

Los Angeles Times

Paranoia and a Partisan Agenda

Book Review: Features Desk

March 21, 2004

The year 1979 was a climactic one in the Islamic world. On Jan. 16 of that year, the shah of Iran fled the country he had ruled in the face of a revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. That event marked the birth of an entirely new kind of Islamist sensibility bent on active confrontation with everything Western. On Dec. 24, the armies of what was then the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, signaling a decisive chapter in Communism's death agony. A month before, on Nov. 20, a mob of extremists -- adherents of Sunni Islam, rather than the Shiites that controlled Iran -- seized the vast structure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Islam's holiest site and the place where millions of Muslims assemble for the annual pilgrimage, or hajj.

Memory of the 1979 Mecca Mosque rebellion has been tenacious, especially among Saudi subjects, who claim the House of Saud called for French paratroops to retake the sacred precincts, killing hundreds of Muslims in the process. Others claim that American civilian mercenaries suppressed the rebellion. One Saudi dissident told me, with tears in his eyes, that he had touched the bullet marks in the walls with his own fingers years afterward. So much for claims, trumpeted far and wide, that Muslim holy soil must not be defiled by non-Muslims -- the centerpiece of propaganda by Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda in their war against the U.S. presence on Saudi territory.

The Grand Mosque was undergoing reconstruction in 1979, with work on the complex in the hands of the Saudi Bin Laden Group, as the massive construction enterprise (which made the father of Osama bin Laden colossally rich) is officially known. Without such projects for the transformation of Mecca and Medina into Las Vegas-style centers of Islamic architecture, the name might never have been known outside the Saudi kingdom.

According to Craig Unger in "House of Bush, House of Saud," the militants who seized the Mecca Mosque in 1979 were able to do so because of the involvement of Mahrous bin Laden, an elder brother of Osama, in the construction project. Indeed, Unger writes, "the Bin Laden family's trucks" were used in the raid. In the aftermath of the bloodbath, Unger writes, Mahrous bin Laden was arrested, but was later released and provided with a management post in the family business.

This charge will be a startling one to many experts in the field, as well as to most of those uninstructed in the convoluted nature of Saudi reality. That the Bin Laden clan was involved in terrorist activity inside the Saudi kingdom and has benefited from official negligence since the beginning of the recent cycle of global Muslim unrest is, at least, novel. It brings something seemingly new to the table of Saudology, the post-Sept. 11 school of analysis of the kingdom's inner and outer worlds, comparable with the Sovietology of the past.

But it is based, as shown in Unger's footnotes, on no more than a handful of references. A Google search revealed only 18 items linking the name "Mahrous" to the 1979 events.

Unfortunately, that is about all there is that appears fresh, or even very interesting, in Unger's book. A contributor to the New Yorker, Esquire and Vanity Fair, Unger seeks in this book to present the horror of Sept. 11, and quite a bit more of contemporary history, as a consequence of a "secret relationship between the world's two most powerful dynasties" (as the book's subtitle has it).

He has failed in the effort -- and more, he has betrayed a relentlessly **partisan agenda**, in which real journalism and historical research are as rare as oases in the Saudi deserts. His intent is clear enough: to discredit the House of Bush in this, an election year, by recycling almost every conspiracy claim made about the family, associations and administration of George W. Bush.

Some of what appears in this volume is just silly. To begin with, the House of Bush is by no means one of the world's two most powerful dynasties: It is enough to compare it with the Rockefellers to see the absurdity of that claim. Further, the House of Bush cannot be compared with the House of Saud as a dynastic phenomenon, considering that the former produced a U.S. senator (Prescott Bush, father of George H.W.), two presidents and a governor of Florida, while the latter has remade the core of the Arabian Peninsula, and a large part of global Islam, in its own bizarre image (based on the cult of Wahhabism) over the last 250 years. Of course, George W. Bush is currently the world's most powerful single individual -- but one cannot seriously describe King Fahd of Saudi Arabia as his peer in war or statecraft. Tony Blair or Vladimir Putin might qualify, but the monarch of the Saudi state?

In addition, Unger's definition of a dynasty per se is about as loose as one can get. According to him, James A. Baker III, Frank Carlucci, the Carlyle Group, Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld are all members of the House of Bush. But the House of Saud, like every other real dynasty in history, from the Romanovs to the Rothschilds, is based on marriage and inheritance. Is somebody really hiding something from us? Are Cheney and Rumsfeld related to their boss by marriage?

Predictably, Unger seeks to transform the Carlyle Group, an investment entity that does indeed link some of the latter individuals with Saudi aristocrats and businessmen, into a gigantic economic power. Yet even he has to admit that Carlyle's entire holdings amount to no more than \$16 billion. How does this compare with ExxonMobil, which possesses assets of \$155 billion? How is it that the latter company, and other oil giants that have dictated U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia for the last 70 years, occupy so little space in Unger's account of U.S.-Saudi relations? The answer is obvious: They do not fit into his paranoid scenario.

Unger promises a great deal and delivers a pretty thin meal. In an appendix, he totes up the "financial transactions through which individuals and entities connected with the House of Saud transferred money to individuals and entities connected to the House of Bush." The result: \$1.5 billion, or one-tenth of Carlyle's holdings and 1% of ExxonMobil's.

The relationship between the U.S. government, its economic and political elite, and its counterparts in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia certainly merits examination, especially in the aftermath of Sept. 11, when 15 out of the 19 terrorists were Saudi subjects. It is unfortunate that President Bush has yet to demand an appropriately thorough and transparent accounting of Saudi involvement in Al Qaeda, as well as in the broader campaign for Wahhabization of world Islam and the transformation of a religion into a terrorist conspiracy.

But getting the facts we need and deserve to have from the Saudi authorities will not be helped by ascribing this lack to naked corruption in the Bush family or the state of Texas as a whole, which is a center of evil far more sinister than Saudi Arabia in Unger's universe.

Unger's book also features other errors and overstatements. Unger -- who should know better considering that he writes for such society organs as Vanity Fair -- refers to California's Bohemian Grove and its "secret meetings for a global elite since 1873." But the Bohemian Club, at its founding, was a social group made up of journalists, poets and other such "bohemian" folk. For the "global elite" of the 1870s to get to the redwood forests of Northern California -- for the kind of annual revels the club holds -- would have required extremely long, arduous and even dangerous journeys by steamship, railroad and horseback. Indeed, there was no rail line to Monte Rio, Calif., where the annual Grove bash takes place, until 1876. The "global elite" of those years preferred locations such as Baden-Baden or Corfu in stuffy old Europe.

Unger's book will be of no use to anybody who does not already hate President Bush. It will probably make its author plenty of money, for precisely that reason. But as journalism, or history, the serious reader would be better off looking elsewhere.