

The United States and the Taliban before
and after 9/11

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If writing a book is a lonely process, then it is perhaps loneliest for its bystanders. Amanda Toronto, Lucy Cristol, and Milo Cristol bore the brunt of my physical and mental absence and they have been tolerant and forgiving.

This book is dedicated to them.

PREFACE

My first day of college was 3 August 1996. Some colleges may have had high speed internet then, but Bard College in rural Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, did not. There were two people in a room with one phone line. Such a thing is hard to imagine now. The internet was too slow to support graphics on the web, so we used a text-based browser called Lynx. Such a thing is even harder to imagine now. There was no information superhighway. It was an information creek. My main exposure to news of the outside world came each night at midnight when I listened to the BBC World Service on the local National Public Radio station. That was the first time I heard of the Taliban. For those first few weeks of college, I listened as the Taliban got closer and closer to Kabul, Afghanistan's capital, and I remember when Kabul fell on 27 September 2001. And at some point, soon after, I found other things to do in college besides lie in bed listening to the BBC.

In my second semester of graduate school at Yale University, I attended a debate between Sayed Rahmatullah Hashemi, an advisor to Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, and Harold Koh, a professor at Yale Law School who later became assistant secretary of state for human rights in the Obama Administration. Professor Koh spoke in legal and academic terms. His arguments were based in theory and legality. Mr. Rahmatullah articulated his positions clearly and convincingly. His arguments were rooted in the reality on the ground. Koh was clearly correct on the merits, but Rahmatullah handily won the debate. There was a reception for the foreign dignitary upstairs where I discovered that the

Taliban were regular people, and not the monsters I'd believed them to be. Rahmatullah was neither a naive simpleton nor a cartoon dictator. It was my first taste of public diplomacy and lessons from the experience stick with me more than 17 years later.

On my way to Prof. Jon Butler's class, "Religion and Modernity in Europe and America," I heard a radio report that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. A terrible accident, we held class as normal and only afterward discovered what happened. The Taliban did not carry out 9/11, but they were back in the news. They refused to turn over Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the attacks, and the United States invaded Afghanistan on 7 October 2001. Kabul fell (again) on 13 November 2001.

In the following years, I finished my M.A., got married, had a daughter, finished my Ph.D., and had a son. Now my children are in elementary school, the United States has 15,000 troops in Afghanistan, and the Taliban just agreed to a "ceasefire" for Eid al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan. The quotation marks are because the Taliban said that the ceasefire did not apply to foreign forces.

After the US invasion of Afghanistan, I heard little about Washington's relationship with the Taliban before 9/11, but I knew one existed. I knew Rahmatullah did not travel from Kandahar just to talk to a bunch of Yale students. I wanted to learn more about that relationship, specifically why the US did not recognize the Taliban government as the legitimate government of Afghanistan when it could make a compelling legal case for recognition. President Bill Clinton's non-recognition of the Taliban government became a case study in my doctoral dissertation completed at the University of Bristol in 2012—"American Diplomatic Recognition and Classical Realist International Relations Theory." This book is an expansion of that case study.

I am a professional critic. I can explain why policymakers' decisions are bad without having to offer any helpful alternatives. In my dissertation, I argued that the Clinton Administration's non-recognition of the Taliban government was a mistake, and that it would have been better to recognize the Taliban government. My 2012 argument was that the Clinton Administration was too influenced by domestic politics, and that the influence of the Feminist Majority Foundation, while well meaning, was ultimately negative. The reality is more complicated.

The US and the Taliban held countless meetings, in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, and even in the United States, but could never come to a

workable arrangement. The Taliban's primary interest was for the US to extend diplomatic recognition to the Taliban government in Kabul. America's primary interest was for the Taliban to expel Osama bin Laden. This book examines both why diplomatic recognition was so important to the Taliban government and why the US refused to recognize it. It is a story about people making reasonable and defensible decisions that ultimately led to poor policy outcomes.

Chapter 1 focuses on diplomatic recognition of new governments, the competing theories of diplomatic recognition, and the benefits that come from recognition. Chapter 2 is about the rise of the Taliban and the possibility of a positive and productive relationship between the Taliban and the US. Chapter 3 is a history of US/Taliban relations from the fall of Kabul until the Al Qaeda attacks on the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Chapter 4 examines how the US/Taliban relationship evolved in the first year after the embassy attacks. It shows that while the Clinton Administration outwardly opposed recognizing the Taliban government due to its treatment of women, behind-the-scenes it was willing to prioritize bin Laden at the expense of women's rights. Chapter 5 focuses on the deterioration in relations in the two years prior to 9/11. Chapter 6 focuses on 9/11 and the US invasion of Afghanistan. I argue that there was a very brief window in which US recognition of the Taliban government might have prevented Al Qaeda from taking root in Afghanistan, but by 1997 the opportunity had passed and Omar's obstinance meant there was no chance the US would ever recognize the Taliban government. I conclude that President George W. Bush erred by treating terrorists "and those who harbor them" the same way and that the 2001 invasion and occupation of Afghanistan could have been avoided.

