

CARLOTTA GALL: ISI SHELTERED BIN LADEN IN PAKISTAN

The New York Times has just released an excerpt from Carlotta Gall's upcoming book *"The Wrong Enemy: America in Afghanistan, 2001-2014"*. Recall that Gall lived in Afghanistan and covered Afghanistan and Pakistan for the Times from 2001-2013 (Declan Walsh also covered Pakistan from inside Pakistan until he was expelled just before the election in 2013). The biggest revelation in the excerpt is that Pakistan knew about, and Pakistan's intelligence agency, the ISI, actively sheltered, Osama bin Laden when he was in hiding in Pakistan.

Gall claims that then-ISI head Ahmed Shuja Pasha had direct knowledge of bin Laden's presence:

Soon after the Navy SEAL raid on Bin Laden's house, a Pakistani official told me that the United States had direct evidence that the ISI chief, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, knew of Bin Laden's presence in Abbottabad. The information came from a senior United States official, and I guessed that the Americans had intercepted a phone call of Pasha's or one about him in the days after the raid. "He knew of Osama's whereabouts, yes," the Pakistani official told me. The official was surprised to learn this and said the Americans were even more so. Pasha had been an energetic opponent of the Taliban and an open and cooperative counterpart for the Americans at the ISI. "Pasha was always their blue-eyed boy," the official said. But in the weeks and months after the raid, Pasha and the ISI press office strenuously denied that they had any knowledge of Bin Laden's presence in Abbottabad.

Although Pasha knew, it appears that ISI compartmented the knowledge very carefully:

In trying to prove that the ISI knew of Bin Laden's whereabouts and protected him, I struggled for more than two years to piece together something other than circumstantial evidence and suppositions from sources with no direct knowledge. Only one man, a former ISI chief and retired general, Ziauddin Butt, told me that he thought Musharraf had arranged to hide Bin Laden in Abbottabad. But he had no proof and, under pressure, claimed in the Pakistani press that he'd been misunderstood. Finally, on a winter evening in 2012, I got the confirmation I was looking for. According to one inside source, the ISI actually ran a special desk assigned to handle Bin Laden. It was operated independently, led by an officer who made his own decisions and did not report to a superior. He handled only one person: Bin Laden. I was sitting at an outdoor cafe when I learned this, and I remember gasping, though quietly so as not to draw attention. (Two former senior American officials later told me that the information was consistent with their own conclusions.) This was what Afghans knew, and Taliban fighters had told me, but finally someone on the inside was admitting it. The desk was wholly deniable by virtually everyone at the ISI – such is how supersecret intelligence units operate – but the top military bosses knew about it, I was told.

Gall's reporting on Taliban factions and their madrassas came at great personal risk. This story picks up at a point where her Pakistani colleagues have been picked up by the ISI at the hotel where they were staying and she had been summoned to meet the ISI agents outside:

Before I could reach them, the agents broke through the door of my hotel room. The lintel splintered, and they burst in in a rush, snatching my laptop from my hands. There was an English-speaking officer wearing a smart new khaki-colored fleece. The other three, one of whom had the photographer in tow, were the muscle.

They went through my clothes and seized my notebooks and a cellphone. When one of the men grabbed my handbag, I protested. He punched me twice, hard, in the face and temple, and I fell back onto the coffee table, grabbing at the officer's fleece to break my fall and smashing some cups when I landed. For a moment it was funny. I remember thinking it was just like a hotel-room bust-up in the movies.

Then I flew into a rage, berating them for barging into a woman's bedroom and using physical violence. The officer told me that I was not permitted to visit the neighborhood of Pashtunabad and that it was forbidden to interview members of the Taliban. As they were leaving, I said the photographer had to stay with me. "He is Pakistani," the officer said. "We can do with him whatever we want." I knew they were capable of torture and murder, especially in Quetta, where the security services were a law unto themselves. The story they didn't want out in the open was the government's covert support for the militant groups that were propagating terrorism in Afghanistan and beyond.

The excerpt ends with Gall stating her conclusion is an unpopular one (it's one that certainly doesn't fit with my stance):

When I remember the beleaguered state of

Afghanistan in 2001, I marvel at the changes the American intervention has fostered: the rebuilding, the modernity, the bright graduates in every office. Yet after 13 years, more than a trillion dollars spent, 120,000 foreign troops deployed at the height of the war and tens of thousands of lives lost, Afghanistan's predicament has not changed: It remains a weak state, prey to the ambitions of its neighbors and extremist Islamists. This is perhaps an unpopular opinion, but to pull out now is, undeniably, to leave with the job only half-done.

Meanwhile, the real enemy remains at large.

What Gall elides is that, in the large part, the enemy she speaks of is only our enemy because we are there. To withdraw, especially if done after a negotiated settlement among the governments of Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Taliban, removes their primary reason for fighting us. I wish the people of the region good luck in working toward such a settlement, but the real lesson after thirteen years of war is that we are entrenched in a battle that simply is not ours.