

# FIRST IN: AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT OF HOW THE CIA SPEARHEADED THE WAR ON TERROR IN AFGHANISTAN<sup>1</sup>

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*I don't want bin Ladin and his thugs captured, I want them dead. Alive and in prison here in the United States, they'll become a symbol, a rallying point for other terrorists. They have planned and carried out the murder of thousands of our citizens. They must be killed. I want to see photos of their heads on pikes. I want bin Ladin's head shipped back in a box filled with dry ice. I want to be able to show bin Ladin's head to the president.*<sup>3</sup>

Cofer Black's Capone-like directive to Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operative Gary Schroen promises the reader an intense look at the virtually unparalleled manhunt for one of the central figures in the U.S. War on Terror. Thus Schroen embarks on a dual-level account of the United States' earliest operations in Afghanistan following 11 September 2001. On one level, Schroen conveys an intimate narrative of the very personal experience of a small team of warriors in battle. On another level, Schroen attempts a critical analysis of contemporaneous national policy decisions and the strategic implications of those decisions. Because Schroen fails to commit to either a micro or a macro accounting of the CIA's early operations in Afghanistan, *First In* fails to contribute much to our understanding of either the warrior's life in battle or the complex strategic issues involved in prosecuting a war.

Schroen is eminently qualified to write a book on the CIA's role in the U.S. War on Terror.<sup>4</sup> During his thirty-two year career with the CIA, Schroen served in a host of assignments either in or dealing with Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup> Throughout those assignments, Schroen established relationships with Afghani military officers and political leaders that facilitated his team's initial success in Afghanistan in 2001.<sup>6</sup> Those relationships also provide the *First In* reader with a unique perspective on early U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

While Schroen's prior CIA experience provides valuable background information, his participation in the CIA's first mission into Afghanistan after 11 September 2001 establishes Schroen as the appropriate person to write this book. When then-CIA director George Tenet selected Schroen in mid-September 2001 to lead a team into Afghanistan,<sup>7</sup> Schroen was in the process of retiring from his position as the Deputy Chief of the Near East and South Asia Division of the Directorate of Operations.<sup>8</sup> Schroen rapidly assembled his seven-man team, "JAWBREAKER,"<sup>9</sup> and deployed with them to Afghanistan in late September 2001.<sup>10</sup> *First In* chronicles JAWBREAKER's efforts to reach Afghanistan, to quickly establish itself with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance, and to make the first U.S. strikes in America's War on Terror.

## A Warrior's Tale

Schroen tells the reader that by writing about JAWBREAKER, he hopes to capture "in an honest and accurate manner the events and actions of the brave officers involved."<sup>11</sup> In doing so, Schroen intimates that he intends for *First In* to

<sup>1</sup> GARY C. SCHROEN, *FIRST IN: AN INSIDER'S ACCOUNT OF HOW THE CIA SPEARHEADED THE WAR ON TERROR IN AFGHANISTAN* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Army. Written while assigned as a student, 54th Judge Advocate Officer Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, U.S. Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

<sup>3</sup> SCHROEN, *supra* note 1, at 38 (statement of Cofer Black, Chief CIA Counter-Terrorist Center).

<sup>4</sup> See Jon Sawyer, *Book Details Derring-Do and Miscues*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, June 12, 2005, at B1, available at LEXIS, News & Business.

<sup>5</sup> Schroen was stationed in Islamabad, Pakistan in the late 1970's with the CIA's Near East Division. SCHROEN, *supra* note 1, at 43. He participated in the CIA's support of the Mujahedin in Afghanistan following the Soviet invasion of 1979. *Id.* at 45. Schroen was the CIA station chief in Kabul in the 1980's, serving in Kabul when the United States closed its embassy there in 1988. *Id.* at 46-47. He again served as the senior case officer responsible for coordinating support to the Mujahedin in Afghanistan in Islamabad during the late 1980's. *Id.* Schroen was the chief of the Islamabad office in the mid-1990's. *Id.* at 53.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 63.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at 16.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at 12.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* at 78.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at xiii.

memorialize the personal tale of warriors in battle. Schroen reportedly wrote *First In* after sharing many of the details of JAWBREAKER's mission with journalists writing about the CIA involvement in Afghanistan, bolstering Schroen's conclusion that he seeks to "set the record straight."<sup>12</sup>

Much of Schroen's account paints a very human and intriguing picture of various aspects of CIA operations. Schroen almost immediately connects with the reader by invoking the memory of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.<sup>13</sup> Details about his personal reaction to the terrorist attacks invite the reader to reflect on the reader's memories of that day. Schroen's explanation of his decision to accept the mission to Afghanistan<sup>14</sup> reflects the very fundamental emotions stirred by the call to service. Schroen honestly portrays the profound moment of saying good-bye to loved ones,<sup>15</sup> drawing the reader further into JAWBREAKER.

