



VINTAGE

**WHERE IN THE
WORLD IS
OSAMA BIN LADEN?**

MORGAN SPURLOCK

CONTENTS

ABOUT THE BOOK
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
ALSO BY MORGAN SPURLOCK
DEDICATION
TITLE PAGE

CHAPTER 1: TERRORIZE ME
CHAPTER 2: I'LL TAKE OSAMA FOR \$200, ALEX
CHAPTER 3: THE FEW, THE PROUD, THE JIHADIS
CHAPTER 4: ANARCHY IN THE U.K.
CHAPTER 5: THE FRENCH CONNECTION
CHAPTER 6: DIAL-A-FATWA
CHAPTER 7: IN THE LAND OF SPEEDY MOHAMMED
CHAPTER 8: LOOKING TOWARD THE PROMISED LAND
CHAPTER 9: OLIVE BRANCHES
CHAPTER 10: THE BOOM-BOOM ROOM
CHAPTER 11: SAUDI AMERICA
CHAPTER 12: WELCOME TO HELL, MAN
CHAPTER 13: BE MY LITTLE GENERAL
CHAPTER 14: ONE DOWN TALIBAN
CHAPTER 15: OSAMA BIN GONE
CHAPTER 16: TALIBANISTAN
CHAPTER 17: INTO THE WILD

NOTES
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
BIBLIOGRAPHY
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About the Book

With a baby on the way and a need to make the world safe for mankind, an unassuming film-maker from West Virginia employs his complete lack of experience, knowledge and expertise to find the most dangerous and wanted man on earth. Kicking off his quest in New York City, Morgan Spurlock zigzags the globe in search of the bearded man: to Britain, France, Egypt, Morocco, Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, drawing ever closer to the heart of darkness in the tribal regions of Pakistan. Along the way he meets with experts and imams, breaks the Ramadan fast with Muslim families, helps disarm bombs with an Israeli squad, accompanies British and US Armies in Afghanistan and much much more ... all in an attempt to understand the Muslim world and the roots of the conflict overshadowing the world today.

About the Author

Morgan Spurlock is an award-winning writer, producer and director. He directed and starred in *Super Size Me*, subjecting himself to a steady diet of McDonald's food for thirty straight days. It was one of the most successful documentaries of all time and earned him an Oscar nomination as well as Best Director prizes at the Sundance and Edinburgh Film Festivals. He also produces the acclaimed documentary television series *30 Days*, which has just completed its third season. He currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Also by Morgan Spurlock

Don't Eat This Book

For Sasha

For always supporting me
For always understanding me
For always being there when I come home
And for not changing the locks.

MORGAN SPURLOCK

Where in the
World is Osama
Bin Laden?

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

CHAPTER 1

TERRORIZE ME

EVER SINCE I was a kid, seems like every time I turn on the TV it tells me that I'm supposed to be afraid of something. Growing up in the waning years of the Cold War, it was the Russkies with their great big bombs and funny marching and their hatred of the American way. By the time I was old enough to notice, nobody seriously worried anymore about "nuclear combat toe to toe with the Rooskies," as Major "King" Kong put it in *Dr. Strangelove*. Still, when the Soviet Union fell apart in 1990, I thought we were in the clear.

But it wasn't just the crazy freedom-hating Russians that we were told to be afraid of. They topped the hit parade for years, but in my lifetime we've been told to panic about all kinds of things. Here are some of them, in no particular order:

Soviet nukes, North Korean nukes, suitcase nukes, nuclear power plants, dirty bombs, shoe bombs, guns, assault rifles, semiautomatic weapons, sarin, anthrax, Ebola, E. coli, Lyme disease, Legionnaires' disease, smallpox, salmonella, dengue fever, Asian flu, bird flu, swine flu, yuppie flu, West Nile virus, the pesticides sprayed on the mosquitoes that spread West Nile virus, breast implants, AIDS, SARS, SIDS, ADD, ADHD, PTSD, TB, Y2K, EMP, WMD, illegal aliens, drunk drivers, road rage, asbestos, mercury, lead, oil shortages, the national debt, inflation, stagflation, hurricanes, twisters, tsunamis, asteroids, earthquakes, killer bees, killer canines, mad cows, global warming, the hole in the ozone, flesh-eating

bacteria, stem-cell research, Franken-food, Halloween, poisoned Tylenol, sex addiction, identity theft, secondhand smoke, Crips, Bloods, neo-Nazis, Satanists, pagans, cults, serial killers, postal workers, Catholic priests, heroin, cocaine, crack cocaine, methamphetamines, club drugs, ecstasy, Special K, day-care centers, retirement homes, hospitals, an epidemic of obesity, an epidemic of teen drug abuse, an epidemic of teen murders, an epidemic of teen suicides, an epidemic of teen gambling, an epidemic of teens having sex, an epidemic of teens having babies, an epidemic of child pornography, missing children, workplace violence, violence against seniors, violence on TV, violence in movies, violent video games, rap videos, rap music, heavy-metal music, Dungeons & Dragons, snuff films, Internet porn, high-voltage power lines, cell phones that explode, cell phones that cause brain cancer, drivers on cell phones, pedophiles on MySpace, the air, water, soil, eggs, ham, fish, peanuts, spinach, and dog food.

