

The Roots of 9/11: Book Review of *The Looming Tower*

by Marcia Allen, Collection Development and Processing Manager, Manhattan Public Library

I admit my ignorance: I really knew little about the volatile nature of the Middle East or the reasoning behind 9/11. I had heard references to longstanding hatred for the West, but I couldn't fathom the reasons for that malice. And I knew next to nothing about militant Islamism and terrorism in this country

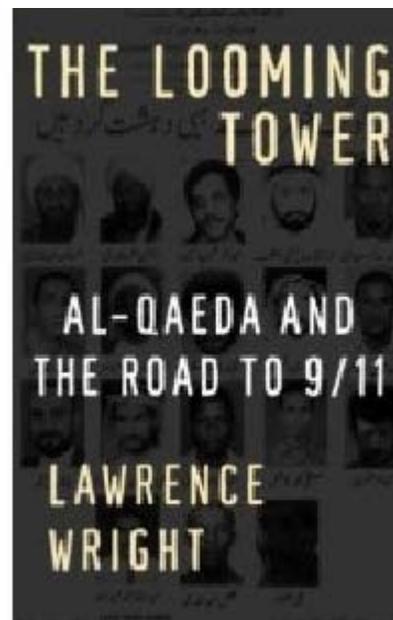
While I'm still no expert on the hostilities on the other side of the world, I have learned a great deal, courtesy of one excellent writer. Lawrence Wright, a staff member for *The New Yorker*, has written a truly astounding book about terrorism. *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* is undoubtedly one of the best of the many offerings on terrorism.

Wright's book begins with a brief biography of Sayyid Qutb, an Islamic who came to the United States in the late 1940s to study at an American university. Horrified by what he perceived to be the blatant sexuality of American women and by the waste and carelessness he saw in American lifestyles, Qutb returned to his home an embittered man. His growing fundamentalism placed him at odds with Egyptian authorities, and he became a martyr for extreme Islamism. His death lent him heroic stature, and other young men soon followed his beliefs.

The story of Qutb is a fascinating one, but Wright's account of Osama bin Laden is even more spirited. Wright tells us, for example, about the broken home of bin Laden's childhood, as well as the man's fragile health. He tells us of his marriages and his attraction to life in Afghanistan. We learn of his growing charisma and his friendship with Aymen al-Zawahiri.

Beyond the biographical sketches lies the story of a powerful movement. Wright perceives the 6-Day War of the 1960s as a pivotal event, one which solidified resentment against the Israelis, as well as their American allies. Further complications, like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, sparked the rise of formal training camps that developed into a formidable resistance. The bombing of various U.S. embassies and an initial attempt to destroy the World Trade Center attested to the growing menace of terrorism. Wright's detailed examination of the recruitment of the World Trade Center bombers is heartbreakingly vivid.

I found this book to be exhausting, chiefly because of the severity of the threat it implies. But I also found it to be utterly captivating. With the fluidity of a well-crafted novel, *The Looming Tower* recounts



a story we can't afford to ignore. This is required reading for informed Americans.