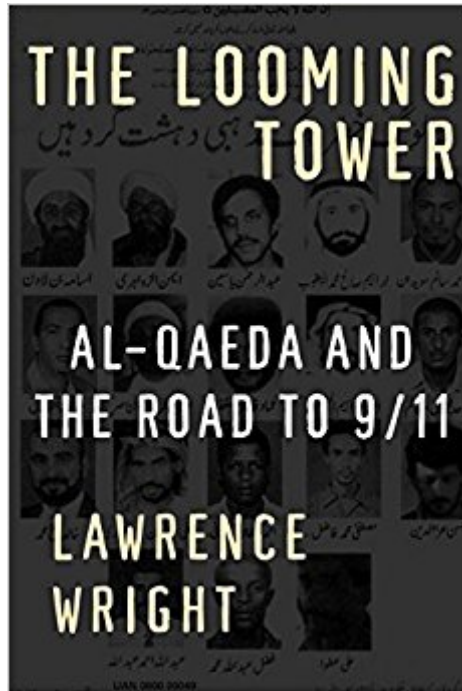




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The Looming Tower



Synopsis

This Pulitzer Prize winner is the basis for the upcoming Hulu series starring Peter Sarsgaard, Jeff Daniels, and Tahar Rahim. A gripping narrative that spans five decades, *The Looming Tower* explains in unprecedented detail the growth of Islamic fundamentalism, the rise of al-Qaeda, and the intelligence failures that culminated in the attacks on the World Trade Center. Lawrence Wright re-creates firsthand the transformation of Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri from incompetent and idealistic soldiers in Afghanistan to leaders of the most successful terrorist group in history. He follows FBI counterterrorism chief John O'Neill as he uncovers the emerging danger from al-Qaeda in the 1990s and struggles to track this new threat. Packed with new information and a deep historical perspective, *The Looming Tower* is the definitive history of the long road to September 11. National Book Award Finalist Updated and with a New Afterword

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Customer Reviews

This is a well-researched, temperate account of how various modern fundamentalist Islamic

movements coalesced under different leaders and became juggernauts moving toward various bombing attacks and finally 9/11. If you often just listen to the news casually, as background, you might not really understand the difference between such groups as Hamas, al Jihad, al-Qaeda, and the Taliban. This book distinguishes those groups by region, history, and leadership so that readers can approach currently unfolding news stories more intelligently.

Looming Tower starts in the early 1950s with Egyptian Sayyid Qutb, telling how his ultimate martyrdom gave impetus to much of modern terrorist activity. Wright proceeds through the formation of the Taliban in the wake of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and on to bin Laden's activities under the al-Qaeda banner. He tells how the latter became in effect, "a death-cult." Enough biographical information is given about each of these leaders to convey a sense of who they were in their personal lives and of the frequent disjunction between what they did publicly and how they lived privately. There isn't a huge amount of psychological analysis of how presumably religious people arrived at the point of justifying mass murder and suicide, but Wright does provide some insights into the process of transformation away from simple, often happy childhood days.

This book is written in straight-forward reportorial style. But it includes enough telling metaphor to graphically illustrate many points. For example, Wright tells how some factions fell away from having a centralized leadership and instead organized themselves into cells. This gave them a "spongy quality, clandestine, hard to combat." With that one word "spongy," Wright conveys the difficulty that U.S. and allied military forces have been up against. The narrative includes some really surprising details about how Western and Middle Eastern cultures can differ in their interpretation of events. I had no idea how the Monica Lewinsky/President Clinton scandal was interpreted by many in the Middle East and how it served to fuel further terrorist activity. Wright also tells of other instances where our failure to speak the language and realize cultural differences led to serious diplomatic and military miscalculations.

The last third of the book moves quickly, almost too quickly, towards 9/11. A lot of it is told from the perspective of FBI investigator John O'Neill. There isn't quite the measured detail here that there is in the first part of the book. I felt a little hurried along. Of course, events themselves were rapidly sweeping towards the terrorists' fearful culmination. But I would have liked to have known somewhat more about how vital information that might have forewarned us got lost in the jostling egos of FBI and CIA operatives. Well, more detail on that score might have made this book too long and was perhaps better saved for separate books.

Looming

Tower's book was first published in 2006, and includes an "Afterword" written in 2011. In that afterword, Wright expresses some optimism that a partial, peaceful resolution might be possible – an optimism that unfortunately doesn't seem justified in light of recent developments. There's a map at the front of the book showing Middle East countries' relationships to each other, and the location of key bases of activity. Wright also provides a list of "Principal Characters" at the back of the book, reminding the reader who's who. Despite the many names in this book, I found that I didn't often have to refer back to that reference section. Wright provides such a clear, chronological account, it was easy to keep track of the key players.

In America we like our villains super. The popular media often paints characters like Osama bin Laden with that brush. Lawrence Wright helpfully avoids such a treatment of bin Laden without dismissing him as an inconsequential madman, which would only be half true. Wright deals with some of the intellectual history leading up to al-Qaeda without overwhelming the reader. The tracing of influential strands emerging out of Egypt was especially helpful. There are some great sub-stories intertwined throughout the book, especially about characters such as bin Laden's father, the rags to riches construction magnate, and the turbulent lives of some of the princes of Saudi Arabia. Wright also intersperses stories of US intelligence efforts to subdue bin Laden, which he ultimately concludes fail because of perpetually elevated walls of miscommunication between the FBI, CIA, and NSA. One of the more compelling and tragic stories woven throughout is the career and personal exploits of John O'Neill of the FBI. Wright argues that perhaps he alone had the force of personality and passion against terrorism to unearth the towers plot had circumstances been slightly different. Instead, his story ends tragically on 9/11 making his contribution all the more relevant to the book's narrative. This book is especially compelling in light of developments after its publishing in 2006. It would be interesting to see of post-script addressing the "Arab Spring," the killing of bin Laden, the rise of ISIS, and the ongoing quagmire in Afghanistan (maybe my biggest critique would be the way Afghanistan is briefly painted as nearly uncomplicatedly successful, but to be fair addressing those issues would go well beyond the scope of his thesis). If you want to watch the news of today intelligently, this book will give you many foundational narratives to draw from.

This book is basically two mini-books. One of which describes the origins of al-Qaeda and its

principal players; the other is the USA spending years bumbling around, trying to figure out what was going on. As an American, this is a frustrating book, as 9/11 could easily have been prevented, the information was out there, hiding in plain sight, as different elements of the American security apparatus hid info from each other and tried to big time each other. It's tough to walk away from the book without that in one's head. Wright also made the wise decision, in my opinion, to basically end the book at 9/11. There is more than enough material for a million other books with what happened after. This book came out over 11 years ago, and I think much of the information is more widely known today, but that probably is in part because of this book. This is still a really good primer on the origins of al-Qaeda, OBL, Zawahiri, and the jihadist ideology which we are obviously still struggling with today. I really think it is something more people should know about, to break away from the dreck that so often pollutes the discussions on this topic from all sides of the spectrum.

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