

Osama bin Laden Responsible for the 9/11 Attacks? Where is the Evidence?

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The idea that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the 9/11 attacks has been an article of faith for public officials and the mainstream media. Calling it an “article of faith” points to two features of this idea. On the one hand, no one in these circles publicly challenges this idea.

On the other hand, as I pointed out at length in two of my books – 9/11 Contradictions¹ and The New Pearl Harbor Revisited,² no good evidence has ever been publicly presented to support it.

Colin Powell’s Withdrawn Promise Two weeks after 9/11, Secretary of State Colin Powell, speaking to Tim Russert on Meet the Press, said that he expected “in the near future . . . to put out . . . a document that will describe quite clearly the evidence that we have linking [bin Laden] to this attack.”³

Powell reversed himself, however, at a press conference with President Bush in the White House Rose Garden the next morning, saying that, although the government had information that left no question of bin Laden’s responsibility, “most of it is classified.”⁴ According to Seymour Hersh, citing officials from both the CIA and the Department of Justice, the real reason for the reversal was a “lack of solid information.”⁵

This was the week that Bush, after demanding that the Taliban turn over bin Laden, refused their request for evidence that bin Laden had been behind the attacks.⁶ A senior Taliban official, after the US attack on Afghanistan had begun, said: “We have asked for proof of Osama’s involvement, but they have refused. Why?”⁷ Hersh’s answer was that they had no proof.

Tony Blair’s Weak Document

The task of providing such proof was taken up by Bush’s chief ally in the “war on terror,” British Prime Minister Tony Blair. On October 4, 2001, Blair made public a document entitled: “Responsibility for the Terrorist Atrocities in the United States.” Listing “clear conclusions reached by the government,” it stated: “Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, the terrorist network which he heads, planned and carried out the atrocities on 11 September 2001.” Blair’s report, however, began by saying: “This document does not purport to provide a prosecutable case against Osama Bin Laden in a court of law.”⁸ Although the case was not good enough to go to court, Blair seemed to be saying, it was good enough to go to war.

The weakness in Blair's report, in any event, was noted the next day by the BBC, which said: "There is no direct evidence in the public domain linking Osama Bin Laden to the 11 September attacks. At best the evidence is circumstantial."⁹

The FBI's Surprising Statement

What does our own FBI say? Here is a surprising but little-known fact, because it has scarcely been reported in the mainstream media: The FBI's "Most Wanted Terrorist" webpage on "Usama bin Laden" does not list the 9/11 attacks as one of the crimes for which he is wanted. It does list bombings in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi as terrorist acts for which he is wanted. But it makes no mention of 9/11.¹⁰ In 2006, Rex Tomb, then the FBI's chief of investigative publicity, was asked why not. He replied: "The reason why 9/11 is not mentioned on Usama Bin Laden's Most Wanted page is because the FBI has no hard evidence connecting Bin Laden to 9/11."¹¹

After this story started flying around the Internet and was even covered by a TV station in Louisiana,¹² Dan Eggen tried to downplay its significance in an August 2006 Washington Post article entitled "Bin Laden, Most Wanted For Embassy Bombings?"¹³ Complaining about "conspiracy theorists" who claimed that "the lack of a Sept. 11 reference [on the FBI's "Most Wanted" webpage for bin Laden] suggests that the connection to al-Qaeda is uncertain," Eggen quoted the explanation offered by a former US attorney, who said that the FBI could not appropriately "put up a wanted picture where no formal charges had been filed."

But that explanation, while true, simply pushes the issue back a step to this question: Why have such charges not been filed? Rex Tomb's fuller statement, which Eggen failed to mention, had answered this question the previous June, saying:

The FBI gathers evidence. Once evidence is gathered, it is turned over to the Department of Justice. The Department of Justice then decides whether it has enough evidence to present to a federal grand jury. In the case of the 1998 United States Embassies being bombed, Bin Laden has been formally indicted and charged by a grand jury. He has not been formally indicted and charged in connection with 9/11 because the FBI has no hard evidence connecting Bin Laden to 9/11.¹⁴

The 9/11 Commission

What about the 9/11 Commission? Its report gave the impression that it was in possession of solid evidence of bin Laden's guilt. But the Commission's co-chairs, Thomas Kean and Lee Hamilton, undermined this impression in their follow-up book, which they subtitled: "The Inside Story of the 9/11 Commission."¹⁵ (I discussed this book at length in Chapter 2 of my 2007 book, *Debunking 9/11 Debunking*.¹⁶)

