Neill said, "All politics is local."

Now we can't bring Hussein back, and whether Nouri al-Maliki can manage to hold Iraq together remains to be seen. We may yet end up with the three-state solution that Joe Biden proposed in 2006. But whatever falls out, it will only work if we back away. We will never understand Iraq.

Nor will we ever comprehend the political and social complexities of Afghanistan. As is true in most countries engaged in a guerrilla-style civil war, it's impossible to tell the civilians and insurgents apart. Which Taliban are we fighting? There seem to be quite a few. What about the other outfits like Hizb-e-Islami and the Haqqani network? How do the warlords figure in? The tribes?

If there are any good guys in Afghanistan, they aren't part of the corrupt Karzai government that we're propping up. As one Afghan put it, seeking justice from the regime "is like going to the wolves for help, when the wolves have stolen your sheep." But calling the Afghan population the "center of gravity," as our top military leaders do these days, is also a mistake. Populations may be a critical factor in foreign relations but only to the extent that they influence the real strategic center of gravity, political leadership. That's why fictional aliens don't step out of their spaceships and say, "Take me to your tired, your poor ..."

Our success in terminating World War II was a result of leaving the political institutions of our vanquished enemies intact. Germany's Karl Doenitz signed a piece of paper that said "Onkel" and the war in Europe was over. One of our biggest mistakes in Iraq was ousting Ba'athist leaders who knew how to keep things under control. Our biggest mistake in Afghanistan was putting Hamid Karzai in power; he clearly doesn't know how to keep things under control. The closest thing Afghanistan has to a political leader is Omar, who was its de facto head of state from 1996 to 2001. If we ever hope to get our arms around the situation there, we'll have to deal with him.

Making cozy with Omar will rub many in Washington the wrong way, but doing business with your enemies is what foreign policy is about: we hardly have a contemporary ally that we haven't fought a war with at some point in our relatively short history. In Iraq, we lowered levels of violence by bribing the guys who were shooting at us. Successful conduct of foreign policy is a slutty business.

Nobody will argue that these are nice men. Hussein did horrible things to his own people, and Omar's Taliban are a grim lot, but let's face it: they've done less harm to their countries than we have in the process of removing them, so who is the actual bad guy? A great fallacy of our counterinsurgency doctrine is the notion that we can win the hearts and minds of whatever freedom-loving people we happen to be blowing to smithereens.