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Between 1986 and 1998 STRATFOR'S Fred Burton was at the forefront of the United States' counterterrorism efforts. As part of the relatively low-profile Diplomatic Security Service's (DSS) Counterterrorism Branch, Burton gained first experience of religious terrorism and extremism. 'Ghost' is his attempt to take the reader into his – and the West's – struggle against terrorist atrocities. This is a journey into what Burton calls the 'Dark World' and as such throws light on the response to terrorism that is seen by all but a few.

Ghost is divided into three sections, each reflecting stages of Burton's career with the DSS and also developments within the international system. Part 1 details Burton's transition from a beat cop into a counterterrorism professional. It also covers the Beirut hostage crisis and the beginnings of Libya's support for Middle East terrorism. From the outset it is absolutely staggering just how inadequately prepared the United States was for international terrorism. Initially, the Counterterrorism Branch was comprised of just three federal officers. There were no set guidelines or standard procedures and you get the sense that Burton and the team truly made it up as they went along.

To begin, Burton applies a beat cop mentality to the task at hand. At times part 1 reads a little bit like a counterterrorism manual. It is full of anecdotes about lessons learned, advice to take out into the field and 'do's and don'ts'. Part 1 also provides the reader with the side of intelligence and counterterrorism that is regularly played out in Hollywood movies. Burton introduces us to the FOGHORN messenger facilities, the standard uniform and accessories of a federal agent and the near constant stream of intelligence that needs to be sifted and made sense of quickly. There is also a sense that because the Counterterrorism Branch was so small and compartmentalised they were a breed apart from Washington's other federal agencies. Yet all this is forgotten when it is discovered that they have lost one of their own.

As hostages are gradually released in Lebanon it becomes clear that William Buckley, the former CIA Bureau Chief in Beirut, died in captivity. Burton's memoirs capture the overall despair that all federal agencies felt in not saving the life of a colleague. Indeed the death of Buckley is one of many acts of extremism that Burton and his own take very personally. In doing so the Counterterrorism Branch shifts from being a regular place of work to almost the cornerstone of Burton's very existence. Holidays are lost, family commitments are overlooked and weekends merge into the working week.

A further demonstration of how all consuming counterterrorism became to Burton is his 'hit-list' of terrorists. For twelve years, Burton did not rest in his attempts to bring each and every name on that list to justice. Indeed many names were added to the list throughout his career. The bombing of the TWA Flight over Greece, the Lockerbie disaster and the 1993 attack on the World Trade Centre all bring the same heartfelt response from Burton. They also take him to the safe-houses and the back streets of the world in his attempts to capture those responsible. When Burton slips off the scene almost entirely, the reader joins him on a journey into the murkiest parts of the 'Dark World'.

In part 2, Burton has transformed from an inexperienced rookie into a more streetwise counterterrorism officer. His no-nonsense approach to counterterrorism was more than apparent throughout his investigation into the death of the then-Pakistani President General Zia-ul-Haq in 1988. The aircraft carrying Pakistan's ruling cadre crashed not long after take-off, killing all members onboard. The accident heightened tensions between Pakistan and India, prompting speculation that both countries were on the verge of nuclear war.

Burton's investigation into the crash represents his coming of age as a supreme counterterrorism specialist. With the prospect of a regional nuclear war, Burton deals with Pakistan's notoriously obstructive Armed and Security Forces. His own resourcefulness – and teamwork alongside other federal service officers – leads him to the conclusion that the death of Zia is more of a parting gift from Cold War adversaries rather than the start of a dangerous new twist in South Asian affairs.

The final section of Ghost sees Burton at the helm of the Counterterrorism Branch. Lessons have been learnt and are now being passed on to the next generation of officers. Yet the decline of the Soviet Union and its proxy states has not allowed the United States to rest on its laurels. The first stirrings of contemporary Islamic extremism shook Washington and the DSS to the very core. The terrorist threat could now penetrate the homeland, and the United States was not prepared. A ruthless, technologically savvy enemy had left the Counterterrorism Branch exposed. Whilst Burton was in control of a more organised unit, the need to be resourceful was never far away at any point in his career.

Part three ends in triumphant fashion. As one of the main perpetrators of the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing, Ramzi Yousef was very much part of Burton's list. Yet for two years Yousef evaded capture and indeed carried on his terrorist activities. The endgame for Yousef occurred in Pakistan in 1995. Following a tip off, Yousef is traced to a guest house in Islamabad. It is without doubt the tensest part of the book. Burton needs to balance other federal services players with the need for secrecy as net the closes in on Yousef. If he evades capture, lives and careers are on the line. The capture of Yousef seems to be the pinnacle of Burton's career, and perhaps a personal sign that things must change.

Alongside the tools of his trade, Burton has some other 'constants' throughout his time as a counterterrorism officer. One is his dog and their exercise regime. You sense that Burton used this time to gain a clear head before undertaking a 'hard day at the office' for which few of us would perhaps have the stomach. The other is his old friend from his time as an ordinary cop. Their time spent reminiscing about the past are one of the few occasions where we find out more about Burton the man, rather than the agent. Indeed even these stories are punctuated with references to terrorist atrocities and global events. Tellingly, it was not until the end of this book that Burton's family life seemed to have swayed him to leave the DSS.

One of the few criticisms I have about the book is Burton's excessive use of dialogue. Some of the conversations between colleagues and adversaries seem at times to be padded out with

unnecessary chit-chat. Burton could have overcome this by making better use of some of the locations he visited throughout the course of his work. For a book that is high on drama and tension there is very little atmosphere attributed to Burton's clandestine visits to the 'Dark World'. That said Ghost provides a fascinating insight into the challenges Burton faced in combating terrorism. The 'Dark World' is not a place for the faint hearted. Instead it demands the sharpest of minds, the strongest resolve and in many circumstances your life. Burton gave it all three.

Ghost, by Fred Burton, was published in 2009 by Random House.