



The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole who Infiltrated the CIA

Joby Warrick

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A stunning narrative account of the mysterious Jordanian who penetrated both the inner circle of al-Qaeda and the highest reaches of the CIA, with a devastating impact on the war on terror.

In December 2009, a group of the CIA's top terrorist hunters gathered at a secret base in Khost, Afghanistan, to greet a rising superspy: Humam Khalil al-Balawi, a Jordanian double-agent who infiltrated the upper ranks of al-Qaeda. For months, he had sent shocking revelations from inside the terrorist network and now promised to help the CIA assassinate Osama bin Laden's top deputy. Instead, as he stepped from his car, he detonated a thirty-pound bomb strapped to his chest, instantly killing seven CIA operatives, the agency's worst loss of life in decades.

In *The Triple Agent*, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Joby Warrick takes us deep inside the CIA's secret war against al-Qaeda, a war that pits robotic planes and laser-guided missiles against a cunning enemy intent on unleashing carnage in American cities. Flitting precariously between the two sides was Balawi, a young man with extraordinary gifts who managed to win the confidence of hardened terrorists as well as veteran spymasters. With his breathtaking accounts from inside al-Qaeda's lair, Balawi appeared poised to become America's greatest double-agent in half a century—but he was not at all what he seemed. Combining the powerful momentum of *Black Hawk Down* with the institutional insight of Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side*, Warrick takes the readers on a harrowing journey from the slums of Amman to the inner chambers of the White House in an untold true story of miscalculation, deception, and revenge.

The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole who Infiltrated the CIA Details

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From Reader Review The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole who Infiltrated the CIA for online ebook

Paul Pessolano says

"The Triple Agent" by Joby Warrick, published by Doubleday.

Category – History/Military

The story of Humam Khalil al-Balawi is very convoluted and hard to believe. He is responsible for the worst loss of life in the CIA in decades.

Humam was very intelligent and came from a well to do family. He received a medical degree and was working at a United Nations medical clinic in a Palestinian refugee camp. He was married and had two daughters.

Humam also had another side of him that espoused radical Muslim philosophy. Unknown to his family, he became Abu Dujana al-Khorasani, his alter ego on the internet that spewed anti- American rhetoric to a large Muslim audience.

He was finally apprehended by the Jordanian secret police, the Mukhabarat, and was detained and when he was released three days later became an agent for the Mukhabarat, well at least they thought so.

The CIA was looking for any double agent that could give them information on the most wanted men of al-Qaeda. Humam was able to penetrate al-Qaeda and gain their confidence. At the same time he was able to convince the CIA that he had the information they wanted and needed.

Humam agreed to meet the CIA at their Khost, Afghanistan facility. The CIA was so eager to meet with him that they disregarded the basic cautionary measures usually applied to visitors to the facility.

A well told story that oft times reads more like a mystery/thriller than history. The author does an excellent job telling the story of the CIA agents that were involved and the CIA's response to this tragedy.

Book Him Danno says

I have never read a book like this before, I have read so many books of fiction and Non-Fiction about the CIA but never one on the current decade. It starts off with the Bomb blasting of the Khost CIA outpost in Afghanistan. As mentioned in the book several times it was the darkest day for the CIA because so many CIA officers were killed and it could have been prevented had they taken the proper steps to protect themselves, instead of worrying about protecting an asset they had never met. The CIA station chief was Jennifer Matthews and the only reason she took the job was because she wanted to move up in the CIA. By taking the post in Afghanistan for one year, it was compared to working for the CIA state side for four years. She had no proper training, was unprepared and she just wanted a promotion which is never a good reason to do anything, my personal feelings on the subject.

The author writes with such passion about the topic and in so much detail that I never once felt lost in the

story. He explains everything in terms, that if you follow the news, you will completely understand.

He writes about each of the different men and woman who were killed by interviewing family and coworker and I feel that gives the reader a real connection to the individuals who were murdered for no reason. In the middle of the book there are several pictures putting a face to those who lost their lives that day.

