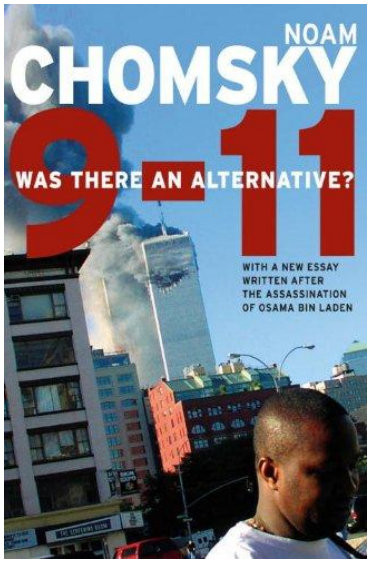




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9-11: Was There an Alternative? (Open Media Book)

van Chomsky, Noam

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Was There an Alternative?

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Was there an alternative? There is every likelihood that the Jihadi movement, much of it highly critical of bin Laden, could have been split and undermined after 9/11. The “crime against humanity,” as it was rightly called, could have been approached as a crime, with an international operation to apprehend the likely suspects. That was recognized at the time, but no such idea was even considered. It might also have been possible to follow the precedent of law-abiding states, like Nicaragua’s response to the massive U.S. terrorist war to which it was subjected (discussed in the text below). Again, unthinkable. In 9-11, I quoted Robert Fisk’s conclusion that the “horrendous crime” of 9/11 was committed with “wickedness and awesome cruelty,”¹² an accurate judgment. It is useful to bear in mind that the crimes could have been even worse. Suppose, for example, that the attack had gone as far as bombing the White House, killing the president, imposing a brutal military dictatorship that killed thousands and tortured tens of thousands while establishing an international terror center that helped impose similar torture-and-terror states elsewhere and carried out an international assassination campaign; and as an extra fillip, brought in a team of economists—call them “the Kandahar boys”—who quickly drove the economy into one of the worst depressions in its history. That, plainly, would have been a lot worse than 9/11.

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plausible reconstruction of the events is provided by veteran Middle East correspondent Yochi Dreazen and colleagues in the Atlantic. Dreazen, formerly the military correspondent for the Wall Street Journal, is senior correspondent for the National Journal Group covering military affairs and national security. According to their investigation, White House planning appears not to have considered the option of capturing bin Laden alive: “The administration had made clear to the military’s clandestine Joint Special Operations Command that it wanted bin Laden dead, according to a senior U.S. official with knowledge of the discussions. A high-ranking military officer briefed on the assault said the SEALs knew their mission was not to take him alive.” The authors add: “For many at the Pentagon and the Central Intelligence Agency who had spent nearly a decade hunting bin Laden, killing the militant was a necessary and justified act of vengeance.” Furthermore, “Capturing bin Laden alive would have also presented the administration with an array of nettlesome legal and political challenges.” Better, then, to assassinate him, dumping his body into the sea without the autopsy considered essential after a killing, whether considered justified or not—an act that predictably provoked

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both anger and skepticism in much of the Muslim world. As the Atlantic inquiry observes, “The decision to kill bin Laden outright was the clearest illustration to date of a little-noticed aspect of the Obama administration’s counterterror policy. The Bush administration captured thousands of suspected militants and sent them to detention camps in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Guantanamo Bay. The Obama administration, by contrast, has focused on eliminating individual terrorists rather than attempting to take them alive.” That is one significant difference between Bush and Obama. The authors quote former West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, who “told German TV that the U.S. raid was ‘quite clearly a violation of international law’ and that bin Laden should have been detained and put on trial,” contrasting Schmidt with U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, who “defended the decision to kill bin Laden although he didn’t pose an immediate threat to the Navy SEALs, telling a House panel ... that the assault had been ‘lawful, legitimate and appropriate in every way.’ ”²⁰

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societies that profess some respect for law, suspects are apprehended and brought to fair trial. I stress “suspects.” In June 2002, FBI head Robert Mueller, in what the Washington Post described as “among his most detailed public comments on the origins of the attacks,” could say only that “investigators believe the idea of the Sept. 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon came from al Qaeda leaders in Afghanistan, the actual plotting was done in Germany, and the financing came through the United Arab Emirates from sources in Afghanistan.” In his own words, “We think the masterminds of it were in Afghanistan, high in the al Qaeda leadership. Plotters and others—the principals—came together in Germany and perhaps elsewhere.”²⁵ What the FBI believed and thought in June 2002 they didn’t know eight months earlier, when Washington dismissed tentative offers by the Taliban (how serious, we do not know) to permit a trial of bin Laden if they were presented with evidence. Thus it is not true, as President Obama claimed in his White House statement, that “We quickly learned that the 9/11 attacks were carried out by al Qaeda.” There has never been any reason to doubt what the FBI believed in mid-2002, but that leaves us far from the proof of guilt required in civilized societies—and whatever the evidence might be, it does not warrant murdering a suspect who could, it seems, have been easily apprehended and brought to trial. Much the same is true of evidence provided since. Thus the 9/11 Commission provided extensive circumstantial evidence of bin Laden’s role in 9/11, based primarily on what it had been told about confessions by prisoners in Guantanamo. It is doubtful that much of that would hold up in an independent court, considering the ways confessions were elicited. But in any event, the conclusions of a congressionally authorized investigation, however convincing one finds them, plainly fall short of a sentence by a credible court, which is what shifts the category of the accused from suspect to convicted. There is much talk of bin Laden’s “confession,” but that was a boast, not a confession, with as much credibility as my “confession” that I won the Boston marathon. The boast tells us a lot about his character, but nothing about his responsibility for what he regarded as a great achievement, for which he wanted to take credit.

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is worth adding that bin Laden’s responsibility was recognized in much of the Muslim world, and condemned. One significant example is the distinguished Lebanese cleric Sheikh Fadlallah, greatly respected by Hizbollah and Shia groups generally, outside Lebanon as well. He had some experience with assassinations. He had been targeted for assassination by a truck bomb outside a mosque in a CIA-organized operation in 1985. He escaped, but eighty others were killed, mostly women and girls as they left the mosque—one of those

innumerable crimes that do not enter the annals of terror because of the fallacy of “wrong agency.” Sheikh Fadlallah sharply condemned the 9/11 attacks, as did many other leading figures in the Muslim world, within the Jihadi movement as well. Among others, the head of Hizbollah, Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, sharply condemned bin Laden and Jihadi ideology.²⁶

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Reflections on 9-11

for (1), it was assumed, plausibly, that the guilty parties were bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network. No one knows more about them than the CIA, which, together with its counterparts among U.S. allies, recruited radical Islamists from many countries and organized them into a military and terrorist force, not to help Afghans resist Russian aggression, which would have been a legitimate objective, but for normal reasons of state, with grim consequences for Afghans after the Mujahidin took control. U.S. intelligence has surely been following the other exploits of these networks closely ever since they assassinated President Sadat of Egypt twenty years ago, and more intensively since the attempt to blow up the World Trade Center and many other targets in a highly ambitious terrorist operation in 1993. Nevertheless, despite what must be the most intensive international intelligence investigation in history, evidence about the perpetrators of 9-11 has been hard to find. Eight months after the bombing, FBI director Robert Mueller, reporting to the press, could say only that U.S. intelligence now “believes” the plot was hatched in Afghanistan, though planned and implemented elsewhere. And long after the source of the anthrax attack was localized to U.S. government weapons laboratories, it has still not been identified. These are indications of how hard it may be to counter acts of terror targeting the rich and powerful in the future. Nevertheless, despite the thin evidence, the initial conclusion about 9-11 is presumably correct.

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