

THE COVER STORY THAT SERVES AS A COVER STORY

Check out this sentence, which appears at the end of the Executive Summary of a document purporting to debunk the “cover stories” of detainees who claimed to have traveled to Afghanistan to teach the Koran.

Mujahideen that traveled to Afghanistan following the attacks of 11 September 2001 did so with the knowledge that Usama Bin Laden and Al-Qaida were the likely perpetrators of the attack.

Note the assumptions. First, that the detainees picked up in Afghanistan were, by definition, mujahadeen. The document doesn't define the term. It does contextualize the term “mujahadeen” within the fight against the Russians, then calls recent “recruits” mujahadeen uncritically. And nowhere in the document does it explain how to assess a detainee's claim that he was not an active fighter, a trainee at an al Qaeda camp, or even a trainee more generally.

Nowhere does the document address evidentiary problems assessing when a detainee left for Afghanistan and/or arrived there and whether the departure preceded 9/11 (though this is one of the least problematic parts of this statement).

As to the claim that detainees that traveled to Afghanistan after 9/11 did so “with the knowledge that Usama Bin Laden and Al-Qaida were the likely perpetrators of the attack”? Here's the shoddy proof the document offers for the claim that these detainees assumed to be trained fighters knew of 9/11 and Osama bin Laden's role in it.

There was already speculation on 11 September 2001 as to the origins of the

perpetrators of the attacks, and the US Government publicly named Usama bin Laden and Al-Qaida no later than 12 September 2001. Even before this announcement, there were communications between extremists in Afghanistan and elsewhere identifying UBL as the sponsor of the attacks. Prior to the attacks, the recruits would have no way of knowing they would soon be engaged in a battle with a US-led coalition because of the deaths of thousands of innocent people. This does not decrease the recruits [sic] involvement with terrorist groups including Al-Qaida, however, as their travel to Afghanistan and their room and board in the months following their arrival were paid for by the Al-Qaida, the Taliban, and or other supporting extremist groups [sic] fund raising activities and the recruit elected to remain in Afghanistan. Some detainees state they attempted to leave but could not, this too is part of their cover story to show they were not in Afghanistan of their own free will. After 11 September 2001, the new recruits could no longer claim ignorance to the actions of Al-Qaida and the likelihood of hostilities resulting from the US desire to bring those responsible to justice. Therefore, especially following the attacks, Muahideen traveling to Afghanistan did so with the distinct desire to defend UBL and his organization.

Now, there are a lot of basic problems with the claim about speculation that al Qaeda executed the attacks just after 9/11, not least that key players within the Bush Administration were fighting the argument at the time that al Qaeda caused the attack. Ultimately, this amounts to an argument that because Richard Clarke was sure al Qaeda caused the attack, it meant the Americans generally were loudly backing that

certainty rather than, for example, trying to turn this into a war against Iraq.

Then there's the problem that intelligence in US possession by the time this was issued in August 2004 made clear that even Osama bin Laden himself did not expect the US to retaliate as they did. If he was expecting the US to respond with limited missile strikes, then how they hell are purported recruits (ignoring the problem of proving they were recruits) supposed to expect the full response the US made?

Then there's the implicit problem—with the reference to Al-Qaida "and or other supporting extremist groups"—that many of these purported mujahadeen weren't even purportedly training with al Qaeda. Even if they knew al Qaeda carried out the attack, where is the proof that because the US would, at some point in the future, assert that those "supporting extremist groups" were affiliated with the attack, recent recruits of those "supporting" groups had to have known that the US would ultimately deem those groups as supporting as well?

But the really big problem here is the failure to even attempt to establish what the media/communications consumption of someone purporting to be teaching the Koran in rural Afghanistan would have, and whether it might credibly include awareness of what Richard Clarke was arguing within the Situation Room of the White House in the days right after 9/11 (not least given the assertion that a number of these detainees had limited schooling). I mean, most Americans on September 12, 2001, watching footage of the attack over and over on CNN, probably didn't know that al Qaeda caused the attack; many still doubt it did. But we're insisting someone reading the Koran in Afghanistan would know?

It all feels very familiar. When confronted with refutations of their claims that Iraq had WMD before the war, the US repeatedly attributed those refutations—by people like Hans Blix and Mohammed el Baradei (not people who happened to

leave for Afghanistan at an inauspicious time)—to Iraqi cover stories. Anything that didn't confirm their assumptions was, by definition, a cover story. Only even with all the intelligence claims on Iraq that have been released, we never got to see how shoddy the logic those arguing it was all a cover story really was.

Seeing the logic, though, I'm not sure which is more appalling and embarrassing: that many people treated this as valid analysis? Or that someone had either such bad logical skills or such a desire to generate propaganda that he'd consider this report a coherent argument?