

Falling into the

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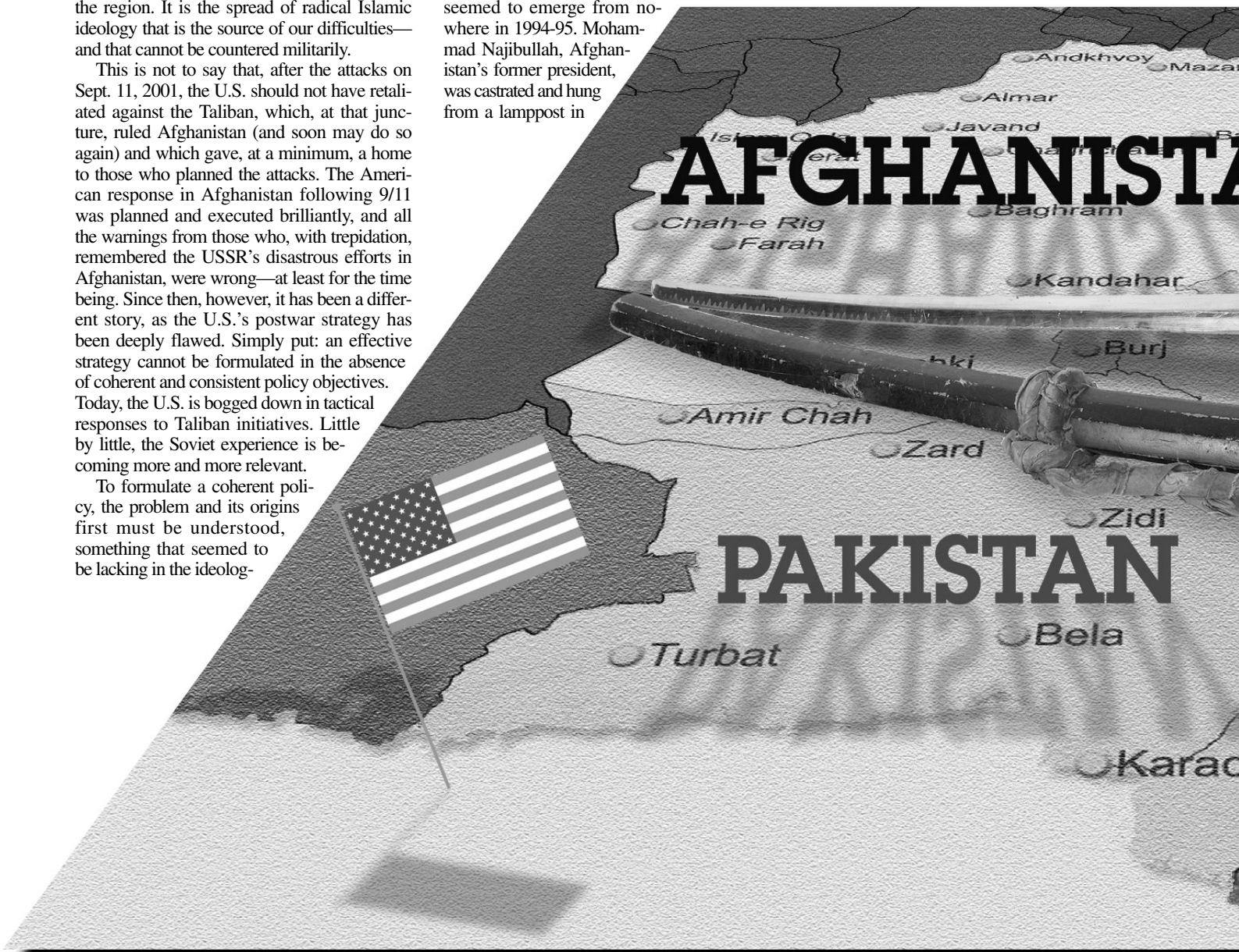
THE “WAR ON TERROR” must end. Even the phrase itself is ill conceived and used for domestic political purposes that obscure the true nature of the problem. Conceptually, the term constrains the response to the real threat solely to military means. In particular, the war against terror in Afghanistan cannot be won and its continuation may damage our real national interests in the region. It is the spread of radical Islamic ideology that is the source of our difficulties—and that cannot be countered militarily.

This is not to say that, after the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, the U.S. should not have retaliated against the Taliban, which, at that juncture, ruled Afghanistan (and soon may do so again) and which gave, at a minimum, a home to those who planned the attacks. The American response in Afghanistan following 9/11 was planned and executed brilliantly, and all the warnings from those who, with trepidation, remembered the USSR’s disastrous efforts in Afghanistan, were wrong—at least for the time being. Since then, however, it has been a different story, as the U.S.’s postwar strategy has been deeply flawed. Simply put: an effective strategy cannot be formulated in the absence of coherent and consistent policy objectives. Today, the U.S. is bogged down in tactical responses to Taliban initiatives. Little by little, the Soviet experience is becoming more and more relevant.

