A BITTER HARVEST

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IN ITS understandable rage for justice, America may be tempted to overlook one uncomfortable fact. Its own policies in Afghanistan a decade and more ago helped to create both Osama bin Laden and the fundamentalist Taliban regime that shelters him.

The notion of jihad, or holy war, had almost ceased to exist in the Muslim world after the tenth century until it was revived, with American encouragement, to fire an international pan-Islamic movement after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. For the next ten years, the CIA and Saudi intelligence together pumped in billions of dollars' worth of arms and ammunition through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) to the many mujahideen groups fighting in Afghanistan.

The policy worked: the Soviet Union suffered such terrible loses in Afghanistan that it withdrew its forces in 1989, and the humiliation of that defeat, following on from the crippling cost of the campaign, helped to undermine the Soviet system itself. But there was a terrible legacy: Afghanistan was left awash with weapons, warlords and extreme religious zealotry.

For the past ten years that deadly brew has spread its ill-effects widely. Pakistan has suffered terrible destabilisation. But the afghanis, the name given to the young Muslim men who fought the infidel in Afghanistan, have carried their jihad far beyond: to the corrupt kingdoms of the Gulf, to the repressive states of the southern Mediterranean, and now, perhaps, to New York and Washington, DC.

Chief among the afghanis was Mr bin Laden, a scion of one of Saudi Arabia's richest business families. Recruited by the Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki al Faisal, to help raise funds for the jihad, he became central to the recruitment and training of mujahideen from across the Muslim world. Mr bin Laden fought against the Russians on the side of the ISI's favourite Afghan, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, whose Hezb-e-Islami party became the largest recipient of CIA money.

After the Russians withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989, the Americans quickly lost interest in the country and a struggle for power erupted among the mujahideen. But since no group was strong enough to capture and hold Kabul, the capital, Afghanistan slumped into anarchy. In 1995-96, a movement of Pathan students—Taliban—from religious schools in the border regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan swept the country, promising a restoration of order. They enjoyed Pakistani backing, and almost certainly the approval of the Americans.

Meanwhile, Mr bin Laden had become a self-avowed enemy of America, appalled at the presence of American troops on holy Saudi soil during the Gulf war. Exiled to Sudan, he was soon forced to leave. He secretly returned to Afghanistan, becoming a guest of the Taliban, whose interpretation of Islam and hostility to the West he shares. After attacks on two American embassies in 1998, America tried to persuade the Taliban to surrender him. When the regime refused, the Americans retaliated by raining cruise missiles on guerrilla camps in Afghanistan. The Taliban have steadfastly refused to hand Mr bin Laden over. As their guest he remains.