

## IN SEARCH OF OSAMA | By David Lamb '58

In the weeks before Christmas 2003, I whiled away the daylight hours waiting for Osama bin Laden. Every morning I'd clamber into a pickup truck in Kandahar with my interpreter and two armed guards and make the two-hour drive to the foothills of Afghanistan's Tora Bora Mountain. There, with a horde of other foreign correspondents, I'd watch the private armies of various warlords begin another day's trek into the snow-clad peaks in search of the man President Bush had promised to get "dead or alive."

Many rumors circulated through the military base camp where we hung out: bin Laden and his Al-

Qaeda terrorists were surrounded, cut off from an escape to Pakistan by waist-deep snow; bin Laden had taken refuge in a cave so elaborate it had elevators and tunnels that reached miles into the towering cliffs; bin Laden had been seen on a white stallion, galloping along a mountain path, rallying his troops. So we waited. Other captured Al-Qaeda fighters came down the mountain on mules, hands tied behind their backs. But not bin Laden.

He had slipped away, if indeed he had been on Tora Bora in the first place. Soon President Bush stopped mentioning his name and spoke instead of Saddam Hussein. In Arab capitals, bin Laden's "miraculous escape" and his defiance of the

West made him a folk hero. Mothers named newborn babies after him and shopkeepers hung his picture on their walls. And most of us in America were left to ask, "Who is this man?" and "How is it possible that a middle-aged Saudi millionaire can threaten the world's only superpower?"

Jonathan Randal '51, who covered the Middle East for four decades for *The Washington Post* and other publications, gives us thought-provoking and clear-headed answers to these questions in his newest book, *Osama: The Making of a Terrorist* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004). Randal's book is in the best tradition of boots-on-the-ground journalism, researched and written over several years of travel from Yemen to Afghanistan and Pakistan and culled from countless interviews with foreign intel-

ligence agents, bin Laden associates and others who dwell in the shadowy world of international terrorism.

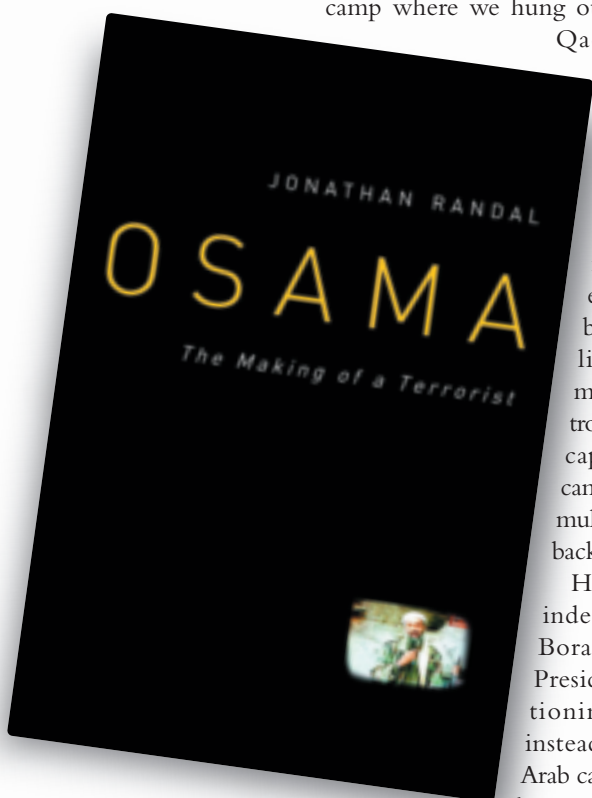
Randal's assessment of bin Laden's impact is one I do not quibble with. "It is too early," he writes, "to draw up a definitive balance sheet for Osama and jihadi Islam. But he arguably has changed American society as much as, perhaps more than, any single foreigner in contemporary times. There's an edginess in American life, bordering on paranoia. The USA Patriot Act and its restriction on civil liberties, hostile attitudes toward suspect immigrants, many of whom were held incommunicado for extended periods after September 11, and a general public fixation on security in what had prided itself as the world's most open society—all this can be laid at Osama's door."

The 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon—and earlier strikes orchestrated by bin Laden on two U.S. embassies in Africa and the USS *Cole* in Yemen—abruptly ended America's decade-long, post-Cold War "holiday from history," dashing the notion that an antimissile defense was enough to protect the United States. The half a million or so dollars it cost Al-Qaeda to plan for and execute the September 2001 attacks was pocket change compared to the \$10 billion the United States budgeted for counterterrorism.