Schroen also reveals the unexpected whimsical moments in an otherwise dangerous mission. To start, Schroen and his team rely not on the awesome ingenuity and wealth of the nation's industrial-military complex for their initial logistical support, but on a shopping trip to REI.<sup>16</sup> One team member's flatulence problem receives substantial attention from Schroen in the book, as it surely did from the other team members in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> Finally, Schroen confesses that JAWBREAKER found the mid-tour arrival of Starbucks coffee as a most valued re-supply item.<sup>18</sup>

Readers in the military or government service will benefit from Schroen's discussion of building relationships with the commanders of the Northern Alliance. In describing JAWBREAKER's mission, as conveyed to him by the chief of the Counterterrorist Center in the CIA, Schroen states:

Gary, I want you to take a small team of CIA officers into Afghanistan. You will link up with the Northern Alliance in the Panjshir Valley, and your job is to convince them to cooperate fully with the CIA and the U.S. military as we go after bin Ladin and the Al-Qa'ida. You will also evaluate their military capabilities and recommend steps we can take to bring the Northern Alliance forces to a state of readiness so they can effectively take on the Taliban forces, opening the way for our efforts against UBL.<sup>19</sup>

Although Schroen's mission seems to neatly divide all players into four groups—the United States, the Northern Alliance, the Taliban, and Usama bin Ladin's associates—Schroen draws on his years of regional experience to demonstrate the nuanced and delicate relationships between those players in Afghanistan. Schroen, for example, describes his meeting with Professor Abdul Rasoul Sayyaf, a commander loosely allied with the Northern Alliance.<sup>20</sup> Although Sayyaf pledged general support for U.S. operations against bin Ladin and Al Qa'ida during his meeting with Schroen, Schroen remained wary as Sayyaf had ten years earlier accepted financial support from bin Ladin and had previously been vehemently anti-American.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, Schroen exposes fractures in the Northern Alliance, as evidenced by his meetings with General Mohammad Fahim Kahn, a senior Northern Alliance military commander,<sup>22</sup> Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, the Northern Alliance foreign minister,<sup>23</sup> and engineer Aref Sarwari, the head of the Northern Alliance intelligence service.<sup>24</sup> In one such meeting, Dr.

<sup>12</sup> See Faye Bowers, *Life in the CIA: Once Clandestine, Now Read All About It*, CHRISTIAN SCI. MONITOR, May 20, 2005, at 01, available at LEXIS, News & Business (citing examples from the book in which Schroen attempts to set the record straight).. "Schroen, for his part, says he wrote his book because he had been directed to tell most of his story already to two Washington Post reporters who were writing books about the war on terror." *Id.*

<sup>13</sup> SCHROEN, *supra* note 1, at 11-15.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 31-32.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> *Id.* at 23-24. Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI) is a well known supplier of specialty outdoor gear and clothing with seventy-eight retail stores in the United States and a busy Internet, telephone, and mail-order business. See www.REI.com (last visited Nov. 22, 2005).

<sup>17</sup> SCHROEN, *supra* note 1, at 109, 129, & 156.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.* at 210.

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 15-16.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 116.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 96.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 87.

Abdullah and engineer Aref exploited General Fahim's inability to speak English by saying one thing to Schroen in English and then intentionally mistranslating their comments to General Fahim.<sup>25</sup> Through his description of these and other meetings with Sayyaf, Fahim, Abdullah, and Aref, Schroen demonstrates that alliances are not simple relationships and that the individuals within those alliances may often act to further their own interests.

On a number of points, however, Schroen's account of the warrior in battle leaves the reader with more questions than answers. While he addresses Starbucks and flatulence at length, Schroen's account of intelligence matters falls short. At one point, Schroen reports that JAWBREAKER filed four hundred intelligence reports in one month.<sup>26</sup> What information did those reports contain? Schroen hints that the reports may have contained information pertaining to Taliban troop movements,<sup>27</sup> but little, if anything, else is mentioned. In fairness, Schroen informs the reader early on that the CIA scrubbed *First In* for classified data.<sup>28</sup> While the reader should expect and, in fact, appreciate the exclusion of sensitive material, a book on the CIA that is largely devoid of the intelligence-gathering process or the substance of intelligence is contrary to its readers' expectations.