The author also interviewed the family of the Al-Qaeda mole and you feel how much they didn't know about their son and husband. He was a doctor healing people in a free clinic and one day he entered an Al-Qaeda chat room and became famous by calling all those who read his words to war. At one point he mentions in his chats how the American Barbie dolls will one day wear burka's.

The author explains how the police are able to properly identify the suicide bomber at the blast site. He also write in detail about what happened after the bombing and the doctors who attended to the men and woman. You can almost feel the pains a doctor felt seeing the young woman Elizabeth Hanson enter his operating table with hopes of survival only for her to die minutes later.

I still do not realize why the Al-Qaeda hates what Americans stand for and how a man who was trained to save lives could takes lives instead. By reading this book I have found myself more interested in learning about Islam without the extremes and what separates them from Al-Qaeda.

Review by Guest Blogger Heidi...thanks Heidi for you input.

Jerome says

A careful, easy to read history of the Humam al-Balawi case, with a focus on how various events, personalities, decisions led up the Camp Chapman attack. Warrick tells the story of all these events as they happened and refrains from passing judgement on any of them or engaging in sensationalism. His treatment of the Agency officers involved is sympathetic and he is appreciative of the many challenges posed by Balawi's recruitment by the Agency and Jordan's GID.

Warrick raises many questions about the lead-up to the attack, such as whether the amount of oversight was insufficient, appropriate, or excessive, and whether or not there were too many officers involved in the operation. Warrick treats all of these in a fair manner and avoids the trap of second-guessing decisions that were made in a very specific context.

Among the interesting developments the Agency has gone through since 9/11 is that there is less of a "wall" between case officers and intelligence analysts. This "wall" was common in the Cold War, where it was important to protect a source's identity and ensure objective analysis. In the counterterrorism field of the modern CIA, this "wall" seems to be considered an obstacle, with less restricted interaction between case officers and analysts. In many ways, this can be an advantage, but in Balawi's case it meant that all kinds of people in the Agency and the government were well aware of the Balawi case.

Balanced and interesting, and well-written, even if the tone feels rather rushed, with little context or historical background. Warrick claims that the Jordanians were behind the assassination of Abdullah Azzam in 1988, although this is probably impossible to prove, and it does seem likely that Ayman al-Zawahiri was behind Azzam's death. And, of course, much of the narrative is hard to evaluate since the author relies mainly on interviews and because relevant documents have yet to be released, although a summary of them has been made public. Warrick also includes much internal dialogue that one suspects is imagined since

many of the people that supposedly said it also died in the attack. Warrick also writes that by 2009 bin Laden was “merely a figurehead,” although in reality bin Laden was still heavily involved in running al-Qaeda after 9/11, and closely followed the activities of its newer affiliates.

Benjamin says

My review from Lawfare:

The Triple Agent: The Al-Qaeda Mole who Infiltrated the CIA, by Washington Post reporter Joby Warrick, ranks among the very best pieces of narrative journalism I have read related to the history of America’s conflict with Al Qaeda. Like the other books in that category—George Crile’s *Charlie Wilson’s War*, Lawrence Wright’s *The Looming Tower*, and Steve Coll’s *Ghost Wars*—Warrick has pulled off a truly remarkable feat of reporting, bringing together a rich constellation of sources on a sensitive matter and telling a story that, prior to his efforts, had remained obscure despite our all having known it was there.

Unlike these other books, however, Warrick’s story does not deal with the big sweep of modern history. It is not about anything as broad as the history of Al Qaeda, much less modern Afghanistan or its confrontation with the Soviet Union. The Triple Agent, rather, is the story of a single suicide attack on the CIA base at Khowst in late 2009 by a supposed American-Jordanian agent arriving for a meeting—an attack which killed, among others, several CIA officers and contractors and a Jordanian intelligence officer and royal family member.

The book’s many virtues begin with its lack of pretense. There is no political agenda here, no broad thesis the events Warrick recounts are made to support. Those looking for shrill denunciations dressed up as investigative intelligence reporting will be disappointed. Warrick is simply telling a story, albeit a tragic one with broad implications.