And in 2001 fear got a new mascot—a glorious rebranding featuring the godfather of fear, the hardest-working man in terrorism: Osama bin Laden. The attacks of September 11 ramped us up to levels of fear and paranoia I'd never felt in my life. Some of it was justified; I mean, it was the first time since Pearl Harbor that outside aggressors had attacked us on our own soil. But all the media-fanned panics that followed were even scarier than the actual event.

The odd thing is that when you look past the terror of the headlines Americans actually live longer,¹ healthier, safer lives than ever before. Our average life expectancy is 60 percent greater than it was at the start of the twentieth century. Medical science has conquered all sorts of diseases that were once common killers. Violent crime has plummeted in every major city. We're safer in our homes, in our cars, on planes, trains, and bicycles than ever before. And globally, since the end of the Cold War no great

military power has really threatened us. As shocking as 9/11 was, it wasn't nuclear war.

But we don't feel safer, do we? In poll after poll, we express our belief that times are more frightening now than they used to be, that people are more dangerous and the world is more violent, that we're so close to the apocalypse that you can smell the brimstone. We're afraid of strangers, we're afraid of our own teenagers, we're afraid of insects, we're afraid of the food we eat and the water we drink and the air we breathe, we're afraid of TV and movies and the Internet, we're afraid of the weather, and we're afraid the earth itself is dying.

Fear is a biological survival mechanism. But there's rational, useful fear, and then there are phobias—illogical, unwarranted fears of imagined or highly exaggerated threats. Take the fear of flying. Flying is a much, much safer form of transportation than, say, driving. In 2004, a representative year, almost 43,000 Americans died in car accidents. That same year, only 600 Americans died in aircraft crashes. Your chances of dying in an aircraft are around one in 10 million, versus one in 7,000 in a car. Statistically, you're far safer during your flight than you are driving to and from the airport. (Your luggage, however, is another story.)

Now, take terrorism. Since 9/11 we've been kept on a constant state of alert—i.e., anxiety—about terrorists. Depending on who's doing the math, the average American civilian's chances² of being a victim of a terrorist attack are minuscule—about one in 9 million, according to one estimate. According to the National Safety Council, you have an equal, if not greater, chance of being struck and killed by lightning (6,188,298 to 1) or of being bitten to death by a dog (9,089,063 to 1). Yet the National Weather Service doesn't make you leave your golf clubs at the door when it starts raining, and the NSPCA doesn't have color-coded threat levels for German shepherds.

Let me put it another way: From the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 through 2005, about 3,200 American civilians died in terrorist attacks, 2,973 of them on the single day of September 11, 2001. In that same period, in round numbers:³

- about 700,000 Americans died of heart disease
- roughly 600,000 Americans died of cancer
- nearly 500,000 Americans died in car accidents
- about 200,000 died in homicides
- nearly 150,000 died after falls
- almost 40,000 people drowned
- and more Americans were killed by *police officers*—almost 4,000—than by terrorists.

Despite the infinitesimal chance that the average American will be the victim of a terrorist attack, Osama bin Laden, “the terrorist threat,” and the Global War on Terror have turned our entire society upside down and inside out. We’ve started two wars that we can’t seem to end, in which thousands and thousands of people are dying. The United States has committed what many see as war crimes and human rights abuses. We’ve made a lot more enemies around the world than friends, and by the fall of 2006 more Americans had died fighting the War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq than were killed by terrorists from 1995 to 2005.

So why, if the threat is so exaggerated, do we feel so much dread?

Partly because we’re told to, over and over and over. We live in what sociologists call a “culture of fear,”⁴ in which the media, the government, and various special-interest groups keep us in a constant state of anxiety about wave after wave of supposed new threats to our health and well-being. Since Machiavelli’s time politicians have known how to use fear to keep people distracted, cowed, and obedient.

Bureaucrats use it to justify their budgets and their jobs, TV newspeople use fear as a way to keep our eyes glued to the screen, and special-interest groups use it to keep our donations pouring in.