As the endnotes for The 9/11 Commission Report reveal, whenever the Commission referred to evidence of bin Laden's responsibility for the 9/11 attacks, the Commission was always referring to CIA-provided information, which had (presumably) been elicited during interrogations of al-Qaeda operatives. By far the most important of these operatives was Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, generally called simply "KSM," who has been called the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. The Commission, for example, wrote:

Bin Ladin . . . finally decided to give the green light for the 9/11 operation

sometime in late 1998 or early 1999. . . . Bin Ladin also soon selected four individuals to serve as suicide operatives. . . . Atta – whom Bin Ladin chose to lead the group – met with Bin Ladin several times to receive additional instructions, including a preliminary list of approved targets: the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and the U.S. Capitol.¹⁷

The note for each of these statements says: “interrogation of KSM.”¹⁸

Kean and Hamilton, however, reported that they had no success in “obtaining access to star witnesses in custody . . . , most notably Khalid Sheikh Mohammed.”¹⁹ Besides not being allowed to interview these witnesses, Commission members were not even permitted to observe the interrogations through one-way glass or to talk to the interrogators.²⁰ Therefore, Kean and Hamilton complained: “We . . . had no way of evaluating the credibility of detainee information. How could we tell if someone such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed . . . was telling us the truth?”²¹

An NBC “deep background” report in 2008 pointed out an additional problem: KSM and the other al-Qaeda leaders had been subjected to “enhanced interrogation techniques,” i.e., torture, and it is now widely acknowledged that statements elicited by torture lack credibility. “At least four of the operatives whose interrogation figured in the 9/11 Commission Report,” NBC pointed out, “have claimed that they told interrogators critical information as a way to stop being ‘tortured.’” NBC then quoted Michael Ratner, president of the Center for Constitutional Rights, as saying: “Most people look at the 9/11 Commission Report as a trusted historical document. If their conclusions were supported by information gained from torture, . . . their conclusions are suspect.”²²

The “Bin Laden Confession Tapes”

As we have seen, neither the 9/11 Commission, the Bush-Cheney White House, the FBI, the British government, nor the 9/11 Commission provided good evidence that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Many people, however, have assumed that the question of his responsibility was settled by the existence of videotapes and audiotapes in which he himself confessed to the attacks. There are, however, good reasons to believe that these so-called confession tapes are fakes. I will illustrate this point in terms of the two best-known videotapes of this nature.

The “Jalalabad Video” Released December 13, 2001: The first and most famous of the “Osama bin Laden confession video tapes” was released by the Pentagon on December 13, 2001. It had purportedly been made on November 9, 2001, after which it was allegedly found by US forces in a private home in Jalalabad, Afghanistan. In this video, an Osama bin Laden figure is seen talking about the 9/11 attacks with a visiting sheikh. During the course of the conversation, the bin Laden figure boasts about the success of the attacks, saying that he had planned them.²³ Both US and British officials claimed that this tape left no doubt about bin Laden’s guilt.²⁴

Stories in both the Canadian and British media, however, raised questions about the tape’s authenticity. These stories, besides pointing out the existence of the technical ability to create fake video tapes, also mentioned the suspicion of some people that the bin Laden figure was not Osama bin Laden himself.

A BBC News report said: “Washington calls it the ‘smoking gun’ that puts Bin Laden’s guilt

beyond doubt, but many in the Arab world believe the home video of the al-Qaeda chief is a fake.”²⁵ This report was, in fact, entitled, “Could the Bin Laden Video Be a Fake?”

This question was also raised in Canada by CBC News, which pointed out that some people had “suggested the Americans hired someone to pretend to be the exiled Saudi.”²⁶

This question was raised even more insistently in a Guardian story with the title, “US Urged to Detail Origin of Tape.” Reporting “growing doubt in the Muslim world about the authenticity of the film,” writer Steven Morris said:

The White House yesterday came under pressure to give more details of the video which purports to show Osama bin Laden admitting his part in the September 11 attacks.²⁷

Morris, pointing out that the White House had provided no details about how the Pentagon came to be in possession of the tape, added:

According to US officials the tape was found in a house in Jalalabad, eastern Afghanistan, and handed to the Pentagon by an unnamed person or group. . . . But for many the explanation is too convenient. Some opponents of the war theorise that the Bin Laden in the film was a look-alike.

Morris then quoted one such opponent in Pakistan, who said: “This videotape is not authentic. The Americans made it up after failing to get any evidence against Osama.”