The outlines of this story are simple enough. The CIA and Jordanian intelligence operatives cultivated what they thought was a mole in Al Qaeda—a doctor whom the Jordanians caught posting vile material to a jihadist web site and thought they had flipped. Their mole sent back tantalizing material suggesting that he had penetrated Al Qaeda’s inner core, thereby dangling before the highest levels of the Obama administration and the CIA the possibility of locating and nailing Ayman Al-Zawahiri. The supposed mole, however, turned out to be not just a double agent but a triple agent; the material he sent back was all bait. And when we fell for it and a meeting was finally arranged at the base at Khowst, he came with a suicide vest, detonated it, and thereby inflicted one of the greatest injuries the CIA has sustained in its modern history.

What makes Warrick’s book at once so electrifying and informative is the detail he brings to this story. His reconstruction of the events, both on the ground in Jordan and Afghanistan and at the decision-making level in Washington, bristle with the energy of a thriller. Yet at the same time, his portraits of those killed, deeply enriched by substantial input from their families, are intimate and moving. These portraits are made all the more moving by the fact that he does not spare some of these characters their flaws or the mistakes they made in the debacle that took their lives. Indeed, the ultimate tragedy really boiled down to a question of operational security—a decision to have so many important people standing within the potential blast radius of a bomb before subjecting someone known to have been hobnobbing with Al Qaeda to so much as a pat down. While Warrick does not condemn the base commander, CIA officer Jennifer Matthews, for this decision, the implication of his narrative is clearly that this was a terrible blunder on her part—one that cost many lives in addition to her own.

Beyond the many fine character studies, Warrick's portrayal of the depth of the security cooperation between the United States and Jordan will surprise all but those most knowledgeable about the intelligence community. And his description of the tradecraft of counterterrorism, both in Jordan and in the United States, will enrich anyone's understanding of how these operations happen—how they go right, and how they go wrong. Along the way, Warrick gives the best description I have yet read of why and how the drones program accelerated so dramatically between the late Bush administration and the early Obama administration. The Triple Agent is a short volume, but it's a short volume that does a huge amount of work.

One of its most interesting labors is Warrick's unsentimental effort to get inside the mind of the bomber, Humam Khalil al-Balawi. Balawi left behind a lot of writing and videos, and being a supposed asset of Jordanian intelligence, he also had a long record of correspondence and interviews with his handler. What's more, he got his start as a kind of jihadist blogger; indeed, the Jordanians initially picked him up because he was becoming a celebrity in certain online jihad circles. So there's a fair bit of material with which a resourceful reporter can reconstruct what he did and what he was thinking at various times. What's more, Warrick seems to have spent a lot of time with his family, just as he did with the families of those Balawi killed. And the book reflects access in the Jordanian intelligence community as impressive as Warrick's access in the American intelligence community. The result is that his portrait of Balawi is almost as rich as his portrait of Balawi's victims. And he deftly uses him to shed important light on the inside of the Pakistani Taliban and on the Al Qaeda figures with whom Balawi interacted.

It is the convention, I know, in overwhelmingly positive book reviews to find something to criticize before closing. But with only a little embarrassment, I'm going to defy that convention. At a narrative level, I couldn't put this book down. At an informational level, I learned a great deal on a subject about which I thought I knew a lot. And at an emotional level, The Triple Agent quite literally brought tears to my eyes over what this country lost that day and reminded me how great the sacrifice can be in even invisible wars. I recommend this book without reservation.

Anna says

** Read by Sunil Malhorta
app 7+ hrs

Elizabeth Sulzby says

I found this book very intriguing. It is based on a true story but reads like fiction by Richard Clarke or David Ignatius. This book is about the triple agent mole that lead to many CIA/NOC and other US intelligence "experts" doing very un-expert things which lead to their death. This is a real event, when so many of these people came out together to meet a mole they'd never met before--KaBlooey! Many highly trained intelligence experts got stupid just long enough to get killed.

I read this just after so many of SEAL Team 6 were killed from a helicopter shot down. And that was just after Osama bin Laden was killed by other members of SEAL Team 6. Again, why were so many highly trained people putting themselves in a common spot, in this case, helicopter.

If you like Clarke's fiction and non-fiction books and Ignatius's books and articles, you should definitely read this. If you like Smiley's People, etc., you will also read about "life imitating fiction."

