

On Line Book Club Transcription
The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11
By Lawrence Wright
Participants- Jay Lenrow and Professor Steven David

JL:

Welcome to the second Johns Hopkins book club of 2010. I am Jay Lenrow, a graduate of the class of 1973 and an officer of the alumni council. We are here in the Mattin Center on the Homewood campus in the Digital Media Center on a beautiful 75 degree spring afternoon, which is a very welcome change after the 81 inches of snow that fell in Baltimore this winter. Hopkins sophomore Buddy Sola is taping this talk today and it will be available to you on the website in transcribed form as well.

It is a pleasure to introduce our faculty host, Professor Steven David, who will discuss this month's selection, *The Looming Tower: Al Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, by Lawrence Wright. Dr. David is Vice Dean for Programs and Centers and Professor of International Relations, Security Studies in Comparative Politics at Johns Hopkins. A graduate of Union College and Stanford University, he received his doctorate from Harvard and has taught at Johns Hopkins since 1981. He is also the Director of the Jewish Studies Program at Johns Hopkins and Director of the Woodrow Wilson Undergraduate Fellowship Program. Additionally, he has served as a consultant to the Department of Defense and to the Central Intelligence Agency. Please welcome Dr. Steven David.

Although the role of Al Qaeda and the 19 terrorists who hijacked four commercial American Airliners in 2001 is generally known, there is still much not known about this shadowy organization that continually morphs. This book covers the road that led to 9/11, in particular the role of former Egyptian pediatrician, Dr. Iman Al Zawahiri. Lawrence Wright shows how the policies of the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Pakistan, to name a few, have the unintended consequence of nurturing the creation of an organization that regularly commits murder in the name of religion. Dr. David, could you please share with our listeners two passages that you believe are representative of the author's writings and discuss why you chose them?

SD:

I'd be happy to do so. The first passage is on page 194, and it's the second paragraph in the book and it begins this way:

"Why did these men (referring to the hijackers) turn against America, a highly religious country that had so recently been their ally in Afghanistan? In large part it was because they saw America as the locus of Christian power. Once, the piety of the Muslim mujahideen and the Christian leaders of the United States government had served as a bond between them. Indeed, mujahideen leaders had been considerably romanticized in the American press and had made tours through American churches, where they were lauded for their spiritual courage in the common fight against Marxism and godlessness. But Christianity— especially the evangelizing American variety— and Islam were obviously competitive faiths. Viewed through the eyes of men who were spiritually anchored in the 7th century,

Christianity was not just a rival, it was the arch enemy. To them, the Crusades were a continual historical process that would never be resolved until the final victory of Islam. They bitterly perceived the contradiction embodied by Islam's long, steady retreat from the gates of Vienna, where on September 11th – that now resonant date – in 1683, the king of Poland began the battle that turned back the farthest advance of the Muslim armies. For the next 300 years, Islam would be over shadowed by the growth of Western Christian societies. Yet Bin Laden and his Arab Afghans believed that, in Afghanistan, they had turned the tide and that Islam was again on the march.”

My second paragraph is on page 355 and it's at the very end.

“This is the view of some very bitter FBI investigators, who wonder why they were never informed of the existence of al-Qaeda operatives inside America. Mihdhar and Hazmi (Referring to the two hijackers that had been in America for quite some time) arrived nineteen months before 9/11. The FBI had all the authority it needed to investigate these men and learn what they were up to, but because the CIA failed to divulge the presence of two active members of al-Qaeda, the hijackers were free to develop their plan until it was too late to stop them.”

JL:

Starting with that second quote, I noted that Wright spends a lot of time on the story of John O'Neill who was the Senior FBI agent who tried to raise the alarm about Bin Laden early on and how he was thwarted in those efforts. He also details meetings that O'Neill had with the CIA where the CIA counterparts knew at the time that they were withholding vital information and wasn't it a sad irony that O'Neill left the FBI and ended up perishing in the World Trade Center? The entire issue of the lack of the cooperation is one that we've heard discussed time and again in the press. From your perspective and having been an insider as a consultant, is that appreciably better than it was ten years ago?