But since September 11, the government hasn't just kept *us* in a panic; the government *itself* has been in a panic. In 2002, the Bush administration created the Department of Homeland Security, whose very name invokes insecurity, not to mention the odd sound of that word "Homeland." Maybe it should have been called the Department of We Hate You, Osama, and You'll Never Catch Us with Our Pants Down Again! Because the DHS is nothing but a massive restructuring of the same old federal bureaucracy. It's an interdepartmental Frankenstein stitched together from existing agencies, including Customs, the Immigration and Naturalization Service, FEMA, and various parts of the FBI, the Coast Guard, the Secret Service, and the departments of Defense, Transportation, Energy, and Agriculture.

With an annual budget upward of \$40 billion, the DHS defends us from terrorists, illegal aliens, drug smugglers, hurricanes, earthquakes, and epidemics. It guards our seaports and coastlines, our farms and reservoirs, and protects us in cyberspace. See, it really is the Department of Disaster Movie Plotlines. It's the DHS that issues those color-coded threat-level advisories and makes us take our shoes off at the airport.

And the DHS is charged with ladling out hundreds of millions of dollars every year in antiterrorism grants to the states. Having few legitimate terrorist targets in their districts but knowing pork when they smell it, many local bureaucrats have gotten very creative. On the list of 77,069 potential terrorism sites⁵ nationwide were "1,305 casinos, 163 water parks, 159 cruise ships, 244 jails, 3,773 malls, 718 mortuaries and 571 nursing homes." Specific targets included "the Old MacDonald's Petting Zoo near Huntsville,

Ala., a bourbon festival, a bean festival and the Kangaroo Conservation Center in Dawsonville, Ga. ... the Amish Country Popcorn factory, the Mule Day Parade, the Sweetwater Flea Market and an unspecified 'Beach at End of a Street.'" Ice-cream parlors, check-cashing joints, and tackle shops also made the list.

Meanwhile, the DHS spends about \$5 billion a year screening us at airports. But the reality, as *The Atlantic Monthly* noted, is that it's "largely for show. ...⁶ 'The inspection process is mostly security theater, to make people feel safe about flying,' says John Mueller, a political scientist at Ohio State."

Only it doesn't make us feel safer, does it? Take off your shoes! Empty that baby bottle! At Dulles Airport, security personnel ordered a woman to peel her banana.⁷ Banana bombs! When fruit and baby formula become potential WMDs, what's next? And who really feels safe? That nursing mother and her child in the seat next to you could be terrorists. She could be carrying liquid explosives in her breasts. How do you know she isn't? Don't rough her up when you arrest her—she might explode.

You think I'm joking? I met a woman who was ordered by an inspector at Newark International Airport to remove the gel inserts from her push-up bra! Just because she's a member of the IBTC (that's the Itty Bitty Titty Committee, for those of you who aren't or don't act like you're twelve), she's a terrorist threat. You'd never see Pamela Anderson getting stopped. Why? Because Pamela Anderson *loves freedom*, 36D times more than that other girl.

These were the thoughts that were running through my head as I sat in front of the TV in January 2006. I flipped through the news channels, hearing all about the dread and despair, thinking about how unsafe everyone felt (a few weeks before this friends of mine canceled a trip to New York because they had heard about potential New Year's

plots on New York City), and about how I got cheated out of the relief I felt entitled to when the Cold War ended. Who was to blame for all this fear? Whom could I confront and say, "Enough already. We get it. The world's a scary place. Leave us all alone." Whom did I have to smack to get some peace around here?

And on the news there he was—the man anointed as the father of all our fears these days. The man who torments and inspires millions around the world from an undisclosed location that even Dick Cheney can't find from *his* undisclosed location. The most wanted man on the planet: Osama bin Laden.

This was the guy who wrecked the carefree, post-Communist party the twenty-first century was supposed to be. The one guy who screwed it all up for the rest of us. If this guy is such a big deal, why haven't we caught him? Why haven't we found him? Is he a nine-foot-tall ninja with mind-control powers? Why haven't we spent every resource and hired every person we can to turn over every rock on earth to find him?

I mean, who is this guy? Why does he like to terrorize us? What does he want? Why do people support him?

Despite all the face time he got in the media, I bet most Americans really don't know much about Osama bin Laden. Be honest. Would you pick him as a category on *Jeopardy!*? He's the Most Wanted Man on Earth, the man who single-handedly terrorized the entire United States, and I bet most of us know more about Britney Spears than we do about bin Laden.

Sure, there isn't an American alive who doesn't know what he looks like. With his narrow, sharp face and long nose, his dark eyes and scraggly beard, emerging from a cave in long robes and head wrap with an AK-47 dangling from one hand, he was the very image of the evildoer I'd heard so much about. The poster boy for fanatics. If he

hadn't made himself the global enemy of the West, we might have created him.