It is well-written and a quick read. That's always nice.

Evan Leach says

I was a fan of *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS*, Warrick's gripping description of the birth of ISIS, which led me to seek out his sole other book. *The Triple Agent* is a retelling of The Camp Chapman Attack of 2009, with a focus on the role of Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi. Warrick has a knack for narrative nonfiction (as displayed in *Black Flags*), and this book is consistently engaging. The author does a good job in introducing the (fairly wide) cast of characters and the various locations (Jordan, Afghanistan, etc.) that fill the book.

As good as Warrick is at narrative nonfiction, I do think he can struggle a bit with structure and organization. I thought this was a problem that affected *Black Flags* as well (although to a lesser degree). This book doesn't seem to know exactly what it wants to be. Is it the story of Balawi? The story of the Americans that lost their lives in Balawi's attack? A description of the CIA's role in the War on Terror? The answer, of course, is all of the above, but while it is largely successful in spinning a number of threads at once, this somewhat schizophrenic approach did make it feel a bit disorganized, at least to me.

Still, the strengths easily outweigh the weaknesses here. Overall this was a good, engaging, comprehensive description of a sad incident in the War on Terror. **4.0 stars**, recommended.

Patrick C. says

I found this book to be very informative and compelling. The quality of the reporting reminded me of Bob Woodward's accounts - informed by multiple interviews and extensive research. Here, there were some gaps that I attribute to the nature of the intelligence business. For instance, the lives and backgrounds of each of those who died in the bombing at the Khost CIA base were presented in remarkable detail - yet those who were also present, but survived, are not described at all.

Two of the main CIA agents involved in the incident were women, which really opened my eyes to the true nature of our meritocracy in military/intelligence matters in the US...

The depiction of the "Triple Agent" (Balawi) was balanced and empathic, which I appreciated since trying to understand such a person is critical if there is hope to divert/prevent future such occurrences. Once again, a horrific terrorist emerges from an otherwise well-educated (M. D.) person living in relatively modern society and comfort....

Another really intriguing takeaway was the depiction of life in the tribal regions of Pakistan - almost medieval culturally, yet with sophisticated technological tools. Then there are the Predator drones - flying, remote-controlled killer robots (!!!) - that are depicted as ever-present in the skies throughout the region - every account of life or activity in that region included the always-heard "buzzing" of these machines circling at 23,000 feet and with the capacity to place a missile within a square foot target in seconds! Truly scary! Not even special effects dominated cinematic fiction presents such a jarring context....

Jason Koivu says

Reading this was pretty much like watching *Zero Dark Thirty*. It's about the man who blew himself up in 2009 at the CIA base Camp Chapman at Khost in eastern Afghanistan.

Seven American CIA officers and contractors, an officer of Jordan's intelligence service, and an Afghan working for the CIA were killed when al-Balawi detonated a bomb sewn into a vest he was wearing. Six other American CIA officers were wounded. The bombing was the most lethal attack against the CIA in more than 25 years. - Wikipedia

"Al-Balawi" refers to Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi a doctor, who spent much of his free time using an alias to write fanatical diatribes for fundamentalist Islamic sites online. Jordanian agents got ahold of him, thought they'd converted him into a mole and sent him off to supposedly infiltrate al-Qaeda leadership. It appeared he had.

Appearances deceived.

Balawi went to al-Qaeda and they turned him into one of their most successful weapons. A video surfaced of Balawi with the radical Islamist group's number three man, Ayman al-Zawahiri. It appeared Balawi was treating the ailing Zawahiri. Balawi's intimate knowledge of these ailments, which were known in detail by the CIA and Jordanian agents, seemed to lend credibility to his claims of infiltration. Relating such details gave the pro-western forces hope that they had themselves a reliable mole.

Not all were convinced. However, U.S. pressure for results rashly hastened a face-to-face meeting with their relatively new supposed double agent. And then the shit hit the fan.

