

**THE LOOMING TOWER:
AL-QAEDA AND THE ROAD TO 9/11¹**

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*If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of
a hundred battles.³*

In many respects, America knew neither its enemy nor itself on the morning of 11 September 2001 (9/11).⁴ The United States had enjoyed a false sense of security that was shattered in an instant. In his groundbreaking narrative, *The Looming Tower*, Lawrence Wright gives unprecedented insight into the background, motivation, and deadly plans of the al-Qaeda leaders who organized the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. He also uncovers critical mistakes and missteps of this country's intelligence and law enforcement agencies which left America vulnerable. Americans have come to realize that they must recognize the warning signs of terrorism.⁵ The public now has a general idea of *what* terrorism is; Wright's main objective is to explain *how* terrorism came to be.⁶

I wholeheartedly recommend Wright's Pulitzer Prize-winning work.⁷ *The Looming Tower* provides a true "education"⁸ for the reader on the beginnings of modern terrorism and what we could have done to prevent

¹ LAWRENCE WRIGHT, *THE LOOMING TOWER: AL-QAEDA AND THE ROAD TO 9/11* (2006).

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³ SUN TZU, *THE ART OF WAR* 51 (Lionel Giles, trans., Military Service Publishing 1944) (circa sixth century B.C.).

⁴ See generally NAT'L COMM'N ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES, *THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT: FINAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES* xv-xvi (2004) [hereinafter *THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT*] ("The nation was unprepared.").

⁵ See generally *id.* at xvi (discussing the need for Americans to rethink how they approach terrorism in the future).

⁶ See generally *The Looming Tower* by Lawrence Wright, Author Q&A, <http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780375414862&view=qa> (last visited Apr. 14, 2008) [hereinafter *Wright Q&A*] ("[The book] examines [the al-Qaeda leaders'] backgrounds and explores the evolution of their decisions to attack America and to murder innocent people.").

⁷ See Katherine Q. Seelye & James Barron, *Wall Street Journal Wins 2 Pulitzer Prizes; History of Civil Rights Reporting Also Wins*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 17, 2007, at B8.

⁸ Dexter Filkins, *The Plot Against America*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 6, 2006, § 7, at 1.

it. This education serves as an important resource for Judge Advocates who continue to support the fight against a determined al-Qaeda enemy. Today's leaders must not only examine the essence of the enemy they are fighting but also reflect upon the errors that put America at risk for being attacked.⁹ Wright distinguishes his work from other 9/11 accounts with four main strengths: an engaging writing style, clever organization, an unparalleled commitment to research, and uncompromising objectivity.

Wright's Engaging Writing Style Draws the Reader into the Story

What truly elevates Wright's work is his ability to pull the reader into his story. Wright was already well regarded by many as a "superb literary stylist,"¹⁰ and he advances that reputation in *The Looming Tower*. Principally, Wright's book is a detailed narrative of the years preceding the 9/11 attacks, but in reality, it is much more. Instead of simply stringing together cold, hard facts, the author uses extraordinary detail to breathe life into the people, places, and events that he describes. Wright also delivers his tale in an exciting, fast-paced, storytelling style that leaves the reader on the edge of her seat.

Wright takes a masterful approach to describing his main characters and events. One example is Wright's introduction of FBI Agent Dan Coleman, one of the first government agents to track Osama bin Laden as a threat. Wright describes Coleman as "overweight and disheveled, with a brushy moustache and hair that refused to stay combed. He was as cantankerous as a porcupine (his FBI colleagues called him 'Grumpy Santa' behind his back)"¹¹ Wright's vivid words immediately call to mind a vital image of a rather ill-tempered man.

In other chapters, Wright introduces the reader to another FBI agent, the larger-than-life John O'Neill. O'Neill, who would "become the man most identified with the pursuit of Osama bin Laden,"¹² is described

⁹ See generally THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT, *supra* note 4, at xviii ("We learned that the institutions charged with protecting our borders, civil aviation, and national security did not understand how grave this threat could be, and did not adjust their policies, plans, and practices to deter or defeat it.").