Morris also cited Bob Crabtree, the editor of Computer Video magazine, who explained that it was impossible to determine whether the video was authentic without more details of its source, adding: “The US seems simply to have asked the world to trust them that it is genuine.”²⁸

This skepticism about the authenticity of this “Jalalabad video” was based on sound reasons. For one thing, this video’s bin Laden figure appeared too heavy and healthy, compared with the bin Laden who made the last of the undoubtedly authentic bin Laden videos, which was made sometime in 2001 between November 16 (on which occurred an event mentioned on the tape) and December 27 (the date on which the tape was released). In this post-November 16 video, bin Laden’s beard was white, he had a “gaunt, frail appearance,” and his “left arm hung limply by his side while he gesticulated with his right.”²⁹ This immobile left arm, Dr. Sanjay Gupta observed on CNN, suggested that bin Laden had suffered a stroke, adding that this plus a “frosting of the appearance” suggested that bin Laden was in the final stages of kidney failure.³⁰

But in the “Jalalabad video,” which was reportedly made at about the same time (being dated November 9 and released December 13), the bin Laden figure was heavier and also darker, in both skin and beard color; his nose had a different shape;³¹ and his hands were shorter and heavier than those of Osama bin Laden as seen in undoubtedly authentic videos.³²

Still another problem is that, whereas bin Laden was left-handed, the man in the “Jalalabad video” wrote with his right hand. Although it might be thought that this was because his left arm was immobile, the bin Laden figure in this video was easily able to lift his left arm above his head.³³

If this video was made on November 9, as claimed, then it would have been made at most only a few weeks before the post-November 16 video. It is very hard to believe that the heavy, dark-skinned, healthy-looking man with a dark beard could have, within two or three weeks, turned into the pale, gaunt, white-bearded, man seen in the post-November 16 video.

If one accepts the Jalalabad video as authentic, one not only has to accept these radical changes in bin Laden's physical appearance; one must also accept a complete change in his statements about 9/11. In the previous weeks, he had repeatedly – on September 12, 16, 17, and 28 – stated that he had had nothing to do with the attacks.³⁴ In the September 28 statement, he had even declared:

I have already said that I am not involved in the 11 September attacks in the United States. As a Muslim, I try my best to avoid telling a lie. I had no knowledge of these attacks, nor do I consider the killing of innocent women, children and other humans as an appreciable act. Islam strictly forbids causing harm to innocent women, children and other people. Such a practice is forbidden even in the course of a battle. . . . [W]e are against the American system, not against its people, whereas in these attacks, the common American people have been killed.³⁵

Is it likely that he would have made such statements if he himself had authorized the attacks and thereby the killing of innocents?

Whatever be one's opinion about that, the bin Laden figure in the "Jalalabad video" made other statements that Osama bin Laden himself would surely not have made. For example, he said:

[W]e calculated in advance the number of casualties from the enemy who would be killed based on the position of the tower. . . . [D]ue to my experience in this field, I was thinking that the fire from the gas in the plane would melt the iron structure of the building and collapse the area where the plane hit and all the floors above it only. This is all that we had hoped for.³⁶

But in light of the real bin Laden's "experience in the field" as a building contractor, he would have known that high-rise buildings are framed with steel, not iron. Even more important, he would have known that the buildings' support columns – whether made of steel or iron – would not have been melted by the "fire from the gas in the plane." Why? Because he would have known, on the one hand, that a building fire, even if fed by jet-fuel (which is essentially kerosene), could not, even under the most ideal conditions, have risen above 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit (1,000 degrees Celsius). And he would have known, on the other hand, that iron and steel do not begin to melt until they are heated to a temperature far higher than that: to almost 2,800 degrees Fahrenheit (1,540 degrees Celsius). The real bin Laden, therefore, would not have expected any iron or steel to melt.

A final reason to consider the "Jalalabad video" a fake is that bin Laden experts have declared it to such. When Dr. Bruce Lawrence, a Duke University history professor widely considered the country's leading academic bin Laden expert,³⁷ was asked what he thought about this video, he said, bluntly: "It's bogus." Some friends of his in the US Department of Homeland Security assigned to work "on the 24/7 bin Laden clock," he added, "also know it's bogus."³⁸

General Hamid Gul, former head of Pakistan's ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence), suggested that the man in the video was an "Osama bin Laden lookalike."³⁹

Former Foreign Service officer Angelo Codevilla, after saying "[t]he guy just does not look like Osama," added: "The fact that the video had been made for no self-evident purpose except perhaps to be found by the Americans should have raised suspicion."⁴⁰

A fourth expert opinion has been issued implicitly, it would seem, by the Department of Justice and its FBI. If they considered this "confession video" authentic, would they not consider it "hard evidence" of bin Laden's responsibility for 9/11? They say, however, that they have no such evidence, so they must not consider this video authentic.