The title, *The Triple Agent*, might be technically correct, but its validity is tenuous at best. I believe it's used to titillate and entice. When thinking of a "triple" agent, one imagines an intelligence officer of brilliant cunning and possessing the wherewithal to lie convincingly while maintaining the appearance of cooperation. Balawi may have been smart, but it seems he had little need to display cunning. After he was sent off to join al-Qaeda as a double agent, the CIA/Jordanians had very little contact with him. It doesn't take a hardened veteran of spycraft to keep up the sort of cover Balawi had to keep. He just didn't make himself available and said next to nothing until the CIA literally opened their gates and gave him free entry into their base without the usual checks and precautions.

The book mostly stays on topic, veering off only to give background to an event, idea or person in order to infuse the whole with a greater understanding. *The Triple Agent* is only as long as it ought to be and that's a big plus.

Don't let the 3 stars fool you. This was quite good, imo, and I really enjoyed it. Perhaps I'm unfairly docking it a star for its subject matter. I already knew the basics of the story, a story without much depth. Man hates western ideals, man blows self up and takes western agents with him. It's fascinating, emotional, and horrible and it's over quite quick.

Jamie Smith says

Joby did a great job on this story. I helped by providing detail and he captured things we discussed very well. Great read.

Terri says

For being an addictive read, I nearly gave this book 5 stars. Right up until marking it as 'read' I was still going to give it 5 stars. On contemplation, however, the flaws that pother during the read persisted after it and I decided to stew on my rating for a day or two.

That's when I resolved my thoughts to 4 stars.

The military non fiction genre is peppered with books that serve no clear purpose other than to either make the author a quick buck or to give them something to boast about. This book, The Triple Agent, is not one of those books. Or should I say that, even if the author wanted some fame or a quick buck, it doesn't really matter in this case, because the story needed to be told and it was told in a way that made it accessible to every kind of reader.

It is not one of those dry or intensely serious military non fiction books. It is told in a flowery manner. As if it were a novel. To its credit this made it an addictive, easy read. To its debit, it made it a little - for lack of a better description - corny.

I liked and disliked it at the same time. I suppose what won me was that this flowery, corny novel-like style did help to make the book a page turner. I would wince and frown a lot when it got too flowery, but for me it worked more than it didn't.

The other thing may be a tad more controversial to express.

The author is a journalist and he had that obvious leaning towards sensationalism that many journalists have when they write non fiction.

This is the reason why I am usually cautious about reading military non fiction written by journalists. They need a 'hook' and they then play to it. Sometimes, overmuch. Milking the story to give the reader a contrived emotional experience. I don't like feeling like I am being worked. I don't respond to people trying to pull heart strings by sensationalising.

I'd say 7 out of 10 times I do not like military non fiction written by journalists and prefer autobiographical accounts. If it feels over done it repels me.

In this book, the author's hook was the young CIA agent Elizabeth Hanson. One of seven field officers killed in the attack at Khost.

The author focused in too much on how pretty she was. How young she looked at thirty. How all men adored her and all women wanted to be her friend.

I have no doubt that it is true, but it was over done. I believe the author went through the real life victims of the event and chose the one he thought would win the hearts of the readers. The pretty, blonde haired, blue eyed, funny, witty American girl next door who was admired in all departments as an exceptional agent with a bright future ahead.

A journalist's dream hook.

That's not to say that the author didn't give all the characters their due. He most certainly did and it was one of the great things about this book. The way Joby Warrick presented all the characters and made them real people that the reader could relate to.

Yet, in the vein of my like/dislike with this book, it was also a place where he happened to fall down, in my opinion.

He wrote in thought bubbles for the characters. In an effort to get inside the head of what each character was thinking throughout the timeline - including the Taliban, terrorists and family of the terrorist Balawi - he made it too contrived. He couldn't possibly know or understand what was going through their heads without asking them. And since they are all dead he probably shouldn't be putting thoughts in heads.

Despite these annoyances, the book is an addictive read and chronicles the events that led up to the terrorist, Balawi, exploding himself in the CIA base of Khost where he managed to kill ten people, including seven CIA field officers.

If you are unaware of this event, but have seen the movie Zero Dark Thirty, then this is the event covered in the movie. The double/triple agent who arranged to be picked up in a vehicle and delivered to one of the CIA's covert bases in Afghanistan where he then flicked his detonator and blew himself up.