To formulate a coherent policy, the problem and its origins first must be understood, something that seemed to be lacking in the ideolog-

ically driven Bush Administration. After the withdrawal of Soviet troops was completed in 1989, it took three more years for the Mujahidin to overthrow the Soviet-backed Afghan government. The Mujahidin then turned to fighting among themselves and destroyed any semblance of civil society. Everyone appears to have forgotten the relief with which the world greeted the Taliban when they seemed to emerge from nowhere in 1994-95. Mohammad Najibullah, Afghanistan’s former president, was castrated and hung from a lamppost in

1996 and the nation was declared an Islamic state that henceforth would be ruled under the Sharia. The Taliban brought peace and the rule of law. Only later did the world come to understand what that meant. Interestingly enough, the Taliban never have been very popular in the Muslim world. Only Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia recognized the Tal-



Afghan Trap

BY GERALD E. MARSH

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iban as Afghanistan's legitimate government.

It was the Taliban, of course, that gave refuge to a man whose name haunts us still. Explains Charles Allen in *God's Terrorists: The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*: "Mullah Omar's Taliban Government had given sanctuary to a Yemen-born Saudi national who had earlier helped channel

vast sums of Saudi Arabian petro-dollars into the war against the Soviets. His name was Osama bin Laden and he had recently been joined by an Egyptian doctor named Ayman al-Zawahri."

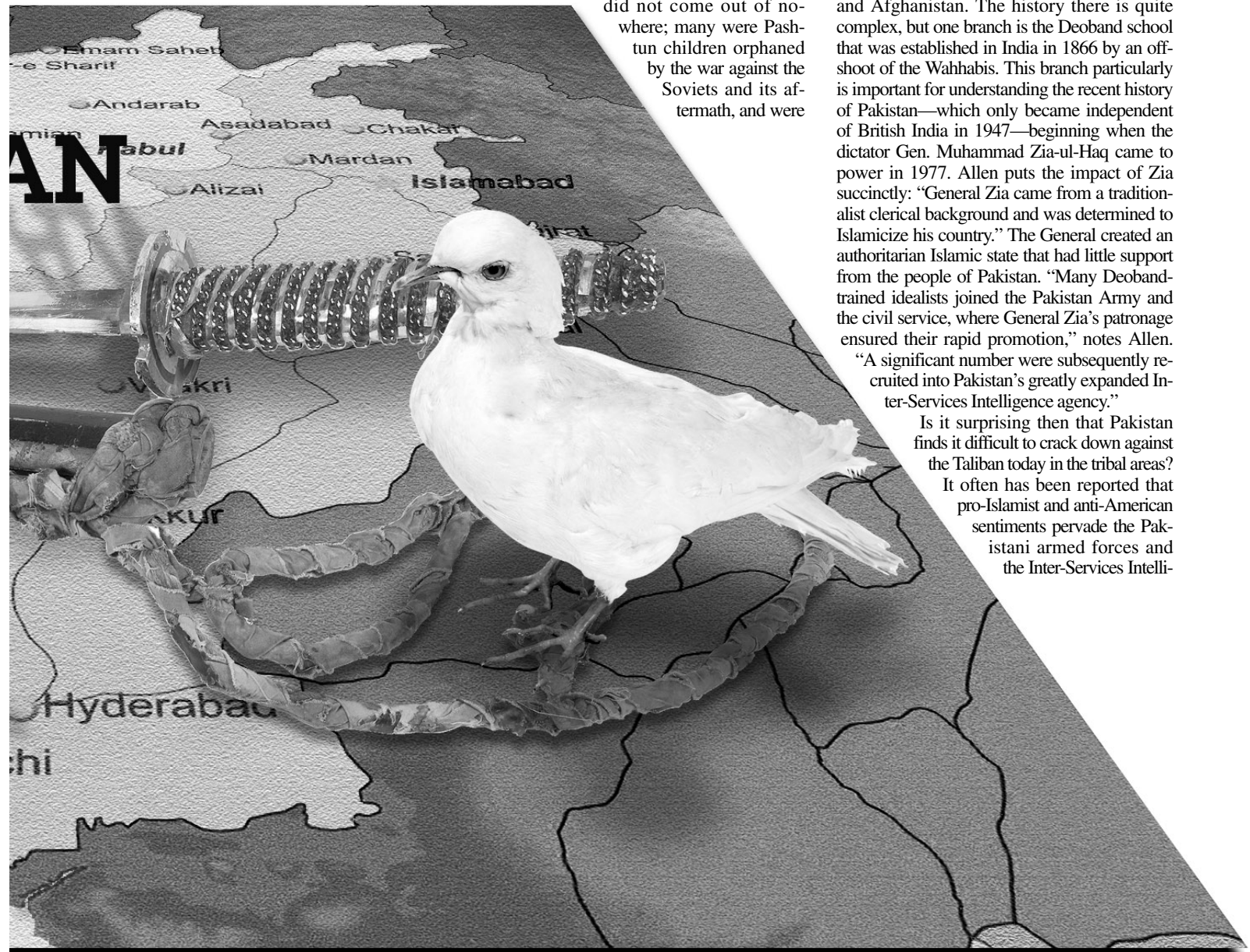
Al-Zawahri became the principal ideologue for world jihad, and bin Laden will remain a hero in some parts of the Muslim world for generations to come. The Taliban did not come out of nowhere; many were Pashtun children orphaned by the war against the Soviets and its aftermath, and were