Osama bin Laden was one of more than 50 children fathered by a former bricklayer, self-made man who rose to prominence as one of Saudi Arabia's richest and most successful contractors. The bin Ladens were (and are) an esteemed, moderate family in the oil-rich kingdom. Some of Osama's siblings were educated in Lebanon's finest schools and later graduated from Harvard, the University of Southern California and other Western universities. In contrast, Osama was far less worldly: He seldom traveled, seemed embarrassed by his inheritance, which some sources estimated as high as \$300 million, and was married by the age of 17.

When the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, bin Laden recruited and funded young Muslims to fight the attackers. Moscow's retreat a decade later turned bin Laden into a hero and he returned to Saudi Arabia as a sort of religious pop star. Not yet 30, he basked in the adulation of both the Arabs and the Americans. It remains unclear why a year after his return he founded Al-Qaeda (Arabic for "the base"), but gradually the soft-spoken man known for his sincere and quiet demeanor became radicalized, railing against the excesses of the Saudi royal family and the perceived injustices of U.S. policies toward Islam. In 1994, the Saudi government stripped him of his citizenship.

Randal finds fault with the Clinton administration



*The search for Osama bin Laden reaches a successful conclusion in journalist Jonathan Randal's new book.*

for underestimating the significance of bin Laden's return to Afghanistan in 1996 after he was expelled from the Sudan and with the Bush administration for launching an ill-defined war on all global terrorists with no exit strategy. The war in Iraq, he writes, diverted resources and attention from Afghanistan, where they were needed most, leaving us with the uncomfortable realization that, with or without Osama bin Laden, terrorism will be part of the global landscape for years to come.

One cannot help but recall, as Randal does, Don-

ald Rumsfeld's question in a leaked Defense Department memorandum in October 2003: "Is our present situation such that 'the harder we work, the behinder we get'?"

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*A foreign correspondent for The Los Angeles Times for the past 35 years and an eight-time nominee for the Pulitzer Prize, David Lamb is also the author of six books, including The Arabs: Journey Beyond the Mirage.*

## AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE ULTIMATE WASHINGTON INSIDER | By John Herney '46, '71 (Hon.)

In a 1967 interview with historian Arthur Schlesinger '33, Tommy Corcoran, longtime Washington insider and former New Dealer, asserted that "a good man cannot be a great man." Was he talking about his former boss, Franklin Roosevelt? About presidents in general? Or was the reference to himself? Author David McKean '75 isn't sure, though he ends his riveting biography of Corcoran, *Tommy the Cork: Washington's Ultimate Insider from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Steerforth Press, 2004), with this provocative idea. We are left to wonder, after 300 entertaining pages describing 40 years of Washington heroics and shenanigans, about the nexus of morality and politics in our nation's capital and whether our modern system of republican government militates against goodness in carrying out the people's business. We could do well to ruminate about that intriguing notion.

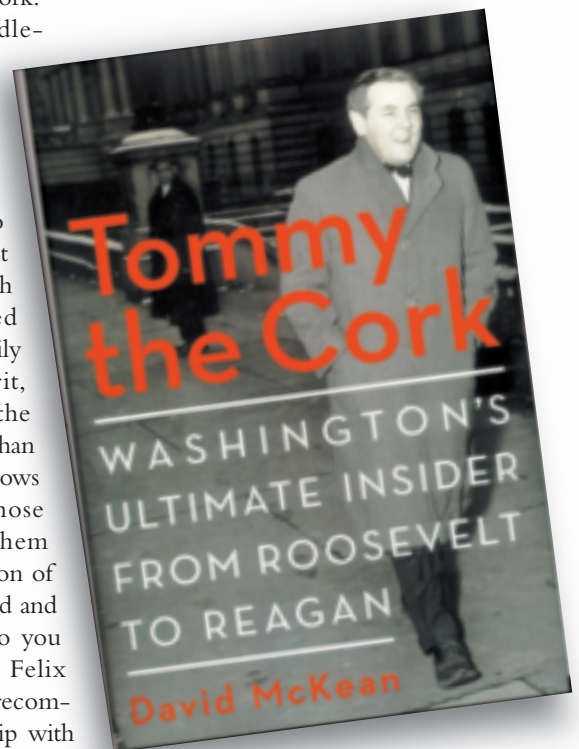
Surely McKean, whose day job is John Kerry's chief of staff (he writes his books in the evenings, after his three children are put to bed), provides us plenty of detail to chew on as we mull this over. His subject, Thomas G. Corcoran, knew everyone who was anybody in Washington from the heady days of the early 1930s to the malaise of the late 1970s. Thus, presidents, Supreme Court justices, senators and congressmen, significant staffers, reporters and editors, socialites and super-lawyers—they are all here. Holmes, Frankfurter, and Hugo Black; White House deal-makers from FDR to Carter; VIPs such as Rayburn, Kissinger and J. Edgar; newspapermen from Drew Pearson and the Alsops to Bob Woodward; and more shadowy figures such as Claire and Anna Chennault—every and all of our nation's headline-makers move in and out of Corcoran's life in Washington. Moreover, as the book makes clear—and this is one of its important points, among many, about power in Washington—headlines are also

made through the work of people we hear little or nothing about, including such staffers as Ben Cohen, Ed Prichard, Bobby Baker and others who make their bosses look good—or bad. All were friends and colleagues of Tommy the Cork.