More specifically, Schroen thoroughly disappoints the reader by almost completely excluding any discussion of Usama bin Ladin. A quick check of the index shows that only nineteen pages even mention bin Ladin.<sup>29</sup> To put that page count in context, Schroen dedicates ten rather graphic pages to his own intestinal problems.<sup>30</sup> Again, the requirement for operational security may, and probably did, prevent Schroen from incorporating a greater focus on Usama bin Ladin. One, however, questions the relevance of the opening quote of this article calling for bin Ladin's head on ice if Schroen intended on largely ignoring bin Ladin throughout his book. Similarly, Schroen includes the very direct mission statement he received,<sup>31</sup> but never develops how toppling the Taliban works in concert with the aim of capturing bin Ladin.

As an abstraction, the two aims are reconcilable, but Schroen leaves the reader with no "inside account" of the actual measures he took to lay the groundwork for capturing bin Ladin. Schroen comes close to discussing plans for bin Ladin's demise when he informs the reader, "Chris was still trying to win Sayyaf's agreement to work on luring one of bin Ladin's lieutenants to a location where he could be captured or killed. I was convinced it was a hopeless mission, but I admired Chris's dedication."<sup>32</sup> The dismissive tone of Schroen's passage evinces a surprising disregard for what would seem to be an important component of JAWBREAKER's mission.

### A Critique of National Strategy

Schroen's failure to address JAWBREAKER's efforts to capture bin Ladin points to the larger problem with Schroen's book: Schroen attempts at once both to tell a warrior's tale and to critique the strategic decisions at play in JAWBREAKER's mission. By splitting his purpose, Schroen dilutes his message and leads the reader through a disappointing account of the CIA's involvement in the early stages of the War on Terror.

The most prominent of Schroen's strategic criticisms is that Washington policymakers did not initially bomb Taliban troop positions in front of the Northern Alliance forces that Schroen supported.<sup>33</sup> Contrary to some voices in Washington, Schroen argues that the degree of unity and discipline possessed by Northern Alliance forces made them far superior allies than the Pashtun fighters in southern Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> According to Schroen:

The key to victory was in the north, and that victory rested on the shoulders of the Northern Alliance forces under Fahim's command. I wanted to avoid any shift in focus away from that strategic fact. I thought the

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<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 101.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 112.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.*

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at xi.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 367.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 371.

<sup>31</sup> *See supra* note 19 and accompanying text.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 265.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 99-100.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 99.

situation was so clear that everyone involved in the war planning under way back in Washington would see things as I did. I did not realize what a fight lay ahead to convince Washington and senior military planners to focus efforts in the north.<sup>35</sup>

In the preceding passage, Schroen takes a decisive step away from the tale of the warrior in battle and undertakes a strategic analysis that he subsequently fails to develop. As Schroen maneuvers into a strategic discussion, he utterly fails to define any parameters of that discussion for the reader. Consider, for example, noted military strategist B.H. Liddell Hart:

In discussing the subject of “the objective” in war it is essential to be clear about, and to keep clear in our minds, the distinction between the political and the military objective. The two are different but not separate. For nations do not wage war for war’s sake, but in pursuance of policy. The military objective is only the means to a political end. Hence the military objective should be governed by the political objective . . . . Thus any study of the problem ought to begin and end with the question of policy.<sup>36</sup>

Most students of military affairs will also recognize military strategist Carl von Clausewitz’s maxim, “War is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.”<sup>37</sup> Clausewitz further defines this principle by explaining, “The main lines along which military events progress, and to which they are restricted, are political lines that continue throughout the war into the subsequent peace. . . . If that is so, then war cannot be divorced from political life.”<sup>38</sup>

When Schroen enters the strategic debate, he thoroughly neglects to account for the policy questions that accompany his position that the United States should bomb in northern Afghanistan. He neglects these policy questions even though he tangentially raises a number of them in the text of his book. For example, Schroen identifies the concern among policymakers over the role that Northern Alliance forces would play in governing Afghanistan after the fall of Kabul.<sup>39</sup> Specifically, Schroen highlights an anti-Northern Alliance lobby in Washington that believed General Fahim was relying on U.S. air strikes simply, “To preserve his military strength for the post-Taliban political struggle.”<sup>40</sup> Schroen also introduces the reader to a Pashtun commander with extensive ties to the National Security Council and the State Department.<sup>41</sup> Schroen’s tone suggests that the United States improperly favored this Pashtun commander over the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance.<sup>42</sup>