brought up in the hundreds of madrassahs in Pakistan funded by Saudi Arabia. They were taught the intolerant and militant form of Islam that goes under the name Wahhabism. The Pashtuns are the dominant ethnic group of the Taliban and the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Wahhabism, born in Arabia in the 18th century, and now the dominant form of Islam in Saudi Arabia, has long and deep roots in India and Afghanistan. The history there is quite complex, but one branch is the Deoband school that was established in India in 1866 by an offshoot of the Wahhabis. This branch particularly is important for understanding the recent history of Pakistan—which only became independent of British India in 1947—beginning when the dictator Gen. Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq came to power in 1977. Allen puts the impact of Zia succinctly: "General Zia came from a traditionalist clerical background and was determined to Islamicize his country." The General created an authoritarian Islamic state that had little support from the people of Pakistan. "Many Deoband-trained idealists joined the Pakistan Army and the civil service, where General Zia's patronage ensured their rapid promotion," notes Allen. "A significant number were subsequently recruited into Pakistan's greatly expanded Inter-Services Intelligence agency."

Is it surprising then that Pakistan finds it difficult to crack down against the Taliban today in the tribal areas?

It often has been reported that pro-Islamist and anti-American sentiments pervade the Pakistani armed forces and the Inter-Services Intelli-



gence organization. Yet, there is another reason that Pakistani efforts against the Taliban are minimal—money. “After the 9/11 attacks, the Pakistani military concluded that keeping the Taliban alive was the surest way to win billions of dollars in aid that Pakistan needed to survive,” according to a *New York Times Magazine* article in which a retired Pakistani official was interviewed. “The military’s complicated relationship with the Taliban is part of what the official called the Pakistani military’s ‘strategic games. . . . Pakistan is dependent on the American money that these games with the Taliban generate. . . . The Pakistani economy would collapse without it.’ The official summed it up by saying that ‘The U.S. is being taken for a ride.’”

The Taliban continue to receive financial support from the narcotics trade and petrodollars from the countries of the Persian Gulf. The Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is the basis for much of this support. R. James Woolsey, former Director of Central Intelligence, wrote that, “over the long run, this movement is in many ways the most dangerous of the ideological enemies we face. . . . Al Qaeda and the Wahhabis share essentially the same underlying totalitarian theocratic ideology. It is this common Salafist ideology that the Wahhabis have been spreading widely—financed by three to four billion dollars a year from the Saudi government and wealthy individuals in the Middle East over the last quarter century—to the madrassas of Pakistan, the textbooks of Turkish children in Germany, and the mosques of Europe and the U.S.”

Moreover, as stated in an open Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing concerning the “World Wide Threat” by former Director of National Intelligence and then Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte: “There are private Saudi citizens who still engage in these kinds of donations [in which money is transferred back door to terrorists].”

The influence of Saudi and Middle Eastern money is felt by India as well. Lashkar-i-Tayyaba, accused by India of being responsible for the Mumbai attacks that took place in November 2008, was formed in 1991 in the Kunar province of Afghanistan by Hafiz Muhammad Saeed, a Pakistani cleric who is a follower of the Ahle Hadith Sunni tradition of Islam, which, according to Farhan Bokhari writing in the *Financial Times*, “bears close resemblance to the Wahhabi Sunni traditions practiced in Saudi Arabia.” Perhaps Woolsey got it right but, if we face an ideological threat, a primarily military response will not succeed in changing people’s minds.

