Review of 500 Days: Secrets and Lies in the Terror Wars


Arguably 500 Days: Secrets and Lies in the Terror Wars may be the most important book to come out of not only the current Global War on Terror, but perhaps into the future. Eichenwald’s has boldly staked out a position that is only perhaps the fringes of the two sides of the political spectrum can truly rail against. What we have is a carefully detailed exposition of what went on in the Bush Administration and the United States Government shortly before the attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequent policy decisions. It is my conjecture that many of the actions undertaken by this administration would have been repeated in large part by any other at that moment in time—a question that Eichenwald never once raises but should have. I think to be generous, some of the folks in the book have made decisions they thought were in the nation's best interests.

Eichenwald’s book is truly panoramic and global in its sweep. The reader is treated to the critical, and not so critical events spanning from Syria, Afghanistan, Bali to the Anthrax letters in DC. The scope of Eichenwald’s book is indeed ambitious, and as one who worked on aspects at different levels and was affected by the actions he describes, the tale and narrative he weaves is both compelling and morbidly fascinating. When one reads early on that John Ashcroft, the Attorney General of the United States, didn’t even include terrorism as one of his top priorities, you simply have to ponder what the train of thinking was to reach that conclusion, after the USS Cole less than a year earlier. Or comments like the FBI Special Supervisory Agent Michael Maltbie who denied the request for a search warrant of the 911 hijackers, indicating the malaise and slothful indifference to thinking outside the box was deep seated in the Federal bureaucracy.

Giving “intelligence” from Syria the same validity and credence as intelligence produced by the American and Western Intelligence Communities would allow us to be seduced by fabrications of those who were telling their Syrian torturers what they thought they wanted to hear. It boggles the mind that no one asked to sit in on one of these interrogation sessions. Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia were notorious for the human rights violations in their penal system—how did no one make the logical jump and assume that interrogations of suspected terrorists would go yet further south than that?

There are some characters who come off quite poorly in the book. Perhaps the worst of the worst is John Yoo, who seemed to think that he could redefine the established law of the land. George Tenet comes off poorly, a bureaucrat trying to regain credibility after failing to protect the nation. Tenet aggressively pursued waterboarding at Guantanamo Bay, spearheaded charitably by what one might label a crackpot psychologist. Interrogations went from brutal to more than illegal,

doi: 10.18278/gsis.1.2.6
repeatedly slamming detainees into the plywood walls, in the name of truth seeking. Even better, try and keep track of the numbers as they grow—the final count reaches 183 times on one individual.

What the book does do is paint a picture in narrative form of much of what I had known at the classified level, but in a manner that encompasses the totality of the subject. The fight over waterboarding in retrospect could not have been any more mishandled than it was by supposedly constitutional lawyers. What makes the reader cringe while reading the sections on water boarding is not the technique per se, but the fact that it generally is shown to be seldom effective. In fact, what we had was a group of people who simply decided to “Cowboy Up” on how interrogations would be conducted. In fact it is easy to see this type of thinking and distinct lack of understanding of the value of real interrogations that leads to real intelligence ends up in the sewer of Abu Grab?

But Eichenwald, for all the good stuff stuff, perhaps, missed some real obvious things. With but a little homework, he would have discovered that the U.S. ARMY Reserves have many professional interrogators. Had he then used that to ask why the CIA chose to go down the dark path they did with a crackpot, his story would have been immeasurably strengthened. Nor does the author give the Manchester Manual the proper amount of analysis, instead consigning it conveniently to an appendix, where most readers will simply ignore it—but shouldn't.

If there is but one book Americans should read on the events post 9/11, 500 Days is the one. It is the benchmark for books to be measured against in terms of in-depth and relatively unbiased reporting. It is compelling and simply very hard to put down. It is easy to see a linear path of the adoption of these techniques to believing in the necessity of the war in Iraq.

Robert Smith