But what did I really know about him? What did I know about his life before September 11? Where did he come from? Where did he get his ideas? Why did he decide to start Al Qaeda? Why did he make us his enemy? Was he married? Did he have kids? Did they run and hug him when he came home to the cave after a hard day of global jihadism? ("What did you do at work today, Daddy?" "Oh, I terrorized the West." "Cool!") And what was he doing living in a cave, anyway? Wasn't he, like, a multimillionaire? What drove him to give up the cushy life in favor of waging jihad?

For that matter, what the hell is a jihad? What's a fatwa? What do other Muslims think of Osama? Do they all hate us, or is it just a lunatic fringe?

I wanted to know. And I really wanted to know how we got to this point where the United States, one of the most revered and respected countries around, is now one of the most hated on earth. I needed some answers, and I figured other people might, too.

So there it was. At that moment, in January of 2006, I decided that I would do what no one else could. I would take my complete lack of knowledge, experience, or expertise and put it to good use by looking for the most wanted and most dangerous man on earth. And to sniff him out I thought I had to try to *figure* him out. Like Sherlock Holmes getting inside Moriarty's head. Or that chick in *Profiler*.

Maybe I could fix this mess. Maybe not. Maybe he'd agree to a mano-a-mano cage match to settle this thing forever. Maybe not. At the very least, I'd try to tackle the one question no one else could answer: Where in the world is Osama bin Laden?

Four months later. April 2006. Morning. I opened my eyes to see a beautiful blonde staring at me. It was my

girlfriend, Alex. She smiled at me as she came into early-morning focus. I believe I smiled back.

"I think I'm pregnant," she said.

I closed my eyes and said to myself, "You're going to open your eyes and find that this is all a dream."

I opened my eyes and there she was, still smiling.

"How do you know?" I asked her. I was pretty awake now. From the groggy borders of deep REM sleep to a heart-pounding post-marathon dry-mouth sweat in 0.24 seconds.

She pulled one of those little plastic urine sticks out from under the covers and showed me the plus sign in the little window.

"But that's only one test," I said. "You can't be sure with just one test."

She reached under the covers again and pulled out five more little EPT sticks, fanning them out in front of my face. My eyes jumped from plus sign to plus sign to plus sign to plus sign to plus sign, then back to her eyes, glistening and anxious.

I couldn't speak. It felt as if I'd swallowed one of those EPTs. I closed my eyes again, and had another quick conversation with myself: "Pull yourself together, man. What did you think was gonna happen? You're getting married in a month anyway. This is what married people do. Well, this and get very out of shape."

I opened my eyes.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I think we're going to have a baby," I said. I smiled, rolled over, and hugged and kissed her.

But inside, ten thousand questions and ideas and fears had all started welling up inside me. Me. A dad. What kind of father was I going to be? I just got really good at taking care of myself! I mean, I'd made it through all the pre-planning test stages of responsibility that determine parental aptitude. Stage 1: The plants in my apartment

were all still alive. Great sign. I could water and care for greenery. Stage 2: The cat. He was still alive and kicking! He didn't look malnourished or neglected or unhappy. He still slept in the bed with me, so he *must* like me! Stage 3: The dog. Dammit! I missed the dog stage. This is *the* most important stage, especially in New York, because dogs are a *real* responsibility. You gotta walk them and play with them and pay attention to them and pick up their doody off the sidewalk. Great preparation for a kid, and I'd missed it. Crap!

"It's okay," I told myself. "You got two outta three. Still very good signs that you can actually handle some responsibility." Only now this little old-person-space-alien-looking thing is going to be coming into my life, and it's going to be completely dependent on me. Me! Scary.

Fudge. I'd already started the ball rolling on my quest for Osama. The ball hadn't rolled far yet, but I was doing extra push-ups, wearing more sensible shoes, and prepping to leave the country in a few months. What should I do now? Stay home with Alex and discover my nesting instincts, or stay on the path to finding His Scariness?

Double fudge! Being a dad meant that I couldn't just think about what was best for me, or my girlfriend. I had to consider the big picture. And what, exactly, was the big picture? I thought ... I squinted ... I started to see something. ...

Now, suddenly, it came into focus. What kind of a world are Alex and I bringing this kid into? He or she will be our responsibility for at least the next eighteen years. It'll be our duty to nurture her, educate her, protect her. Children are like little sponges, soaking up everything you do and say, everything in their environment—all the good and all the bad, from toxic chemicals to toxic emotions. What sort of world will our little SpongeBob see and hear?

A pretty screwy one, to judge by the news. We'd just marked the third anniversary of the invasion of Iraq. We'd

gotten rid of Saddam Hussein, but we'd been caught completely by surprise in the aftermath of his removal—and had compounded the chaos with extraordinary blunders of our own.