The Obama Administration, which has inherited the post-American invasion mess made of Afghanistan, basically has conceded that the war is not winnable in military terms. Hence, the objective is to secure an Afghanistan that will not be a base for Islamic terrorism. Since any withdrawal or negotiated settlement is likely to leave the Taliban in control of most of the country, this goal, too, appears, unachievable.

What then are the real interests of the U.S. in the subcontinent? America naturally supports India, the largest democracy in the world. Pakistan, though, is quite worrisome. It is a nuclear-armed country and, if its secular (and unstable) government falls to radical Islam, the world well could face its worst terrorist nightmare. Thus, whatever strategy is followed in Afghanistan must enhance the stability of secular government in Pakistan.

The power of petro-dollars

First, petro-dollar funding for terrorism, particularly to Pakistan and Afghanistan, must be cut off. This will not be easy given the structure of oil markets and the world’s dependence on Middle Eastern oil. The Saudis, because of their vast reserves and spare capacity, essentially control that market. Although far from being the intellectual center of the Arab world—a position long held by Egypt—Saudi Arabia is considered, even by the Iranians (who are not Arabs), to be the leader of the Arab and Muslim worlds. According to Turki al-Faisal—former director of Saudi intelligence and onetime ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the U.S.—Pres. Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nijad of Iran wrote a letter in January 2009 to King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia explicitly recognizing this leadership. This preeminent status is based on one thing only: oil and the money it generates.

U.S. and European energy policy must change if the flow of petro-dollars to radical Islamic jihadists is to be curtailed; the only long-term hope lies in reducing the demand for Middle Eastern oil. This, though, looks to be an impossible task—even though the U.S. has vast reserves of oil in the form of shale deposits—because of the way oil markets are structured. Only a large-scale, government-funded program to help companies develop shale reserves—despite likely price manipulation by OPEC—could alter this constraint. Despite the fact that the U.S. is spending far more in terms of money and lives to protect the oil supply, such a program would have little chance of passing in Congress. Instead, the nation seems to be intent on chasing the chimera of plug-in hybrids powered by wind generators and solar power—a fantasy of those who eschew basic arithmetic.

Prior to 2005, Al Qaeda and the Taliban were not close; the Afghans never did trust the Al Qaeda foreigners. However, the two have come together, at least along the Afghan-Pakistani border, which justifiably is known as the world’s most dangerous hot spot. It appears that the two are collaborating on operations and that “Taliban insurgents have adopted Al Qaeda tactics and techniques. This seems strong evidence that Taliban fighters have been trained by Al Qaeda veterans,” relates Marc Sageman in *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century*.

However, “the mutual dislike and distrust between Pushtuns and foreigners prevents the

Taliban from truly merging with Al Qaeda. The Pushtun Al Qaeda members have a dual loyalty and, if push comes to shove, they will again betray the foreigners, as they did in the fall of 2001.”

Since, in terms of international terrorism, Al Qaeda and the Taliban have very different capabilities and interests, it is important that U.S. policy be directed at driving a wedge between the two. It is, after all, Al Qaeda that now has the international franchise on Islamic terrorism, not the Taliban. Using the differences between radical Islamic groups around the world to further American interests should be a general policy. While such groups have similar ideologies, often based on the intolerant Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, they are very different in their structure, capabilities, and goals. Exploiting these differences can prevent a coalescing of these groups into a more coherent and effective force.

Even if such a policy is successful, it may not be—at this point—enough to stabilize Pakistan. Whatever stability does exist appears to be due to a deal between the Taliban and the Pakistani army and the Inter-Services Intelligence agency: if the Taliban do not attack the state of Pakistan, it is free to operate in the tribal areas and across the border in Afghanistan.

Given the current financial crisis, it may not be possible for the U.S. to continue the hemorrhage of funds that a long-term presence in Afghanistan entails. The effects of a massive failure of the American economy, and the likely isolationism that such a failure would engender, could have far worse effects on the rest of the world than a withdrawal from Afghanistan. There only is one real hope: the dilemma of maintaining a stable secular government in Pakistan must be internationalized and the U.S. needs to initiate a phased withdrawal of combat troops from the region. Moreover, the problem of the spread of radical Islamic ideology must be dealt with by Muslims—and the U.S. explicitly must make this clear to the Arab and Islamic world.

The spread of the intolerant Wahhabi form of Islam has been going on for far too long for Western policies to be at its root. It is time that Muslims stopped blaming the Christian and secular West for the deficiencies of their own societies. Only moderate Muslims can stop the spread of radical Islam and, if they continue to shirk their responsibility—as they largely have done since even well before 9/11—there almost certainly will be a clash of civilizations, as well as widespread suffering, not only on the part of the West, but especially among Muslims. ★

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