The book is almost entirely based on publicly available primary sources and contemporaneous accounts including: declassified government documents, primarily from the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency and located at the National Security Archive at George Washington University; congressional hearing transcripts; presidential speeches and press conferences; and United Nations Security Council transcripts. Some of these had not yet been declassified when I wrote my dissertation. The documents tell a different story than I had anticipated.

This is a story about bad options.

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Jonathan Cristol

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I could not have written this book without the help of some great people and institutions.

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history and international relations theory. Jeremy Cristol is the kind of doctor who can actually help people, and his help with my wrist made it physically possible to write this book. He is also an incredibly generous and loving brother. Rebecca Kittell and James Cristol provided just the right amount of parental encouragement without crossing the line into micromanagement. Hopefully, I will be able to find that line with my own children.

I have been extraordinarily fortunate to benefit from several outstanding research assistants. Madeline de Figueiredo, Anusha Prasad, and Alana Sheppard provided valuable assistance for the original book proposal. Sona Lim, Kayla Straub, Zuwaina Ateig, and Ji Won Lim helped with all of my assorted, simultaneous projects. I am especially grateful to Nada Osman, my LGS research assistant, and Mashell Rahimzadeh, my WPI research assistant. Ms. Osman spent months tracking down sources and collating and organizing thousands of pages of government documents, congressional testimony, UN transcripts, and academic articles. She is reliable and diligent and this could not have been done without her. Ms. Rahimzadeh fact-checked dates, names, and places, and found answers to dozens and dozens of my questions. She is a brilliant copy-editor, artful writer, and excellent guide to Afghan culture. The book is much better because of her help. I am looking forward to seeing great things from all of my past and present RAs (no pressure!). Most importantly, any typos, errors, or inaccuracies are mine and mine alone.

This book began as a chapter of my doctoral dissertation at the University of Bristol under the supervision of Jutta Weldes and Elke Krahmman. I am grateful to them and to my outside examiners Anthony Lang and Ryerson Christie for their valuable comments. Portions of this book were presented as papers at the American Political Science Association Annual Convention in 2010 and at the International Studies Association (ISA) Annual Conventions in 2008 and 2010. I am grateful to the people who showed up and asked tough questions at those panels. The anonymous reviewers for Palgrave gave thoughtful, thorough, and helpful comments.

It was at the ISA 2017 Convention in Baltimore that I met my editor, Anca Pusca, from Palgrave Macmillan. I am grateful to her and to Katelyn Zingg for their encouragement, time, energy, and putting up with my (hopefully relatively brief) delays and my (almost certainly annoying) questions!

Lucy Cristol and Milo Cristol have put up with their father's mental and physical absence for most of their lives. They managed it wonderfully and they are always (kinda) interested in what I am doing, though I suspect they would be happier if I was writing a *Who Was?* book or a My Little Pony graphic novel.

Nothing I do would be possible without the love and support (and editorial guidance) of the brilliant writer Amanda R. Toronto. When she's not around, I, to borrow her phrase, "literally go off the rails." I'm not sure how many wives would tolerate their husband saying, "I need to go away for a week on Tuesday but I can't tell you where and I won't know myself until I get there," or, more frequently, their husband sitting at the dinner table with his face in the computer. I appreciate it. You put up with a lot. I love you.

Thank you all.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Every book involves choices. Here are a few that I made and why I made them.

I cite most government documents without using page or paragraph numbers. If you have ever looked at a pdf of a State Department cable you will understand why. The pagination is confusing and there are multiple options from which to choose. None of the documents are so long that the lack of page or paragraph number presents a problem. **I use uniform, popular spellings across the text, quotes, citations, and titles.** For example, “Osama bin Laden” is popularly spelled with an “O,” but in many government documents it is spelled with a “U.” I have standardized the spelling without indication in each instance. And speaking of Osama bin Laden, I refer to him as “bin Laden,” in deference to the popular nomenclature and not as “Osama,” which would be more culturally appropriate. **I have standardized the spelling of Afghan names.** The names are transliterated and the spelling is often the choice of the author, so for readability, I have used the most common spelling for each person or name. **A note on Afghan naming:** The second component of male names is often treated as a last name. For example, I refer to Sayed Rahmatullah Hashemi as “Rahmatullah,” and Wakil Ahmed Muttawakil as “Ahmed.” **A note on State Department documents:** I have attributed authorship of State Department documents to the person who signed the document, but the reader should be aware that it is often the case that the document was actually written by someone of a lower rank.