The cost of our occupying the country had risen to nearly \$10 billion a month.⁸ Ten billion dollars! A month! How would I explain that to my kid? You could house all the homeless people in America with what it was costing us to be in Iraq in April alone. And what was all that money buying us? Every morning I looked in the papers and saw more slaughter, more chaos.

How was our *other* war, the one in Afghanistan, going?

Don't ask. Though we'd just passed the fourteenth anniversary of the Soviet Union's final retreat from Afghanistan in 1992, the place was still a mess. In March, President Bush had made a "surprise" visit to Kabul,⁹ where he promised that we would "help Afghanistan grow its democracy and defend those who ... can't stand the thought of terrorism. ... Our desire is to see this country flourish." But all that had flourished in Afghanistan was the Taliban insurgency, Al Qaeda recruiting and training operations, and the poppy harvest.

Iraq and Afghanistan were being called "the frontlines in the Global War on Terror" (also known as the GWOT, pronounced Gee-wot, as in "Gee, wot a predicament we've gotten ourselves into!"). But there were a lot of sidelines in the news. Countries like England, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan paid for being our allies in the GWOT by becoming targets for terrorists. Pretty much the entire Middle East had seen even more terrorist violence than we had. Israel and the decades-long issue of the Palestinian refugees were still sources of rage for Muslims around the world, and a handy recruitment tool for groups like Al Qaeda. France, where people seem to hate our culture as much as Osama does, had become a major recruiting zone for young extremists.

Was all this trouble really caused by one guy? Or, at least, by the ideas he'd come to symbolize? Somehow, the fact that I had a little bundle of joy (and fear) on the way made it seem even more important that I get out there and try to find some answers. I had to do this—for me, for my family, for the child I was about to have. I had to face the terror. I had to know what kind of world I was about to bring a child into. What kind of father I could be. What hope we had for the future. You know, all that light and fluffy stuff.

And so, with the tentative blessing of my wife-to-be, I set off on the adventure of a lifetime—a trip that would take me around the world in search of someone people say is the Devil himself. As I stared into Alex's eyes after we'd agreed that I wouldn't give up this quest, I remembered something my grandmother used to say to me: Be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it.

CHAPTER 2
I'LL TAKE OSAMA FOR \$200,
ALEX

LIKE MOST AMERICANS, I knew very little about Islam and Muslims. I grew up knowing only one or two Muslims as a child, and I was never even exposed to their beliefs until I went to college. I never learned about their religion in school and knew nothing of its roots or its heritage. Thank you, public education system. My first real exposure was at the University of Southern California, when I met a guy down the hall from me who was a Muslim. It was he who first enlightened me, if you will.

We're supposed to be in a "clash of civilizations" with Islam, right? I know what American civilization is: football, baseball, hot dogs, beer, guns, four-wheelers, Brangelina—and democracy. But what is Islamic civilization, and why are we so down on each other? All I knew growing up was that Muslims believe in Allah, face Mecca when they pray, and don't dig on the swine. (Which would be a bummer for me, since I find it to be sacrilicious.)

After doing a television show about Islam in America for the FX network, I knew a bit more, but not enough. If I was going to go looking for spooky ole Osama, the first step in my journey should be to talk to more Muslims. Learn a little more about some of the basic tenets of Islam. Find out what other Muslims thought of Osama and his ideas. Do they like him, or does he terrorize them, too? How does his version of Islam fit with theirs?

STAGE 1: GET EDUMACATED

I asked Reza Aslan, the Iranian-American religious scholar, journalist, and author of *No god but God*¹ to teach me about Islamic culture. We arranged to meet for lunch in an Egyptian restaurant in Greenwich Village. The walls were covered in red, almost psychedelic prints. We sat on the softly carpeted floor and leaned back on thick pillows. A low table in front of us was covered with small dishes of traditional Egyptian hors d'oeuvres, or *mezze*: baba ganoush, hummus, falafel, pita, olives, cheese. In the center of the table, a large glass *shisha* (or hookah, the Arabian predecessor of the dorm-room bong) bubbled whenever one of us took a drag of the apple-flavored tobacco. We were entertained by a belly dancer, a beautiful girl with lustrous black hair and liquid hips, who turned out to be Israeli.

Ah, New York.

I leaned back and asked Reza, "Is this a good representation of Islam?"

He smiled wryly. "This is a good representation of an Egyptian restaurant in New York," he answered.

Oh, well.

When many of us Americans hear the word *Muslim* we think *Arab*. Or we hear *Muslim* and think *terrorist*, since all good Muslims are taught by the Koran to kill infidels, right?

Both images, Reza explained, are wildly inaccurate stereotypes. Although it began in what's now Saudi Arabia, Islam isn't just an Arab religion. There are probably about one and a half billion Muslims in the world now, making it the second-largest religion after Christianity, which has about two billion followers. Together, they represent more than half of the people in the world.

