

## Intelligence in Public Literature

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### **88 Days to Kandahar: A CIA Diary**

Robert L. Grenier (Simon & Schuster, 2015), 442 pp., photos, maps, index.

### **Reviewed by Hayden Peake**

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During the 88 days after 9/11, the CIA supported the two Afghan tribal factions that fought to remove the Taliban from power and force their al-Qa'ida allies to abandon their bases in Afghanistan. In his book *First In*,<sup>a</sup> Gary Schroen, the leader of the CIA task force working with the Afghan Northern Alliance forces, provides a first-hand account of the operations that liberated Kabul. Schroen's successor, Gary Berntsen, describes further efforts against al-Qa'ida and the attempts to find and capture Usama Bin Laden in his book, *JAWBREAKER*.<sup>b</sup> The view of these events from CIA Headquarters is described by Henry Crumpton in his book *The Art Of Intelligence*.<sup>c</sup> Overlooked until now were operations coordinated out of the CIA station in Islamabad. Prior to 9/11, the station worked to gain Pakistani help in dealing with al-Qa'ida and Bin Laden; after 9/11, the focus shifted to supporting the defeat of Taliban elements in southern Afghanistan by selected Afghan tribal units. A third operation sought to find a consensus leader for the new Afghan government. In *88 Days To Kandahar*, Robert Grenier, the station chief in Islamabad during these events, provides the first detailed account of the CIA role in each operation.

Grenier begins his book with a summary of an unusual assignment he received in Islamabad. In late September 2001, he was called by Director of Central Intelligence George Tenet and asked for his assessment of "a war strategy for Afghanistan." (3) Tenet explained that he wanted a firsthand assessment before briefing the president the next morning. Grenier acknowledges this amounted to policy advice—generally a no-no at CIA—but he wrote it as a "chief of station field appraisal." (6) It serves well as an introduction to his views on the major

issues of the moment, as well as the long-range problems he anticipated.

Despite the title, *88 Days* is more than an account of Grenier's post 9/11 operations. It is also a five-part memoir of a successful CIA career, one that was not on his radar after graduating from Dartmouth with a degree in philosophy. Only after teaching for a year at a private girls' school did he decide to pursue his longtime interest in the Middle East by pursuing a graduate degree in international relations from the University of Virginia. By then married, Grenier needed a job; some influential friends suggested the CIA, where he could apply his experience as an analyst. But his recruiter, an experienced woman case officer, surprised him by concluding that he was better suited for the National Clandestine Service. He entered on duty in January 1979.

Part 1 of *88 Days* summarizes Grenier's career over the next 20 years. In addition to overseas tours, he served in the National Counterproliferation Center; on the National Intelligence Council; in the State Department; and as the head of the Farm, the CIA training facility. His accounts of the often frustrating CIA bureaucracy, frequently complicated by important interactions with other government bureaucracies, will be familiar to some readers and enlightening to others. In 1999, when due for overseas duty, Grenier was assigned as chief of station in Islamabad, Pakistan. Parts 2–4 of *88 Days* tell that story in considerable detail.

After reviewing the historical circumstances that created the situation that brought him to Islamabad, the central focus of the book concerns his challenging interactions with the Pakistanis, their Taliban allies, al-Qa'ida, and CIA Headquarters. Grenier explains how he developed sources to provide intelligence for headquarters on a variety of issues, from Pakistan's atom bomb program, to tribal leadership disputes, details of potential targets, and the always problematic relations with the ISI. With regard to Bin Laden in particular, his task was "to arrest, or oth-

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a. Gary C. Schroen, *First In: An Insider's Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (Ballantine Books, 2005).

b. Gary Berntsen, *JAWBREAKER: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qa'ida—A Personal Account by the CIA's Key Field Commander* (Crown Publishers, 2005).

c. Henry A. Crumpton, *The Art Of Intelligence: Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service* (The Penguin Press, 2012).

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erwise to neutralize, a man and an organization that Tenet had described publicly as the greatest current threat to US national security . . . without breaking a federal law.” (45) Toward that goal, Grenier worked—with little success—to gain Pakistani cooperation in evicting al-Qa‘ida from its Afghan safe haven and, in general, received little support from them in this effort. Not for the first time, his advice sometimes conflicted with views at Headquarters, and his descriptions of these situations are informative.

After 9/11, his mission changed. Now “Bin Laden would have to be rendered to justice in the United States, or killed in the attempt.” (82) With improved ISI cooperation, Grenier made an unauthorized attempt to reach a deal with the senior Taliban leaders and to avoid war; CIA Headquarters was not pleased. (130ff) When this failed and war was inevitable, Grenier’s tactical marching orders shifted; he was to facilitate Hamid Karzai’s return to Afghanistan and support the takeover of Kandahar by a Afghan tribal leader friendly to the United States. The former task was delegated to a CIA base chief named Greg, who would save Karzai’s life enroute to Kandahar when his team was hit by friendly fire—a 2000-pound smart bomb. (278) Greg was reported killed, but he actually survived and continued to do well in future assignments.

Finding and supporting a leader who could command troops and take over Kandahar from the Taliban was a complicated process that Grenier describes at length. Besides dealing with the Pakistanis and the Afghan forces heading to Kandahar, Grenier had to coordinate with operations in the north and with the Special Forces elements that were providing critical support to both efforts. Complicating matters further were disagreements with instruction from CIA headquarters (236–39) and problems raised during VIP visits (270–73) that Grenier writes about candidly. When Kandahar was liberated on 7 December 2001—on the 88th day—the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, and his followers had fled—but not before leaving

20 land mines “wired together and set to fire downward” in the earthen roof of the governor’s palace. (108–14) The CIA Museum has an exhibit with artifacts from the roof.

The months following the end of what Grenier calls “the first American-Afghan War” (77) saw the creation of a long-sought joint intelligence center with the Pakistanis; the capture of the first high value al-Qa‘ida target, Abu Zubayda; the beginning of the rendition program; and the hunt for Usama Bin Laden. The Taliban had retreated to Pakistan and, even in early 2002, writes Grenier, “it was obvious to me that the Pakistanis had no interest in pursuing these people.” (362) Although he offers his views on the matter, it is clear he feels that the solution to those problems would not be found any time soon.

When Grenier’s tour ended in June 2002, he returned to CIA Headquarters and worked, first, as an adviser to Director Tenet and then spent two years as “CIA’s Washington-based Iraq Mission manager.” (356) In 2005, after surviving the tumultuous early days after Porter Goss became director that he describes at length, he was appointed director of the CounterTerrorism Center (CTC). Grenier relates the many changes he made in CTC, the “legal red line” (396) controversies surrounding the interrogation program, and the disputes with higher authority that eventually led to his retirement.

The book *88 Days To Kandahar* is first a stimulating, provocative, and forthright account of America’s First Afghan War. Second, it is an assessment of national security policy since 2001 in South Asia and the resurgence of the Taliban that led to the Second American Afghan War, the one where “there will be no victory, illusionary or otherwise.” (8) Third, and more broadly, it is also an insightful appraisal of the challenges we face today in South Asia. A fine contribution, it deserves a place on the bookshelf—virtual or traditional—of every officer, but only after reading.