¹⁰ Steve Weinberg, "Tower" Provides New Understanding of 9/11, BOSTON GLOBE, Aug. 15, 2006, at E6.

¹¹ See WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 241–42.

¹² *Id.* at 207.

wearing “Burberry pinstripes and . . . Bruno Magli loafers”¹³ and being “fascinated by gadgetry and always [having] the latest electronic organizer or mobile phone in his pocket”¹⁴ While the colorful descriptions are important, it is the depth to which Wright explores these characters that is his true genius. For instance, Wright exposes not only O’Neill’s actions in the FBI workplace, but also dives headfirst into many of his personal shortcomings, such as secretly dating three women—despite being a married father—and incurring heavy debts in order to cover his extravagant lifestyle.¹⁵ By providing a richly-detailed look into the foibles and quirks of these key figures, Wright “introduces” them to the reader in such a tangible manner, it feels like a real-life introduction.

In particular, Wright excels in personalizing the major figures of the modern Islamic movement: Sayyid Qutb, the influential Egyptian writer who advocated the “complete rejection of rationalism and Western values”¹⁶ to save Islam; Ayman al-Zawahiri, the Egyptian doctor who helped direct al-Qaeda “to put Qutb’s vision into action”;¹⁷ and Osama bin Laden, the Saudi from a wealthy family who used his influence and money to create al-Qaeda in part to serve as “an Arab legion that could wage war anywhere.”¹⁸ Wright focuses heavily on providing as complete a description as possible of these individuals’ lives and backgrounds.¹⁹ Whether it was learning that bin Laden’s favorite childhood television show was *Bonanza*,²⁰ or that bin Laden felt betrayed when his fourth wife asked for a divorce and some of his children decided to go with her,²¹ Wright’s realistic portrayals provide a depth to these individuals, without which the reader would be left with an easily-confused litany of two-dimensional characters.

Wright also has the rare ability to describe events in a dramatic storytelling fashion that keeps the reader constantly enthralled. It is this style that has led some commentators to accurately describe the work more as a “thriller”²² than a piece of nonfiction. This exciting style helps

¹³ *Id.* at 237.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *See id.* at 292–95.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 30.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 37.

¹⁸ *Id.* at 111–12.

¹⁹ *See generally* Wright Q&A, *supra* note 6 (“No book has gotten such rich and intimate detail about the primary figures in this immense tragedy.”).

²⁰ *See* WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 75.

²¹ *See id.* at 194.

²² Filkins, *supra* note 8.

make the work a true page-turner, rather than a dry history lesson. To showcase his storytelling abilities, the author includes hundreds of anecdotes that are seamlessly woven into the fabric of the narrative. Two examples stand out as the most telling of Wright's gifted abilities and style. The first is the description of the death of Abu Ubaydah, a chief al-Qaeda lieutenant, in a freak ferry accident on his way to Tanzania in May 1996.²³ Wright brilliantly describes the chaotic final moments aboard the sinking vessel in these terms:

Passengers were screaming, luggage and mattresses were falling on top of them, and they clawed at each other in order to reach the door, their only escape. [Abu Ubaydah's brother-in-law] grabbed at Abu Ubaydah's hand and pulled him halfway out of the room, but suddenly the door was ripped from its hinges and al-Qaeda's military chief was pulled back into the cabin by his doomed companions.²⁴

The second gripping example occurs when Wright provides a macabre description of the massacre of fifty-eight tourists in the Egyptian attraction of Luxor in 1997:

Six young men dressed in black police uniforms and carrying vinyl bags entered the temple precinct shortly before nine in the morning. One of the men shot a guard, and then they all put on red headbands identifying themselves as members of the Islamic Group. . . . The other men crisscrossed the terraced temple grounds, mowing down tourists by shooting their legs, then methodically finishing them off with close shots to the head. They paused to mutilate some of the bodies with butcher knives. . . . The ornamented walls were splattered with brains and bits of hair.²⁵

With such graphic accounts, *The Looming Tower* at times reads like an adventure novel. I continually found myself eager to read the next "tale" as told in Wright's flawless and dramatic style.

²³ See WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 232.

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 257.