Many Arabs are Muslims, but it is estimated that only about 20 percent of Muslims are Arabs. In fact, a little more than half of all Muslims actually live in South and

Central Asia. The country with the most Muslims: Indonesia, where there are more than 280 million. Who knew?

“What’s the biggest misconception Americans have of Muslims?” I asked Reza.

“That somehow Islam is this monolithic thing,” he said. “Islam is unquestionably the most eclectic, most diverse religion in the history of the world. You can fly from Casablanca to Cairo to Riyadh to Beirut and see vastly different versions of Islam. And yet, at the same time, I think because of some of these very loud voices—particularly voices of extremism and traditionalism that we hear all the time—there is an impression that Islam is this monolithic idea.”

When I asked Reza why Islam is so diverse, he said that, first of all, it’s because it started in Mecca, which in the sixth century was “a religious melting pot, a city full of Jews, Christians in all their varieties, pagans, Zoroastrians, even pre-Islamic Arab monotheists. It was a place of great and profound religious experimentation.”

Kind of like Haight-Ashbury in the sixties, I thought, with its beaded curtains, handmade rugs, and hookahs.

Muhammad took all that religion around him and, through divine inspiration, delivered “not a new message but a new *kind* of message,” Reza said. “In fact, over and over again in his preachings, over and over again in the Koran, there is a reminder that what you are hearing is not new. This is the same message that was given to Adam, and to Abraham, and to Moses, and to Jesus, and to all the prophets. The only difference is that this was the first time this message had been given to an Arab people.”

But where does Allah come in? I asked him.

“*Allah* is just the Arabic word for *God*,” Reza explained, smiling.

See? I was learning things already.

Islam stayed diverse, Reza went on, because it spread out of the Arabian Peninsula with incredible speed, sweeping through North Africa, the Persian Empire, and into Europe in less than a century. People in all those places adapted the new religion to local conditions and practices. To this day there's no central authority, no pope of Islam. Islam is more like Protestantism, with many different variations and regional or personal interpretations. The two major sects within Islam are the Sunni and the Shia, a split that goes all the way back to the years right after the prophet Muhammad died, when his followers became divided over who should succeed him. About 80 to 85 percent of Muslims worldwide are Sunni. Another variant is Sufism, the most mystical strain of Islam.

"So if there's no central authority, no Muslim Vatican, to whom do you turn when you've got a spiritual question?" I asked him.

Traditionally, Reza said, Muslims have looked to local religious leaders for guidance. These include religious scholars, the ulema, who interpret the Sharia, the body of Islamic religious and legal writings. In most Islamic countries, civil courts and Sharia exist in parallel, and the strictness with which Sharia law is observed differs from one to the other. For example, Sharia has been more strictly observed in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan under the Taliban than in other Muslim societies.

"There are things that all Muslims have in common," Reza explained. "What are sometimes referred to as the Five Pillars of Islam. The first is prayer. The Sunnis pray five times a day, the Shiites, or Shia, pray three times a day. All Muslims pray exactly the same way: they all face Mecca. It's a way of connecting not just with every Muslim in the world but with Muslims throughout time, all the way back to the prophet Muhammad."

The second pillar is fasting during the twenty-eight days of Ramadan. The third is the obligation to give alms. The

fourth is making a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in your life.

“The fifth pillar is the only one that is not about action or ritual,” Reza said. “It’s about belief. It’s the Shahada, the profession of faith: ‘There is no god but Allah, and Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.’”

“Got it. Let’s get back to those voices of extremism within Islam,” I said. “Osama has been one of the loudest. All those tapes he made, issuing fatwas, declaring jihad. Which version of Islam does all that represent?”

To understand Osama bin Laden, Reza said, you first have to understand his birthplace, Saudi Arabia. The land where Islam began, and home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

The United States and Saudi Arabia have been friends since the monarchy was established in the 1930s. Americans helped the Saudis exploit their enormous oil riches and modernize their country, and, in return, the Saudis have helped keep Americans in gas-guzzling SUVs, Hummers, and private jets. The two countries have watched out for each other’s interests in the Middle East and in global markets. The royal family, known as the House of Saud, and the Bush family have been friends for decades. Saudi Arabia is one of the most Westernized—even the most Americanized—of all Arab societies.

But, at the same time, there’s this huge conflict within their society, because Saudi Arabia is home to—and a major exporter around the world of—an Islamic fundamentalist movement called Wahhabism, a source of inspiration for Osama and a lot of other radical jihadists who don’t like America or Western influence at all. (Not to be confused with Wasabi-ism, a religious devotion to sushi.) Wahhabism dates back to the 1700s, when a man named Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab began to preach a purist, fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran. In its most radical form, it includes an intolerance toward other

religions, especially Judaism—Wahhabist clerics routinely refer to Jewish people as “brothers of apes and pigs.” Nice. But extreme Wahhabists even consider other forms of Islam not to be true Islam.