If you are a hardened reader of military non fiction then this book may be a bit too much candy floss for you. Or, you may be able to suppress your aversion to the candy coated style of this journalists story telling and find yourself addicted to the read like I was.

It is an accessible read though, and I highly recommend it to all. Most especially those who rarely read military non fiction because they find it too dry.

Anyone who watched the movie Zero Dark Thirty, and wants to know more about that event at Khost could easily pick this book up and get into it. Even if you never read non fiction.

That's the biggest plus with this book. It's accessibility. I can appreciate it for that, despite its flaws.

Lindsay says

This was very interesting, but I did not love the writing. He tried too hard to make it sound literary and could not quite pull it off. The physical descriptions of people, particularly the women involved, were excessive. I also think he took a lot of liberties in detailing what people were thinking, when that's something he really could not know.

Michael says

The book's title would have you believe that its primary focus is that of the triple agent Humam Khalil Abu-Mulal al-Balawi, who successfully exploded a suicide vest on a CIA base in Afghanistan in 2009. The book does delve into this man's life, but the majority of the book consists of multiple portraits of many of the CIA employees and the Jordanian intelligence officer who were killed in the attack. The main reason for this backstory is to explain how exactly the CIA exposed itself to such an attack.

The most fascinating part of the book, for me, was the high level of detail documenting CIA "drone" attacks throughout Afghanistan and Pakistan. These are the remotely-controlled flying robots operated by CIA pilots, zeroing in on declared terrorists and bombing them. It's difficult to experience this book without thinking that it sounds like something out of a science fiction novel.

Michael says

<http://philabooks.wordpress.com/2012/...>

On February 22 of this year, United States soldiers burned Korans at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan, in an effort to purge the base's library of tools they believed jihadists were using to pass messages to one another. Then on March 11, U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Robert Bales, a decorated soldier on his fourth tour of duty, killed sixteen civilians in southern Afghanistan. The Koran burnings brought a string of deadly protests to the streets of Afghan villages and cities and threatened to further turn the tide of public opinion against the U.S. occupation. The civilian massacre, on the other hand, brought a wealth of warnings from Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who demanded U.S. troops withdraw from their smaller outposts in the villages into their larger military bases. The Republican candidates for U.S. president used Obama's quick apology for the Koran burnings to claim he was not standing behind the troops on the ground. Mitt Romney said not long ago on the campaign trail he would never apologize for anything America does. A deluge of vitriol poured forth from the U.S. public about Bales's senseless slaughter of innocent men, women and children in two small villages. The pain, confusion and anguish a soldier might feel on his fourth tour of duty in one of the hottest warzones in the world, was the last thing on most people's minds.

It's easy to forget why the U.S.-led coalition occupied Afghanistan in the first place, and why it has maintained that occupation for over ten years. Joby Warrick's new book, *The Triple Agent: The al-Qaeda Mole who Infiltrated the CIA* brings the true issues of the War on Terror, which has concentrated on Afghanistan and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan, into sharp focus for a public wearied by the complications of the occupation. If it were not for the Taliban's harboring of al-Qaeda, the U.S. would not have sent troops to this part of the world, and the peace-keeping and democracy-building mission the coalition forces find themselves embroiled in would immediately cease to be imperative if al-Qaeda and a further emboldened Taliban, and its associated insurgent groups, were not still threatening to inflict harm on Americans in America. Karzai's government, which is accused of widespread corruption, would not merit a second glance from an overly extended U.S. foreign presence if he weren't harboring U.S. forces, particularly bases for drone missions over the FATA. The U.S. would immediately install a different government or find another base of operations in the region, if the current troop presence were necessary to fulfill its true mission.

That mission, the disruption and destruction of al-Qaeda and other groups using the FATA as a home base for training and recruitment, is largely conducted by CIA forces based in eastern Afghanistan. While the operation may need some troop presence and certainly require secure bases, the 2009 surge, in hindsight, seems ill-advised.