Wright Utilizes Clever Organization

Obviously, Lawrence Wright expresses a great deal of creativity through his literary style in *The Looming Tower*, but he also gets creative with his organization. Wright's original formatting choices enhance the work significantly. In general, he follows a fairly chronological order of events. In the beginning, the narrative follows the major characters from childhood to adulthood.²⁶ Wright organizes his ideas and descriptions in a cohesive manner so that the reader obtains a clear understanding of each of the key players, chiefly Qutb, Zawahiri, bin Laden, and O'Neill.

Throughout the work, however, Wright skillfully switches perspectives between the al-Qaeda preparations for attacks and the American attempts to defeat al-Qaeda. Early in the work, the transitions occur infrequently.²⁷ As the story moves closer to the 9/11 attacks, Wright jumps more rapidly between the al-Qaeda and the American points of view.²⁸ This method of intertwining both perspectives creates a palpable suspense for the reader, as well as an illusion of chaos which mirrors the chaos of the terrorist attacks themselves.

In particular, Wright brilliantly organizes his description of the events of 9/11. The author repeatedly interrupts his narrative about each of the planes crashing and the ensuing chaos, with tales of bin Laden and his supporters trying to follow the news broadcasts of the attacks.²⁹ After the first plane strikes, Wright launches into a tale of the terrorists trying in vain to set up a satellite dish from their cave headquarters in Afghanistan to watch the events unfold, and being forced instead to listen to the broadcast on the radio.³⁰ As the following planes strike, Wright repeatedly transitions back to bin Laden telling his followers "Wait, wait"³¹ and holding up fingers as each of the new strikes is announced on the news.³² Reading those passages and thinking of the simultaneous shock and fear in America juxtaposed with the celebrating and cheering in a cave in Afghanistan is eerie and a bit horrifying. Of course, it is also an extremely effective method of grabbing and holding the reader's

²⁶ See *id.* at 32–83 (describing the backgrounds of Zawahiri and bin Laden).

²⁷ See *id.* at 7–83 (detailing basically without interruption the lives of Qutb, Zawahiri, and bin Laden).

²⁸ See *id.* at 333–61.

²⁹ See *id.* at 356–59.

³⁰ See *id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 357.

³² See *id.*

attention, which is exactly why the author chose this method of organization.

Wright's Research is Meticulous and Extensive

One of the most admirable aspects of this work is how the author fully committed himself to providing the reader a complete picture of the terrorist attacks. He dedicated nearly five years to researching the events that led to the attacks on America.³³ Wright sought to provide one of the most comprehensive texts ever written on the subject, even going so far as to take a position in Saudi Arabia assisting young writers when his journalist visa request was repeatedly denied.³⁴ During that time, he conducted hundreds of interviews with individuals who had direct knowledge of the major players and events of the terrorist movement.³⁵ He spoke with key figures across the Muslim world, in America and in other countries.³⁶ As a result of talking with people who intimately knew bin Laden, Zawahiri and others, Wright was able to obtain very personal information about them, which makes his work an invaluable resource.

For instance, one anecdote cites Issam al-Turabi, a friend of bin Laden's and the son of the leader of Sudan, regarding the expulsion in 1995 of Zawahiri and much of the Egyptian core of bin Laden's organization from Sudan.³⁷ Drawing from a personal interview with al-Turabi, the author describes bin Laden as "crippled by the loss," remarking how "depressed" bin Laden appeared and stating that "the relaxed and playful character Issam [al Turabi] had known was gone."³⁸ This commentary provides valuable insight into the important relationship between bin Laden and Zawahiri. First hand accounts, such as this one, lend a great deal of credibility to the narrative.

While Wright's extensive research pays off in his unsurpassed knowledge of the shadowy dealings of the al-Qaeda organization, it is not without its flaws. The author's knowledge of conversations between key players in the Islamic movement borders on unbelievable. Other commentators have complained that he relies too heavily on potentially

³³ See Wright Q&A, *supra* note 6.

³⁴ See *id.*

³⁵ See *id.*

³⁶ See *id.*

³⁷ See WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 219.

