



Mon Jul 1, 2002 - Updated at 02:46 PM

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Nov. 27, 2001. 02:00 AM

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Did bin Laden have help from U.S. friends?

By [Thomas Walkom](#)
COLUMNIST

AN INTRIGUING new book, just published in France, details the curiously amicable relationship between the regime of U.S. President George W. Bush and Afghanistan's Taliban, a relationship that turned hostile only after the terror attacks of Sept. 11.

Ben Laden: La Verité Interdite (Bin Laden: The Forbidden Truth) is written by former French spook Jean-Charles Brisard and journalist Guillaume Dasquie. Both are said to be plugged into the murky world of intelligence. During his time with French intelligence, Brisard was regarded as something of an expert on bin Laden's finances.

The nub of their argument is that the Bush regime's attitude toward the Taliban - and even to bin Laden - was driven by the new president's fixation on energy. A stable regime in Afghanistan would allow construction of an oil and gas pipeline from the former Soviet republics in Central Asia to Pakistan and the sea. And initially, Washington's best bet for a stable regime in Afghanistan was the Taliban.

From February, when the Taliban first offered to extradite bin Laden in exchange for U.S. recognition, until August when negotiations stalled, the Bush administration and the government it later labelled a terrorist regime got along just fine.

Indeed, the book quotes John O'Neill, a former director of anti-terrorism for the Federal Bureau of Investigation as complaining that American and Saudi oil interests acting through the U.S. State Department kept interfering with efforts to track down bin Laden.

In particular, the authors say, O'Neill was irked after the State Department refused to let his FBI team return to Yemen to investigate the terrorist bombing of the USS Cole there last year. Frustrated, he quit to take a private sector job. Unfortunately for him, that job was as head of security in New York's World Trade Center. O'Neill was killed on Sept. 11.

Skeptics might argue that his death proved convenient for the authors. Now there is no one to dispute their account of what he said. Certainly, *Bin Laden: The Forbidden Truth* has the whiff of an old-fashioned conspiracy theory starring the usual panoply of villains.

Still, the details that Brisard and Dasquie provide (including the fact that the Taliban hired the niece of former CIA director Richard Helms to orchestrate their publicity) do not contradict what was already known

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about the relationship between Washington and its soon-to-be arch-enemy. In fact, they support it.

Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid's well-regarded book *Taliban: Islam, Oil And The New Great Game in Central Asia* outlines how oil politics has affected U.S. policy in Afghanistan. The Taliban's unprecedented offer to extradite bin Laden to a third country, well before the Sept. 11 attacks, was reported by the Times of London in February. In September, this newspaper reported on the often cozy relationship between Washington and the Taliban.

Last month, the Washington Post reported that Sudan had offered in 1996 to extradite bin Laden, who was wanted at that time for attacks on U.S. servicemen in Saudi Arabia.

However, the U.S. declined that offer. Instead, it agreed with Sudan's decision to deport bin Laden and his entourage to a place where he couldn't do any damage - Afghanistan. The official reason for U.S. reluctance was that it wasn't sure a case against him could stand up in court. Saudi Arabia, the other extradition destination proposed by the Sudanese, refused to take him

But there is a pattern. Earlier this month, the Guardian, a U.K. newspaper, reported that FBI agents had been told by the Bush administration to back off investigating members of the bin Laden clan living in the U.S. In September, the Wall Street Journal documented the lucrative business connections between the bin Laden family and senior U.S. Republicans, including the president's father, George Bush Sr.

What are we to make of all of this? One possible conclusion is that the bin Laden terror problem was allowed to get out of hand because bin Laden, himself, had powerful protectors in both Washington and Saudi Arabia. If that's true, no wonder the Bush administration prefers that he be killed rather than allowed to testify in open court.

The other conclusions - questions really - have to do with the justification for the war on Afghanistan. If the Taliban unilaterally offered in February to extradite bin Laden (an offer they repeated after Sept. 11), were they just kidding? If not, was the war necessary?

This question will become particularly important if the U.S. fails to find the terrorist it says started this war, the man it allowed to go to Afghanistan in the first place.

This weekend, Spain announced it would not extradite suspected Al Qaeda terrorists to the U.S. as long as Bush plans to try such people in military tribunals. We should recall that the Taliban imposed conditions on their extradition offer, too, conditions the U.S. deemed unacceptable. Will Madrid be the anti-terror coalition's next target?

Thomas Walkom's column appears on Tuesday. He can be reached at twalkom@thestar.ca

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