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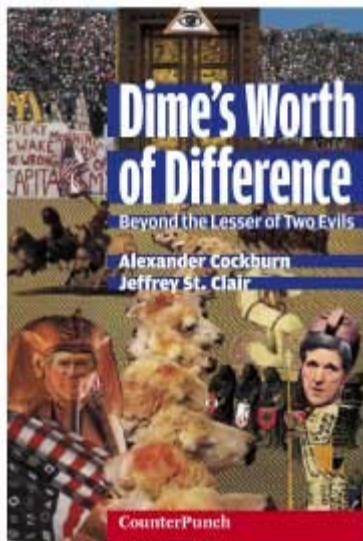
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***Give Him an "F" in the War on Terror***

**How Bush Was Offered Bin Laden and Blew It**

By ALEXANDER COCKBURN  
and JEFFREY ST. CLAIR

George Bush, the man whose prime campaign plank has been his ability to wage war on terror, could have had Osama bin Laden's head handed to him on a platter on his very first day in office, and the offer held good until February 2 of 2002. This is the charge leveled by an Afghan American who had been retained by the US government as an intermediary between the Taliban and both the Clinton and Bush administrations.

**Today's Stories**

Kabir Mohabbat is a 48-year businessman in Houston, Texas. Born in Paktia province in southern Afghanistan, he's from the Jaji clan (from which also came Afghanistan's last king). Educated at

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St Louis University, he spent much of the 1980s supervising foreign relations for the Afghan mujahiddeen, where he developed extensive contacts with the US foreign policy establishment, also with senior members of the Taliban.

After the eviction of the Soviets, Mohabbat returned to the United States to develop an export business with Afghanistan and became a US citizen. Figuring in his extensive dealings with the Taliban in the late 1990s was much investment of time and effort for a contract to develop the proposed oil pipeline through northern Afghanistan.

In a lengthy interview and in a memorandum Kabir Mohabbat has given us a detailed account and documentation to buttress his charge that the Bush administration could have had Osama bin Laden and his senior staff either delivered to the US or to allies as prisoners, or killed at their Afghan base. As a search of the data base shows, portions of Mohabbat's role have been the subject of a number of news reports, including a CBS news story by Alan Pizzey aired September 25, 2001. This is the first he has made public the full story.

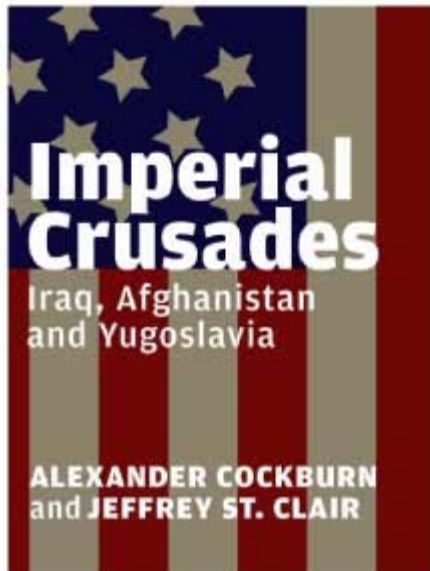
By the end of 1999 US sanctions and near-world-wide political ostracism were costing the Taliban dearly and they had come to see Osama bin Laden and his training camps as, in Mohabbat's words, "just a damn liability". Mohabbat says the Taliban leadership had also been informed in the clearest possible terms by a US diplomat that if any US citizen was harmed as a consequence of an Al Qaeda action, the US would hold the Taliban responsible and target Mullah Omar and the Taliban leaders.

In the summer of 2000, on one of his regular trips to Afghanistan, Mohabbat had a summit session with the Taliban high command in Kandahar. They asked him to arrange a meeting with appropriate officials in the European Union, to broker a way in which they could hand over Osama bin Laden . Mohabbat recommended they send bin Laden to the World Criminal Court in the Hague.

Shortly thereafter, in August of 2000, Mohabbat set up a meeting at the Sheraton hotel in Frankfurt between a delegation from the Taliban and Reiner Weiland of the EU. The Taliban envoys repeated the offer to deport bin Laden. Weiland told them he would take the proposal to Elmar Brok, foreign relations director for the European Union. According to Mohabbat, Brok then informed the US Ambassador to Germany of the offer.

At this point the US State Department called Mohabbat and said the government wanted to retain his services, even before his official period on the payroll, which lasted from November of 2000 to late September, 2001, by which time he tells us he had been paid \$115,000.

On the morning of October 12, 2000, Mohabbat was in Washington DC, preparing for an 11am meeting at the State Department , when he got a call from State, telling him to turn on the tv and then come right over. The USS Cole had just been bombed. Mohabbat had a session with the head of State's South East Asia desk and with officials from the NSC. They told him the US was going to "bomb the hell out of Afghanistan". "Give me



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three weeks," Mohabbat answered, "and I will deliver Osama to your doorstep." They gave him a month.

Mohabbat went to Kandahar and communicated the news of imminent bombing to the Taliban. They asked him to set up a meeting with US officials to arrange the circumstances of their handover of Osama. On November 2, 2000, less than a week before the US election, Mohabbat arranged a face-to-face meeting, in that same Sheraton hotel in Frankfurt, between Taliban leaders and a US government team.