³⁸ See *id.*

faded memories, saying, “Wright has drawn up verbatim reconstructions of entire conversations, some of which took place more than a decade ago. . . . [I]t’s hard to believe that memories are that good.”³⁹ I concur.

There is one section where I find it particularly difficult to understand how Wright can rely on the story he was told. The author describes a secret meeting, held in Pakistan in 1988, of the organization that would later morph into al-Qaeda.⁴⁰ His source for this information, a person who had attended the meeting, refused to speak directly with him.⁴¹ Instead, Wright relied on information relayed to him through an “intermediary.”⁴² Wright’s heavy reliance on the accuracy of a middle man’s information seems suspect.⁴³ Luckily, skeptical sources such as these are the exception in the work, not the norm.

Wright Remains Objective in His Work

Wright’s extensive research helped him create a well-balanced work that provides a thorough analysis of the 9/11 attacks. Wright is remarkably able to remain objective in his work despite, like most Americans, being devastated by al-Qaeda’s actions.⁴⁴

Wright attempts to portray bin Laden and Zawahiri as real people, rather than images on Most Wanted posters.⁴⁵ As discussed previously, Wright expends great effort to reveal the al-Qaeda leaders’ family and personal lives in detail. He does not, however, shy away from their violent actions. Wright’s strength is being able to expose those events without personally commenting on them. For instance, while discussing a situation in which Zawahiri orders the violent execution of two thirteen-year-old boys who were drugged and blackmailed by Egyptian

³⁹ Filkins, *supra* note 8.

⁴⁰ See WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 131–32.

⁴¹ See *id.* at 448.

⁴² See *id.*

⁴³ But see generally *id.* (attempting to address the issue by stating, “I believe the reader can begin to appreciate . . . the imperfect means I have sometimes employed in order to gain information.”).

⁴⁴ See Wright Q&A, *supra* note 6 (“I was very fond of the time I spent [in the Middle East in the 1970s], which added to the heartbreak I experienced on 9/11.”).

⁴⁵ See Most Wanted Terrorist—Usama Bin Laden, <http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorists/terbinladen.htm> (last visited Apr. 14, 2008); Most Wanted Terrorist—Ayman Al-Zawahiri, <http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/terrorists/teralzawahiri.htm> (last visited Apr. 14, 2008).

intelligence into spying on Zawahiri, Wright refrains from criticizing Zawahiri for being ruthless.⁴⁶ By doing so, he enables the reader to form her own opinions based on facts.

The only area in which Wright's objectivity might be called into question is in his handling of the CIA's refusal to share information with the FBI. While he abstains from lambasting the CIA directly, he personally believes the agency is to blame.⁴⁷ Further, he emphasizes heavily the negative effects of many of their decisions to withhold information.⁴⁸ Generally, however, Wright counters any such accusations of bias by routinely offering possible alternative explanations for the withholding of the intelligence.⁴⁹

Conclusion

The Looming Tower is a must-read for every person who wishes to understand the beginnings of modern terrorism—hatred, fear, and the desire for revenge—and to listen to the lessons that tragedy has to teach. Judge Advocates will particularly benefit from the work, as it educates them about their determined al-Qaeda enemy and forces them to explore the ways 9/11 could have possibly been prevented. These vital lessons are especially easy to absorb because Wright uses a skillful, engaging style and organization. In the end, it would be hard to find a better written or more thorough and objective description of the events leading up to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 than *The Looming Tower*.

⁴⁶ See WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 215–16.

⁴⁷ See Wright Q&A, *supra* note 6 (“9/11 could have been prevented if the CIA and the NSA had cooperated with the FBI . . .”).

⁴⁸ See, e.g., WRIGHT, *supra* note 1, at 268–69 (discussing the CIA's refusal to turn over al-Qaeda information retrieved from a computer in Europe), 311–13 (highlighting the CIA failure to alert others to the presence of al-Qaeda in the United States), 362 (discussing an FBI agent vomiting in disgust upon learning that the CIA had known that two of the 9/11 hijackers were in the United States for over a year and a half).

⁴⁹ See *id.* at 312–15 (explaining alternate theories, such as the CIA had too many threats to deal with and the CIA was attempting to recruit the al-Qaeda members as double agents).