Al-Wahhab came under the protection of a local emir, Muhammad ibn Saud. Between 1902 and 1932, the House of Saud united all of what we know as Saudi Arabia into a kingdom, bringing all the tribes under its political rule and all sects of Islam—Sunni, Shia, Sufism—under Wahhabism. Wahhabism became, in effect, the state religion, taught in all schools, public and private, and at the universities. Since the 1970s, the Saudis have spent billions of dollars of their oil wealth actively promoting the creation of thousands of mosques and madrassas (religious schools) around the world, from Southeast Asia to the United States, to spread Wahhabist teachings.

“No one would have heard of the Saudis or the Wahhabis if it weren’t for the fact that the country struck oil,” Reza said. “And now this tiny, backward tribe and this antirational, heretical, puritanical sect is essentially in charge of the global economy.”

It’s as if Jed Clampett, after finding that bubbling crude, had moved into the White House and picked Jerry Falwell as his VP. Scary stuff.

But the relationship between the House of Saud and the Wahhabist clerics has not always been a smooth one, Reza went on. In modernizing their country and exploiting its enormous oil reserves, the Saudi royal family has often come into conflict with the clerics, who stress the need to keep Islam “pure” from modern and Western influences.

Born in 1957, Osama grew up² in a household that was right in the middle of these tensions between reactionary Islam and the Westernizing of the Saudi elite. His father, a poor and functionally illiterate immigrant from Yemen, became a self-made billionaire with close ties to the House of Saud. He founded the largest construction firm in Saudi

Arabia, working on many projects for the royal family—airports, highways, railroads—to create a modern infrastructure for the country. He was proudest, however, of the restoration work he was commissioned to do on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, the holiest place in Islam, as well as the mosques in Medina and Jerusalem. He was the patriarch of a family dynasty, the Saudi Binladin Group (SBG), when he died in a helicopter crash in 1967. Osama was ten years old.

Despite their father's observance of Wahhabism, most of Osama's roughly fifty-three brothers and sisters (his dad had about twenty-two wives during his life—four at a time, the maximum allowed by Islam— and kept them busy) embraced the Westernizing process and became international jet-setters. His oldest brother, Salem, studied and married in England and vacationed in places like Disneyland. Salem became friendly with both President Reagan—whom he allegedly helped funnel funds to the Nicaraguan Contras—and the Bushes.

Osama, meanwhile, stuck close to the family home in Jeddah, a port on the Red Sea that's a major entry point for pilgrims to Mecca. Instead of studying abroad, he went to an elite local high school,³ where he may have been first exposed to radical thought in Islamic study groups. Then he attended King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah, where the faculty was full of ultraconservatives. One of them was a Palestinian, Abdul Azzam, who would become one of Osama's mentors. He filled his students' heads with the idea that Islam was under attack from Western influences and needed to be defended and purified at all costs. "Jihad and the rifle alone,"⁴ he told them. "No negotiations, no conferences, and no dialogues."

And that, friends and neighbors, is where Osama began to think the thoughts that eventually made him America's Most Wanted. I made a mental note that if I was going to track the man down, maybe one of the places I should look

for him was Saudi Arabia. Even if he wasn't there, checking it out might help me get inside his head, and that might help me figure out where he might be.

...

Wahhabism isn't the only fundamentalist movement in Islam, Reza explained, and Islamic fundamentalism needs to be understood in the context of a worldwide spread of fundamentalist movements over the past century or so. "What fundamentalism in all religions, whether Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, or Muslim, has in common is that it's not an independent ideology," Reza said. "Fundamentalism is a *reactionary* ideology. It needs something to rebel against."

The term *fundamentalism* was actually coined in America, by Protestant evangelicals in the 1920s. They felt that secularism and science threatened their Christian values, and they "reverted to an older, purer form of Christianity, to the 'fundamentals' of their faith."

In the Muslim world—as in the United States, only more so—fundamentalism has not just religious implications but social and political ones as well. People like the Wahhabis and the Taliban in Afghanistan believe that "Islam is not just a religion but a comprehensive code of conduct," Reza said. "It rules not just your relationship with God but your relationship with your neighbors, your relationship with your state."

This outlook doesn't seem so different from the views of many Christian fundamentalists in this country, who advocate the importance of "Christian values" in society and think that the American government should be run according to their beliefs.

To Reza, bin Laden takes Islam's lack of a central authority to radical extremes. He represents a "rabid individualization that is taking place in the Muslim world ...

where people no longer go to their clerics, their mosques, in order to get the answers that they are looking for.”