After a rocky start on the first day of the Frankfurt session, Mohabbat says the Taliban realized the gravity of US threats and outlined various ways bin Laden could be dealt with. He could be turned over to the EU, killed by the Taliban, or made available as a target for Cruise missiles. In the end, Mohabbat says, the Taliban promised the "unconditional surrender of bin Laden" . "We all agreed," Mohabbat tells CounterPunch, "the best way was to gather Osama and all his lieutenants in one location and the US would send one or two Cruise missiles."

Up to that time Osama had been living on the outskirts of Kandahar. At some time shortly after the Frankfurt meeting, the Taliban moved Osama and placed him and his retinue under house arrest at Daronta, thirty miles from Kabul.

In the wake of the 2000 election Mohabbat traveled to Islamabad and met with William Milam, US ambassador to Pakistan and the person designated by the Clinton administration to deal with the Taliban on the fate of bin Laden. Milam told Mohabbat that it was a done deal but that the actual handover of bin Laden would have to be handled by the incoming Bush administration.

On November 23, 2000, Mohabbat got a call from the NSC saying they wanted to put him officially on the payroll as the US government's contact man for the Taliban. He agreed. A few weeks later an official from the newly installed Bush NSC asked him to continue in the same role and shortly thereafter he was given a letter from the administration (Mohabbat tells us he has a copy), apologizing to the Taliban for not having dealt with bin Laden, explaining that the new government was still setting in, and asking for a meeting in February 2001.

The Bush administration sent Mohabbat back, carrying kindred tidings of delay and regret to the Taliban three more times in 2001, the last in September after the 9/11 attack. Each time he was asked to communicate similar regrets about the failure to act on the plan agreed to in Frankfurt. This procrastination became a standing joke with the Taliban, Mohabbat tells CounterPunch "They made an offer to me that if the US didn't have fuel for the Cruise missiles to attack Osama in Daronta, where he was under house arrest, they would pay for it."

Kabir Mohabbat's final trip to Afghanistan on the US government payroll took place on September 3, 2001. On September 11 Mohabbat acted as translator for some of the Taliban leadership in Kabul as they watched tv coverage of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Four days later the US State Department asked Mohabbat to set up a meeting with the Taliban. Mohabbat says the Taliban were flown to Quetta in two C-130s. There they agreed to the three demands sought by the US team:

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1. Immediate handover of bin Laden; 2. Extradition of foreigners in Al Qaeda who were wanted in their home countries; 3. shut-down of bin Laden's bases and training camps. Mohabbat says the Taliban agreed to all three demands.

This meeting in Quetta was reported in carefully vague terms by Pizzezy on September 25, where Mohabbat was mentioned by name. He tells us that the Bush administration was far more exercised by this story than by any other event in the whole delayed and ultimately abandoned schedule of killing Osama.

On October 18, Mohabbat tells us, he was invited to the US embassy in Islamabad and told that "there was light at the end of the tunnel for him", which translated into an invitation to occupy the role later assigned to Karzai. Mohabbat declined, saying he had no desire for the role of puppet and probable fall guy.

A few days later the Pizzezy story was aired and Mohabbat drew the ire of the Bush administration where he already had an enemy in the form of Zalmay Khalilzad, appointed on September 22 as the US special envoy to Afghanistan. After giving him a dressing down, US officials told Mohabbat the game had changed, and he should tell the Taliban the new terms: surrender or be killed. Mohabbat declined to be the bearer of this news and went off the US government payroll.

Towards the end of that same month of October, 2001 Mohabbat was successfully negotiating with the Taliban for the release of Heather Mercer (acting in a private capacity at the request of her father) when the Taliban once again said they would hand over Osama Bin Laden unconditionally. Mohabbat tells us he relayed the offer to David Donahue, the US consulate general in Islamabad. He was told, in his words, that "the train had moved". Shortly thereafter the US bombing of Afghanistan began.

In December Mohabbat was in Pakistan following with wry amusement the assault on Osama bin Laden's supposed mountain redoubt in Tora Bora, in the mountains bordering Pakistan. At the time he said, he informed US embassy officials the attack was a waste of time. Taliban leaders had told him that Bin Laden was nowhere near Tora Bora but in Waziristan. Knowing that the US was monitoring his cell phone traffic, Osama had sent a decoy to Tora Bora.

From the documents he's supplied us and from his detailed account we regard Kabir Mohabbat's story as credible and are glad to make public his story of the truly incredible failure of the Bush administration to accept the Taliban's offer to eliminate Bin Laden. As a consequence of this failure more than 3,000 Americans and thousands of Afghans died. Mohabbat himself narrowly escaped death on two occasions when Al Qaeda, apprised of his role, tried to kill him. In Kabul in February, 2001, a bomb was detonated in his hotel in Kabul. Later that year, in July, a hand grenade thrown in his room in a hotel in Kandahar failed to explode.

He told his story to the 9/11 Commission (whose main concern, he tells us, was that he not divulge his testimony to anyone else), also to the 9/11 Families who were pursuing a lawsuit based on the assumption of US intelligence blunders by the FBI and CIA. He says his statements were not much use to the families since his



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judgment was, and still remains, that it was not intelligence failures that allowed the 9/11 attacks, but criminal negligence by the Bush administration.

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