After unwittingly setting up the policy question that should govern his strategic focus—Pashtun versus Northern Alliance governance of post-war Afghanistan—Schroen leaps directly to siding with the Northern Alliance and ignores a number of important questions. Why did Washington policymakers favor the Pashtun? How did a Pashtun commander become connected with the National Security Council and the State Department? What should Afghanistan look like after the fall of Kabul? If the Northern Alliance should govern Afghanistan, then who within the Northern Alliance should seize the helm? The governance of post-war Afghanistan looms as an unresolved, yet important, policy question informing Schroen’s particular military question about whether or not the United States should support the Pashtun or the Northern Alliance.

The reader should not mistake this particular criticism of *First In* as a commentary on whether or not Schroen advocates the *right* strategic positions. Instead, the reader should know that Schroen provides little evidence or logical discussion to support his conclusions on U.S. strategy. Because he fails to develop his strategic criticisms, they are inherently less persuasive than they could be.

Schroen’s potentially excusable failure to address the policy underpinnings of the strategic issues he raises is unfortunately compounded by internal inconsistencies between his strategic conclusions and his assessment of actual conditions in Afghanistan. In the Afterword, Schroen makes several observations about post-war Afghanistan. For example,

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<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 100.

<sup>36</sup> B.H. LIDDELL HART, STRATEGY 338 (Penguin Books 1991) (1954).

<sup>37</sup> CARL VON CLAUSEWITZ, ON WAR 605 (Michael Howard & Peter Paret, eds. & trans., Princeton U. Press 1984) (1832).

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

<sup>39</sup> SCHROEN, *supra* note 1, at 185.

<sup>40</sup> *Id.* at 327.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.* at 187.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.*

Schroen says of General Dostum, a former Northern Alliance commander, “Dostum, who is probably the most devious political figure among the regional leaders, is also a serious potential threat to the Karzai government.”<sup>43</sup> Additionally, Schroen identifies his earlier strategic champion, General Fahim, as, “The most serious potential threat to stability.”<sup>44</sup> Of Engineer Aref, Schroen concludes, “Aref was stuck in the past, using the [National Directorate of Security] for the benefit of his own ethnic and personal interests, often working behind the scenes against Karzai and the government.”<sup>45</sup>

Each of Schroen’s cautionary observations about former Northern Alliance leaders in post-war Afghanistan appear to contradict his earlier assertion that the United States should throw its military might behind Northern Alliance fighters. On the one hand, Schroen argues strongly that the United States should provide the full weight of its military support to the Northern Alliance. On the other hand, Schroen identifies the Northern Alliance leadership as the greatest threat to the success of the fledgling Afghan government. Schroen does not reconcile or explain these apparent and important inconsistencies.

By failing to reconcile these inconsistencies, Schroen forces the reader to overanalyze his unsupported strategic position at the expense of a potentially compelling warrior’s tale. The reader impulsively wonders whether or not Schroen erred in his early support of the Northern Alliance. Did he also, then, err in focusing so little on bin Ladin? Did Schroen’s dedication of limited resources to building a case for bombing in the north<sup>46</sup> hamper JAWBREAKER’s ability to collect intelligence on bin Ladin and his associates? Again, Schroen leaves the reader to ponder questions that have little to do with the stated purpose of his book—to capture the actions of the brave men with whom he served.

### Conclusion

*First In* deals with a timely and relevant topic. A quick read, Schroen’s book certainly contains moments of strong human emotion and nuanced human relationships. Additionally, the reader will close the cover of *First In* with a better appreciation for the sacrifice CIA operatives make in support of our nation. *First In* provides a previously unattainable glimpse into this unique CIA operation.

Unfortunately, Schroen blurs that glimpse by stealing space and substance from his account of JAWBREAKER’s actions to inadequately critique strategic decisions of America’s War on Terror. The reader looking for insight into the strategic issues surrounding U.S. policy in Afghanistan will find little in Schroen’s account. Instead, the reader will find a book filled with promise that stumbles to mediocrity as each page is turned.

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<sup>43</sup> *Id.* at 357.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.*

<sup>45</sup> *Id.*

<sup>46</sup> *Id.* at 146-47.