SD:

I should qualify what I'm saying. I'm not really an insider. Being a sporadic consultant is not in the bowels of the government, but I am concerned that the kind of issues written up in *The Looming Tower* about the lack of cooperation and the lack of sharing information and the bureaucratic politics are still very much with us. And what frightens me is the so called Christmas bomber in Detroit, the young man from Africa who had a bomb hidden in his underwear, whose father had gone to the American Embassy in Nigeria to warn the Americans that his son was a threat. And yet despite this warning, despite the fact that this young man bought a one-way ticket with cash, he was allowed to board the aircraft without any special searches or scrutiny. And everyone had a reason, everyone had an excuse, it was my job, it was their job, and so on, but it was so reminiscent of 9/11 that it was very frightening and we wonder if we have learned anything.

JL:

The first quote where you discussed the concept of the United States as the central Christian nation is also an interesting one. When you look at the backgrounds of a number of the key players in *The Looming Tower* and you note that significant numbers of them spent time in this country, I guess the perception they had of American Christianity included both the pious portions as well as those portions

of our society that they saw as, for lack of a better term, less pious and somewhat more corrupt in a moral sense than the type of Islam they professed. How did that help shape al-Qaeda in its early adaptation and some of the thinking of its leaders?

SD:

Well, it's interesting in that as that passage suggests, in earlier times many Muslims saw America as a strong counterpoint to the Soviet Union as a God fearing country, that while not Islamic were still not atheistic and Godless. But you have a group within the Islamic community, spurred on by extremist beliefs, often financed directly or indirectly by some of the more extreme elements in the Islamic community, that see any deviation from extreme virulent Islam as unacceptable and something that had to be addressed. I chose these two passages in that they indicate to me responses to two of the central puzzles of 9/11. The first passages being, why do they hate us? Why would these nineteen people hijack planes, brutally kill people and then fly these planes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon? Is it because of what America does in terms of our policies in the Middle East and elsewhere, or is it because of who we are, a Judeo-Christian western country? The second passage addresses another important puzzle and that is, why didn't we stop them? Why, given the 30-40 billion dollars that we spend on intelligence, why did we fail to see the warning signs that in retrospect seemed so clearly there? And I think *The Looming Tower* does a good job, especially in the first one and in the other one as well as confronting these two puzzles and at least giving the beginnings of responses to them.

JL:

One of the interesting characters that I frankly had not heard much about was sheik Abdullah Azzam and his early influence on Bin Laden and the interplay and jealousy by Zawahiri, with regard to Azzam. How do you think that played into the direction that al-Qaeda took?

SD:

Well, Azzam, if I recall, is a Palestinian extremist who had a strong influence on Bin Laden as did Zawahiri. What you had in a sense was a struggle for Bin Laden's soul, a battle as to whether the Islamic movement should fight against what they consider Israeli occupation and the existence of the state of Israel, the existence of apostate regimes, what they feel are apostate regimes, or should it go for the so called foreign, the United States and the West. And too often, when we look at al-Qaeda and Bin Laden, we assume it came out of nowhere and all of a sudden they simply just hated America, when in fact this book, *The Looming Tower*, demonstrates that certainly in Bin Laden's early stages, he was much more focused on local issues dealing with the Middle East rather than hatred against America. That developed later. And the battle for his mind and soul by people like Zawahiri and Azzam and others, illustrates that.

JL:

It seems as though the governments in Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, to name two, have done almost a remarkable job in deflecting the anger toward them. The Egyptians seem to be in the crux of all this also, and deflecting it toward the United States and the West in a way to protect their own regimes?

SD:

Oh yes, you do have an instance where certainly the Saudis and, to a certain extent the Pakistanis, have indirectly supported and forced the extremist groups in the belief that this will deflect attention away from them. The problem that they have come to learn is that these extremist groups, once established, are going to strike out of their regimes as well. The Saudis faced a series of brutal attacks in 2003 and 2004. The Pakistanis who have embraced the Afghan Taliban have found out that the Taliban within their own country are enemies of their Pakistani government as well as the United States. So they're finding it difficult to ride these tigers. I think the Saudis are trying to step back a little from their funding of these extremist madrassas, the Islamic schools that have served as a hot bed of Islamic extremism. The notion that you can somehow support these extremist groups at arm's length and buy them out has proven not to be accurate.