The "October Surprise Video of 2004: The other most famous of the "bin Laden confession tapes" is the video tape that was released on October 29, 2004, just before the presidential election between George W. Bush and John Kerry, leading to its being called "the October Surprise video." In this one, for the first time, a bin Laden figure directly addressed the American people. The Associated Press, focusing on the most important aspect of the speaker's message, entitled its story: "Bin Laden, in Statement to U.S. People, Says He Ordered Sept. 11 Attacks."⁴¹ However, although the AP accepted the authenticity of the tape, there are serious reasons to doubt it.

A reason to be at least suspicious is the very fact that it appeared just four days before the presidential election and seemed designed to help Bush's reelection – an assessment that was made even by CIA analysts.⁴² The video, moreover, evidently did help: Bush's lead over Kerry in national polls increased right after it appeared,⁴³ and both Bush and Kerry said that this tape was significantly responsible for Bush's victory.⁴⁴ Given the fact that this video would quite predictably help Bush win reelection, it would seem to have been issued by his friends, not his enemies.

There are also substantive reasons to doubt this tape's authenticity, one of which is the speaker's language. The clearly authentic bin Laden messages were filled with religious language. A bin Laden video released October 7, 2001, for example, began thus:

Praise be to God and we beseech Him for help and forgiveness. We seek refuge with the Lord of our bad and evil-doing. He whom God guides is rightly guided I witness that there is no God but God and Mohammed is His slave and Prophet.⁴⁵

Even though this talk as a whole had only 725 words, bin Laden referred to God (Allah) 20 times and to the prophet Mohammed 3 times. Likewise, his message of November 3, 2001, which contained 2,333 words, referred to God 35 times and to the prophet Mohammed 8 times.⁴⁶ By contrast, the 2004 October Surprise video, which had almost the same number of words as the November 3 video, referred to God only 12 times. The only "Mohammad" mentioned, moreover, was Mohamed Atta.

Another substantive difference involved the type of causal analysis provided. Bin Laden's clearly authentic messages had portrayed historical events as occurring only because they were caused, or at least allowed, by God. In his message of October 7, 2001, for example, he said: "God Almighty hit the United States. . . . He destroyed its greatest buildings." Human agents were involved, to be sure, but they were successful only because "Almighty God . . . allowed them to destroy the United States."⁴⁷ In his message of November 3, likewise, bin Laden said that, if people are helped or harmed, it is always by "something that

God has already preordained for [them].”⁴⁸

The message on the 2004 confession video, however, reflected a worldview in which events can be understood through a causal analysis based on secular rationalism. “One of the most important things rational people do when calamities occur,” the lecturer asserted, “is to look for their causes so as to avoid them.” He himself, in analyzing “the [Iraq] war, its causes and consequences,” provided a causal analysis involving purely human actors: Bush, al-Qaeda, and the American people. Far from suggesting that everything is finally in the hands of God, he said to the American people: “Your security is in your own hands” – a statement that a devout Wahabi Muslim such as Osama bin Laden would surely have considered blasphemous.

Still another reason to doubt the authenticity of this 2004 video is that, although the speaker was addressing the American public, he spoke Arabic rather than English. This is strange, because Osama bin Laden was reportedly fluent in English, which he had started studying when he was 11 years old.⁴⁹ A British journalist reported that, when he and bin Laden met in 1989, they conversed in English for 45 minutes.⁵⁰ General Hamid Gul, speaking to United Press International in 2001, said: “I know bin Laden and his associates. They are graduates of the best universities and . . . speak impeccable English.⁵¹ If bin Laden spoke impeccable English, would he not have used it when speaking directly to the American people?⁵²

Accordingly, this video does not, any more than the “Jalalabad video,” provide evidence that Osama bin Laden himself confessed to planning the 9/11 attacks.

Conclusion

I showed in a previous essay that, according to the best evidence presently available, Osama bin Laden has been dead for many years.⁵³ In the present essay, I have shown that there is not even any good evidence for the claim that bin Laden was responsible for the 9/11 attacks. Accordingly, insofar as the justification for the continuation of the AfPak war is based on the fact that bin Laden in the region both before and after the 9/11 attacks, that justification would seem to be doubly baseless.

David Ray Griffin is the author of 36 books, nine of which are about 9/11. His most recent book is *The Mysterious Collapse of World Trade Center 7: Why the Final Official Report about 9/11 Is Unscientific and False* (Olive Branch, 2009). In 2008, he put out two books: *The New Pearl Harbor: 9/11, the Cover-Up, and the Exposé* (which was named a “Pick of the Week” by Publishers Weekly) and *Osama bin Laden: Dead Or Alive?* (which has generated considerable media coverage in England).

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Notes

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