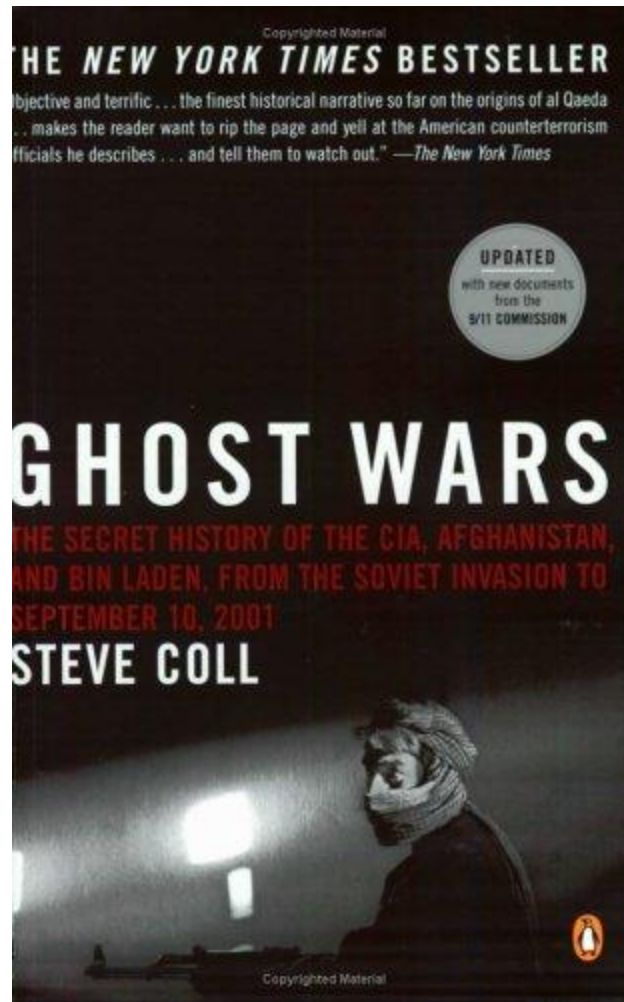


Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001 by Steve Coll



[A Real-Life Spy Thriller](#)

Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* offers revealing details of the CIA's involvement in the evolution of the Taliban and Al Qaeda in the years before the September 11 attacks. From the beginning, Coll shows how the CIA's on-again, off-again engagement with Afghanistan after the end of the Soviet war left officials at Langley with inadequate resources and intelligence to appreciate the emerging power of the Taliban. He also demonstrates how Afghanistan became a deadly playing field for international politics where Soviet, Pakistani, and U.S. agents armed and trained a succession of warring factions. At the same time, the book, though opinionated, is not solely a critique of the agency.

Coll balances accounts of CIA failures with the success stories, like the capture of Mir Amal Kasi. Coll, managing editor for the Washington Post, covered Afghanistan from 1989 to 1992. He demonstrates unprecedented access to records of White House meetings and to formerly classified material, and his command of Saudi, Pakistani, and Afghani politics is impressive. He also provides a seeming insiders perspective on personalities like George Tenet, William Casey, and anti-terrorism czar, Richard Clarke (who seemed to wield enormous power precisely because hardly anyone knew who he was or what exactly he did for a living). Coll manages to weave his research into a narrative that sometimes has the feel of a Tom Clancy novel yet never crosses into excess. While comprehensive, Colls book may be hard going for those looking for a direct account of the events leading to the 9-11 attacks. The CIAs 1998 engagement with bin Laden as a target for capture begins a full two-thirds of the way into Ghost Wars, only after a lengthy march through developments during the Carter, Reagan, and early Clinton Presidencies. But this is not a critique of Colls efforts; just a warning that some stamina is required to keep up. Ghost Wars is a complex study of intelligence operations and an invaluable resource for those seeking a nuanced understanding of how a small band of extremists rose to inflict incalculable damage on American soil. --Patrick OKelley

Personal Review: Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001 by Steve Coll

After 171 reviews, there's not much I can add to what's already been said, but I enjoyed this book so much that I did want to share a few comments. First of all, the style of writing is very engaging - sort of like reading one of Tom Clancy's early novels. Second of all, I did not detect any bias (something I'm always sensitive to when I read history). Third of all, Mr. Coll does an excellent job of helping the reader to keep track of the large cast of characters. So, if you enjoy reading spy thriller novels (like those written by Frederick Forsyth), you might enjoy reading about the REAL THING from an author who can write history that is a real page-turner. Good stuff!

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