JL:

One of the reviewers wrote that those regimes deflected the tip of the Jihadist spear away from Islamabad, Lahore and Karachi toward Kabul, New York and London and that goes to what you were just saying.

SD:

But that spear has a way of turning back and that's what these governments have seen as well.

JL:

I'm not sure we've seen the last that, that challenge to those governments. The book, *Milestones*, Qutb's book, seems to have been a seminal work. Can you discuss that a little?

SD:

Qutb is an Egyptian Islamic scholar of the Salafi School. By that, as I understand it, he believes that the Middle East has to go back to a pure Islam, the Islam that existed at the time of the prophet Mohammed in the 7th Century, and that the regimes throughout the Middle East in fact are not truly Islamic including even the Saudi regime, that they just have a veneer of being Islamic, but they really are in bed with the West and have to be overthrown. And Sayyid Qutb was a prisoner in Egypt, he was an opponent of Nasser and while in Egyptian prisons he was tortured and brutalized and wrote a series of books and wrote voluminously on his views. He was executed by Nasser. He had a chance to get out of that execution by repenting and joining the Nasserite government, and he refused and was hung as a result. But his works have been the guideposts of the Islamic movement, certainly of Osama Bin Laden, Zawahiri and many others who we would consider the extreme Islamic school were very much influenced by him. One other note I should mention is Sayyid Qutb spent a couple years in the United States in Greeley, Colorado, in one of the more traditional, provincial parts of America, and yet he was still appalled by what he saw – men and women dancing together and some drinking and this kind of thing. And I think in America we have this view that if only people got to know us they would love us and want to be like us, and yet you have people like Qutb and a number of hijackers who spent considerable time in the United States and yet this did nothing to deflect their hatred. In fact in some cases it reinforced it against what America is and what America stands for.

JL:

I understood that Al-Zawahiri's uncle was one of Qutb's pupils and so there was even a linkage between al-Zawahiri who was in his middle teens and Qutb's death. That kind of spurred on al-Zawahiri's contempt for the regime in Egypt.

SD:

That's right. And I think that this gets at one of the critical questions that is worthy of discussion when people look at this book is what I alluded to earlier. To what extent do they hate us for our policies – by us, I mean America, our American policies – or for what we are? And in a sense the question matters because if it is a question of policies, we can think about changing them. Might not be a smart thing to do. Osama Bin Laden has made a number of demands that we should stop our support of Israel, conservative Arab regimes, stop meddling in Iraq and elsewhere and also get our troops out of Saudi Arabia. And you can reasonably think, can we deflect his anger and hostility by changing or modifying those policies? I for one think that would be a big mistake. I don't think you send a signal out there that if you want to change policies, you kill 3,000 innocent Americans. But nevertheless, that's do-able. But what I think *The Looming Tower* shows is that it's more than what America does, it's what America is. The fact that we are Western and somewhat a Judeo-Christian, secular in parts, country that gives equal rights to women, tolerates different points of views, is serious about gay rights, allows pornography and religious pluralism, that all the things we are drives Bin Laden and his followers crazy. But I think the broader issue is, if that's who we are, since we are not going to close up shop and become Taliban, there really isn't a lot we can do to persuade Bin Laden and his followers not to attack us. What we have to do is try to prevent them from doing so, either by using pre-emptive strikes, such as we have with the drone aircraft in Afghanistan, better defenses, border controls as such, but the notion that somehow if America were somehow harsher on Egypt and tougher on Israel that we could stop being a target of these people, I think, is horribly misguided.

JL:

In particular, you have to wonder if Israel didn't exist, I don't think it would change the philosophy of a group like al-Qaeda.