Osama and others like him are the Martin Luthers of Islam, Reza maintained, “because Martin Luther’s point was that the church could not define what Christianity meant anymore, only the individual could.” And what bin Laden is saying “is that the clerics, the mullahs, the imams, the people who have essentially had a monopoly over the meaning and message of Islam for fourteen centuries, no longer matter. He tells his followers, ‘Don’t listen to your clerics. Don’t listen to your mullahs. They have nothing for you, nothing to offer you. Listen to me.’ But you can’t say something like that without opening up a Pandora’s box in which anyone—with any kind of agenda, whatever their social prejudices may be, however bigoted they may be, however they see themselves and their role in society—now has divine authority to define not just the Scripture but the religion itself.”

Luther’s Protestant Reformation, Reza noted, led to a century of warfare and social upheaval in Europe. He believes that we’re now seeing the same sort of turmoil in bin Laden’s Islamic Reformation. And terrorism is a part of that upheaval.

“There is a criminal, dangerous element of extremists and militants throughout the Muslim world, non-state entities like Al Qaeda, who have a global agenda,” Reza said. “They are not fighting against America. They are fighting a war against the Devil, they are fighting an angelic war—a cosmic battle between good and evil.” Hey, what works for Mötley Crüe ...

Every time we turn on the TV, we hear that the extremists have declared a “global jihad” against us. *Jihad* is a new word for most Americans—and most of us have no idea what it means. The first time I heard it, or actually paid attention to it, was in the movie *True Lies*, when the

terrorists of Crimson Jihad were going to blow up Miami. I asked Reza what it means.

The Koran defines it in two ways, he said. The “greater jihad” is a personal, inner struggle to better yourself, to resist temptation and evil. This leads to a “lesser jihad,” which, Reza said, is “the physical struggle to remove injustice from the world and allow a Muslim to worship in freedom.” In the Koran it is “spelled out in black and white” that this type of jihad “can only be a defensive strike. You cannot offensively engage in jihad.” Furthermore, he said, only a mullah or an imam is supposed to be able to declare a jihad. Not just any angry Muslim.

Terrorist groups like Al Qaeda have taken the concept of jihad out of context and made it their sole focus and mission. “They have created a new kind of religion, jihadism, that ignores every other aspect of Islam—all of Islamic history, the history of diverse Islamic thought, the diversity of Islamic theology—and boiled it down to one element: jihad jihad jihad,” Reza explained.

He also believes that in framing the Global War on Terror in the same terms the extremists do—“this cosmic battle between the forces of Christianity and the forces of Islam”—we play right into their agenda.

“We’ve completely legitimized the vision of the world that this small group of lunatics have—by our own propaganda, by our own rhetoric, by the way we’ve conducted ourselves in the War on Terror.”

“I’ve decided to go looking for Osama,” I told Reza. “Where do you think he is?”

When he got over laughing his head off, he answered, “I think everyone knows where he is. He’s on the border of Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Afghans say he’s on the Pakistani side, the Pakistanis say he is on the Afghan side.”

I made a mental note to put Afghanistan and Pakistan on my itinerary.

“If everyone knows where he is, why haven’t we caught him?” I asked.

“I don’t think we are looking for Osama bin Laden,” Reza said with a shrug. “I don’t think he’s much of a priority. I think somehow we are under the impression that he has been marginalized, that because his physical movements have been hampered he doesn’t mean as much. This is profoundly mistaken. Bin Laden is no longer even a figurehead anymore. He is something far greater than that. He has become a demigod. And, as such, his living, his existence, and our inability to capture and kill him have turned him into a mythic figure. It is very important that we put an end to that image, and do so quickly.”

“Yeah, they keep trying that with Freddy Krueger, too, and look how far that’s gotten them,” I said.

To hear what other Muslims in America could tell me about Osama, I went to the obvious place to further my education and knowledge: a falafel restaurant. Actually, I went to a mosque on the Upper East Side of Manhattan (although I do love falafels). The Islamic Cultural Center, built in the 1990s, was the first mosque to be erected in Manhattan (other mosques had taken over existing buildings), and boy is it a beauty. From the outside, it’s a modern translation of Islam’s time-honored dome-and-minaret architecture. Inside, it’s a cube of pure white, airy and filled with sunlight in the daytime, very restful and meditative.

Before my visit, I did some research and found out that despite its short history the mosque had already been at the center of controversy. Within a couple of weeks of 9/11, the mosque’s first imam, an Egyptian, Sheikh Muhammad Al-Gamei’a,⁵ was quoted in Arabic media saying some strange and pretty undiplomatic things about America. He declared, “The situation has gotten so bad that Arabs are murdered in the streets,” and “If the Americans knew that the Jews carried out the September 11 attacks, they would