Not bad for a middle-class, Irish-Catholic kid from Pawtucket, who grew up back when Catholics and Irishmen weren't exactly on the fast track to political power. Yet America in the early 20th century also rewarded gifts the Corcoran family had in abundance—grit, brains, optimism and the ability to work harder than the next guy. McKean shows us how, if you take those qualities and leaven them with a yeasty combination of what you know (Harvard and Harvard Law) and who you know (professors like Felix Frankfurter who will recommend you for a clerkship with the likes of Oliver Wendell Holmes) and bingo, a young man can make something of himself.

Still, as McKean also makes very clear, this Corcoran fellow was not any ordinary Irish-Catholic kid. After all, he became Holmes' favorite clerk, and he worked even harder than almost all of those champion workaholics—

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*David McKean '75 explores 40 years of Washington shenanigans and heroics in his biography of Thomas Corcoran.*

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FDR's brain trusters. The fact that he played a mean accordion and piano and sang Irish ditties didn't hurt either. Tommy Corcoran was something special.

Those special qualities made him invaluable to FDR when he needed, quickly—as in virtually overnight—a bill to tame the security industry. Poof, Tommy and Ben Cohen helped craft the 1933 Securities Act and the Securities Exchange Act. Or when those corporate behemoths needed a little discipline, Tommy and Ben were only too happy to oblige with the Public Utilities Holding Company Act. This was only the beginning, as Tommy, through an unobtrusive post in the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, became a one-man employment agency for the era's best and brightest. Consequently, countless friends and friends-of-friends became beholden for this job or that and the public rolls became dotted, all over Washington, with FOT's, Friends of Tommy.

Good thing, too, as Corcoran's penchant for the quick political fix or not-so-gentle arm-twisting eventually put him on the outs with his old boss. Tommy was moved to the periphery of the FDR White House and then out altogether, without access to the center of power. But as McKean so insightfully reveals, influence can be exercised in a variety of ways in Washington, and after 1941 Corcoran became the master of them all, a mastery he shared with Clark Clifford, the subject of an earlier McKean book. Through their law offices, these two men exercised enormous influence and became, as the title says, the ultimate insiders.

As proof of that influence, though Corcoran never again held a position in any subsequent administration nor any public office, his fingerprints were all over major decisions affecting the republic: Supreme Court appointments and decisions (the latter nearly got him into major trouble); U.S.-China policy; the 1954 CIA coup in Guatemala; LBJ's decision to run as vice president in 1960; the secret, and possibly illegal, talks by operatives of then-candidate Nixon with

Vietnam officials in 1968. Along the way, a Congressional hearing or two emerged looking into the probity and ethics of Corcoran activity, though nothing that officially condemned his sometimes-bruising style of making government responsive to his clients. That's what lobbying, Corcoran-style, is all about, folks.

There is much to learn here about Washington, about how the rules of getting things done have changed over the years—and McKean helps to sort all that out. While that is reason enough to pick up this important book, there are other rewards as well. Corcoran was a man of many parts, not just a political fixer. His generosity to men and women in need was sometimes astonishing. To an Irish Catholic like Corcoran, family was vital in defining oneself, in giving meaning to one's life. Sadly, Corcoran's family life was not without its complexities. Though he was not the most attentive husband and father, the early death of his wife, Peggy, as well as that of his most beloved daughter, Margaret—who died at only 28 from an overdose of sleeping pills—were great blows to him. Those very personal stories compel our attention and our wonder at what sustained Corcoran in the face of such loss. Whatever it was, Corcoran managed to remain buoyant and optimistic, not to mention influential, and he continued to play a major role in resolution of public issues until his death in 1981.

That role, Corcoran's influence on Washington decisions, gets us back to that issue of the good man and the great man. McKean forces us to consider not only entertaining and sometimes astonishing displays of political dexterity, but the purpose and the morality behind them. No doubt Washington in Corcoran's day is much like Washington today—with its share of good men and women...and a few great ones. Reading this fine book not only gives us striking examples of each, it helps us define the difference. ■

*Jack Herney, who joined the Academy's history department in 1968, is the Robert Shaw White Professor of History, as well as a past dean of faculty.*