Humam Khalil al-Balawi, a young Jordanian doctor so community-minded he forsook high-paying job opportunities to work in a clinic serving women and children in one of Amman's slums and often gave people on the street free rides in his car if they were going in the same direction, killed himself and ten others in a heavily-guarded CIA base in Khost, Afghanistan in December 2009. This is where Warrick's narrative starts, though he leaves the death toll tenuously obscure throughout *The Triple Agent*. We assume, though, that anyone who is written about only in the past tense in such a narrative has lost his or her life.

The two questions which Warrick seeks to answer are as follows. How could such an otherwise normal young man, with a family and plenty of prospects, turn himself into a weapon of mass destruction? And how could the CIA allow it to happen right under their noses?

At first, Balawi is almost instantly sympathetic. The young, humble clinic doctor who helps the least fortunate in his community is obviously confused and angry about the world around him. His marriage to a conservative Turkish journalist seems to have radicalized his personal politics and confirmed an already strong faith. He starts blogging under a pseudonym and his contributions to radical jihadist sites are so full of passion and perspective they instantly garner him recognition, in both terrorist circles and intelligence agencies. But the reader is left to wonder whether Balawi could ever have turned his vitriol into violence if it

weren't for the Mukhabarat, Jordan's General Intelligence Directorate. Ali bin-Zeid, a pudgy cousin of Jordan's king, and other Mukhabarat officers, interrogate Balawi when he is apprehended after the blog posts are tracked to his computer. Bin-Zeid along with a CIA officer and the blessings of both the Mukhabarat and Washington, adopts Balawi as an agent to infiltrate al-Qaeda in Pakistan. Bin-Zeid, a westernized agent who is obsessed with flight simulators and road trips in expensive vehicles, serves as Warrick's moral center and the only person to follow Balawi from this beginning to his unexpected end. But bin-Zeid threatens Balawi's reputation and the safety of his family to make him cooperate. Balawi may never have met a terrorist in his life, other than in online chat rooms, if it weren't for his adoption as an agent of the Mukhabarat and CIA.

From Michael Hayden to Leon Panetta to Jennifer Matthews, a veteran targeter in the CIA, you get the feeling the CIA fears its own ineptitude being revealed more than anything else. The tone for much of the book is elegiac, as if all of its subjects are doomed to an early death, not only the CIA operatives, but also the intelligence community's fight against extremism. The CIA's eagerness to obtain information on the whereabouts of the most wanted men in the world, even those who are only symbolically leading al-Qaeda and have lost their ability to command, allows the agency to forgo its time-tested protocol in favor of extraordinary risk. Dane Paresi, a former Green Beret, employed by a private military contractor, along with the other well-seasoned security staff at the base, argues for a more traditional approach to Balawi's interview. But in the end Balawi is allowed to enter the heart of the CIA base at Khost without being stopped and frisked or even visually examined before coming into the presence of fourteen operatives, a mix of civilian and military personnel, CIA, Mukhabarat and private contractors.

Balawi's immediate success, or ability to fake immediate success and string along the whole CIA, is impressive given his meek pedigree. It's almost inconceivable that Balawi does not at some point consider turning his back on al-Qaeda and aborting his suicide mission. This is the destructive force of faith at the heart of radical fundamentalism.

The cast of characters in Warrick's book reads more like fiction than fact, from bin-Zeid to Elizabeth Hanson the precocious young CIA targeter who wears flip-flops to work, to Jennifer Matthews the veteran who wants to make up for her tarnished reputation, to Leon Panetta the reluctant boss who never wants to pull the trigger. But the entertaining nature of this modern war story and the grisly detail of the explosion and the CIA's determination to respond and retaliate shed light on our fascination with stories of violence and justice.

Lewis Weinstein says

This is a spectacular book, a sad and important true story that flows like a novel. The subject is one of the undercover battles between the CIA and al-Qaeda, heroic efforts undone by tragic mistakes that ended with multiple deaths in December 2009.

It is hard to believe that experienced CIA agents made the misjudgments that cost many of them their lives; people wanted to believe so much that the skepticism some of them expressed was ignored.

What I was left with in the end was a greater understanding of the plague unleashed on the world by the lies and stupidity of George W. Bush, a plague which will be with us for a long time to come. GWB does not deserve to sit quietly on his ranch painting pictures of his dogs.