SD:

Clearly al-Qaeda is very angry at Americans in their support for Israel, but bear in mind they are not just opposed to the support of Israel, they want Israel to die and end its existence, and I don't think that is something I see America doing. But it goes well beyond Israel, as they are very open as to what they want to do. They want to establish a Muslim rule throughout much of the world, at least in areas that used to have Muslim rule, and that controls the entire Middle East and goes through to Spain. And there is a belief amongst some of the more extreme Muslims that once a land has gone under Muslim control, as Spain was, it can never and should never go back and it is never legitimate for it to remove itself from Muslim rule. But I do want to be careful. We are not talking about Muslims in general. I mean most Muslims are not supportive of al-Qaeda, they are not members of al-Qaeda, and they don't like what al-Qaeda does. But there is a significant extremist element that at least in the past had been supported by the wealth and influence of countries like Saudi Arabia, which have hijacked the Islamic religion, which

for the most part is a gentle and tolerant faith. They have hijacked it to pursue these nefarious ends and one can imagine if you had extremist ultra-orthodox Jews with money and influence and control over a state or fundamentalist Christians, they could pick out passages in the Hebrew Bible or New Testament that would justify the most awful, awful policies and that's what these extremists have done.

JL:

I think Wright does a good job of picking out ways that several of the people we've mentioned have twisted passages from the Koran to suit their own purposes. And as we've seen throughout history, although religion sometimes makes a good excuse for some of these nefarious actions, it's not necessary.

SD:

That's right, that's right and again it is important to note that in any great religion, you can selectively twist, interpret, extract passages that will justify the most horrific things and that is what they have done.

JL:

The portrait of Bin Laden is also very interesting. I guess most Americans see him as this terribly ominous figure, but Wright almost makes him more of a figure head whose accomplishments are more legendary in his own mind than in reality.

SD:

Yes, Wright does a good job in showing that Bin Laden's exploits in Afghanistan were not as heroic or major of a deal as perhaps Bin Laden or his followers would have us believe. But he also portrays Bin Laden in some respects in a somewhat favorable light, not his views or what he's done, but after all Bin Laden could have led a very cushy life. He was a multi-millionaire. His father was a central figure in the Saudi establishment. Bin Laden Construction built much of the infrastructure in Saudi Arabia. So Bin Laden was worth and may still be worth hundreds of millions of dollars. He could have acted as many Saudi princes did, wiling away the time in the French Riviera with yachts and so forth, and I think part of his appeal is that he did not do that. That he led a very aesthetic life, that he was not personally corrupt and that he was a man of sincere religious beliefs, the fact is that they are what they are. Maybe it didn't penetrate people to the extent that it should, but you could certainly see why many saw him as a leader to be emulated.

JL:

That wealth is also an important point because I see two things resulting from that – one is Zawahiri's desire to create his own force using Bin Laden's wealth, and the other is the manner in which that wealth has essentially created this organization in some regards as mercenaries getting paid a fairly princely sum for their society to be Jihadist warriors.

SD:

I wouldn't want to push that too much because I think a lot of the true believers of al Qaeda are certainly not in it for the money. They really believe that America and the West and Christianity are evil and have to be fought and resisted. Nevertheless, you need money to do things. Even 9/11, they estimate, cost \$400,000-500,000, and in the case of 9/11 they needed to send people to flight schools, they needed to support them while they lived in the United States, get travel documents, bribe leaders. You need money, not huge amounts, but substantial amounts of money to do these things, and Bin Laden was able to do that. And one of the points that Lawrence Wright makes is that Bin Laden has been central to the success and existence of al Qaeda, that without bin Laden al Qaeda probably would not have existed. It would have splintered into a variety of groups and not been in a situation where it could have mounted very sophisticated 9/11 campaigns. In a related situation, that raises the question of whether the United States was being a bit too cautious when we had a chance to kill Bin Laden on several occasions. And as the Lawrence Wright book points out in retrospect, very painfully, we had Bin Laden in our sights, and we believed to have him in our sight several times, and because of either legal, moral, or political concerns, we decided not to do it and as a result he was allowed to live and perpetuate the horrors of 9/11.

JL:

Isn't it somewhat ironic that those moral constraints by this society that he abhors don't contrast fairly well with his own lack of constraints on who is fair game and actually saved his life.

SD:

That's right, that's right and although in retrospect I wish we had a little less moral constraints, Bin Laden clearly has not moral constraints to do terrible harm to the United States. I mean one of the areas that I teach at Johns Hopkins is nuclear weapons and one of the points I try to convey to my students is that the world they live in today is more dangerous in terms of a nuclear/biological/chemical attack than the world I grew up in. And although during the Cold War there were many more nuclear weapons held principally by the United States and Soviet Union, those that held those weapons were rational, cost calculating actors with a return address.

JL:

Mutually assured destruction.

SD:

Exactly, we could say to the Soviet's as they said to us, if you blow us up, we'll blow you up in return and since they didn't want to be blown up in return they didn't blow us up, even though they always held the capability to do so and do so today. So just imagine if Bin Laden had a nuclear weapon in Baltimore.

JL:

There's nobody to retaliate against. What could we say to him – I'm going to blow this up next week? What could we say to bin Laden? Bin Laden, you better not blow up Baltimore because if you do we'll do what? There's no clear "what" at the end. That's what makes al Qaeda and groups like it so especially dangerous. They are un-deterrable.

JL:

What do you think is the most important issue that you can single out to the readers that they would find really interesting to discuss online?

SD:

Again, I think the two issues that I would look at online: One has to do with the source of the anger of Bin Laden and his followers against America – why is it they hate us so much? And the second online issue is again reflecting the passages I mentioned – why couldn't or didn't America do more before 9/11? 9/11 wasn't the first attack. As the Lawrence Wright book shows in a very clear fashion, our embassies were attacked in Kenya and Tanzania, the U.S.S. Cole was attacked in 2000, all by al Qaeda, and you had people like John O'Neill and other who identify...

JL:

Abdul Akman's attempt to blow up the World Trade Center before.

SD:

Right, that's a good point. That was in 1993. Abdul Akman, I think the nephew of Khalil Rashid Mohammed, tried to blow up the World Trade Center before. So we had ample warnings that they were out there, that they were prepared to use violence against us and yet you get these reports from the FBI. Well, gee, you've got a lot of young Arab men learning to fly planes, this is of concern. I think one of the FBI people went so far as to say we don't want one of them flying a plane into the World Trade Center. And yet these reports were shrugged off or compartmentalized. The CIA didn't talk to the FBI who didn't talk to NSA who didn't talk to the White House. No one talked to anyone and these guys were able to live in America for as long as they did, make their plans and go unimpeded to launch the attacks on 9/11.

JL:

It's also interesting how a lot of these forces seemed to emerge and become stronger after the end of the Cold War.

SD:

Yes, I think the end of the Cold War created space for other movements to emerge, and the collapse of the Soviet Union gave confidence to people like Bin Laden, that these super powers are really paper tigers and they took the credit themselves that it was Bin Laden and his band of maybe a couple of thousand at most Arab fighters brought down the Soviet empire. Of course, this is non-sense. But he believed it or he professed to believe it and his followers believed it and this gave them sustenance to continue what they feel is the next struggle.

JL:

Is there anything else you think the readers would be interested in knowing?

SD:

I think the readers should spend some time with the back of the book first. The back of the book outlines some of the principle characters, many of whom Lawrence Wright interviewed. And it's sometimes hard to keep track of everyone. A lot of people come in and out. So to get a sense of just who is who, it might be good to start with the back of the book first. But I think the readers will find this book to be very accessible, very clear, easy to follow account. And so much of what we read is post 9/11. It's useful to see something that gives us the basis and foundation of what led up to 9/11 and it should be remarked to the readers that the actual attacks of 9/11 are not addressed in this book at all. This is not a book about 9/11, it is a book about what preceded it.

JL:

Well, thank you very much Dr. David. To our participants, please note that Dr. David will be posting approximately six questions on the website for your online discussion during the month of April and he will be lurking in the background adding to that discussion as he can. Thank you very much and we will see you next month.

SD:

Thank you.