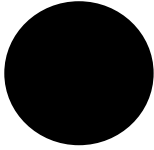


*Barbara Crossette was the New York Times bureau chief in South Asia from 1988 to 1991.*



### Who Killed Zia?

*Barbara Crossette*

Of all the violent political deaths in the twentieth century, none with such great interest to the United States has been more clouded than the mysterious air crash that killed President Mohammed Zia ul-Haq of Pakistan in 1988, a tragedy that also claimed the life of a serving American ambassador and most of General Zia's top commanders. The list of potential malefactors has grown as the years have passed, compounding the mysteries buried in this peculiar, unfinished tale.

The one unarguable fact is that no serious, conclusive, or even comprehensive inquiry into the crash has been undertaken in the United States, although one of its top diplomats, Arnold Raphel, and an American general were killed—and in an American-built aircraft. Congress held a few hearings, but the FBI was kept away from the case for a year. No official report was made public. Indeed, a file in the National Archives containing about 250 pages of documents on the event is still classified secret.

The undisputed facts about the crash of the Pakistani president's specially outfitted Lockheed C-130 aircraft on August 17, 1988, are not many. Even some of those "facts" are still in dispute and can be called up to stoke suspicions of the United States in South Asia.

General Zia was the steadfast ally of the United States against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and had willingly allowed Pakistan to become the base of a holy war by the self-styled mujahidin against the Moscow-backed Afghan government. Zia

had seized power in 1977 after ousting Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in a nonviolent coup. He later had Bhutto tried and hanged for a political murder in a controversial trial. He had been Bhutto's own choice for army chief of staff.

Zia, who began his military career in the British Army in India in 1943 and moved to Pakistan after the partition of colonial India at independence in 1947, remained head of the Pakistani military and president until his death. Although he had toyed on and off with the idea of an elected legislature, he kept the country under martial law for 8 of his 11 years in power.

General Zia had ambitious hopes of arming Pakistan with the most sophisticated American tools: advanced F-16 fighter planes, AWACS reconnaissance aircraft, and field equipment to match or better India's largely Soviet-supplied arsenal. He also promoted the development of nuclear weapons, as had Bhutto, after India's 1974 nuclear test.

On August 17, 1988, General Zia and five of his top generals had gone to a desert test site to watch a demonstration of the Abrams M-1/A-1 battle tank, which the United States was pressing Pakistan to buy. General Zia's armored battle experts were not enthusiastic about the tank, and the president was reported to be much more interested in the AWACS. Nevertheless, he wanted to watch the trials, and traveled to the test range not far from Bahawalpur, about 330 miles south of the Pakistani capital. The C-130 was left on the Bahawalpur

airstrip, and the official party flew to the test site by helicopter. With the tests over by late morning, General Zia and his entourage returned to Bahawalpur for lunch, then took off for the return trip to Islamabad. Within minutes, the plane had plummeted without warning into a dusty wasteland and all aboard were dead.

### *Conspiracy Theories*

The wreckage of the doomed C-130 was still smoldering on a barren patch of Pakistan when the conspiracy theories began to mushroom. Who could have plotted the spectacular crash of Pakistan's Air Force One, wiping out with one blow Zia, Ambassador Raphel, his defense attaché, Brig. Gen. Herbert M. Wassom, and most of Pakistan's top military commanders?

From the beginning, reporters were never short of theories to work with.

Surely it had to have been the Russians, stung by their humiliating failure to subdue the odd assortment of Afghan holy warriors who had found safe haven and generous support in Zia's Pakistan. Although Soviet troops had begun their withdrawal from Afghanistan, Moscow had just halted the process to protest Pakistan's continued arming of rebels.

No, it must have been the Indians, Pakistan's traditional enemies, who were friends of the Afghan Communist government and very anxious about the potential fallout of an Islamist victory in Kabul, which General Zia was abetting. Indian intelligence operatives had a record of undercover meddling in virtually every country in South Asia, most tragically in Sri Lanka, where Indian agents initially trained and supplied Tamil separatists who have killed a generation of Sri Lankan political leaders.

What about the Afghans themselves, led by the devious and ruthless Najibullah, a former head of the secret police with a fearful reputation for torture?

Another candidate might be found among the American-backed Afghan holy

warriors fighting the Soviet-backed government. This was Gulbadin Hekmatyar, perhaps the most ruthless and self-serving of seven mujahidin commanders. Hekmatyar, an evil and violent conspirator and sower of discord then and now (since he has swung his support to the Taliban cause), was reported to be fearful that he was about to lose American money and military aid. He had certainly offended influential officials in both Pakistan and the United States.

Or the Iranians? Iran, a Shiite theocracy, looked askance at the prospect of a Sunniled (and pro-Pakistani) version of the same next door. A homegrown version of this theory blamed Pakistani Shias for the attack on a Sunni president.

Could it be that dissatisfied, ambitious elements in the Pakistani military—Shia or Sunni—had pulled off a coup in disguise? One top general who did not board the doomed aircraft became military chief of staff after the crash wiped out the Pakistani high command.

Then, of course, there was the avowedly violent anti-Zia group known as al-Zulfikar, led by the late Murtaza Bhutto, the brother of Benazir Bhutto, the Pakistani politician who would ultimately gain most from Zia's departure. General's Zia's son Ijaz ul-Haq told me a year after the crash that he was "101 percent sure" that Murtaza was involved.

Benazir Bhutto, who became prime minister in November 1988, herself ventured that the fatal crash might well have been an "act of God."

But wait, what about the Central Intelligence Agency? Some influential Pakistanis and Indians peddled that suspicion immediately, on the ground that Zia had become an embarrassment to the United States on several fronts, not least because of his uncertain commitment toward a more democratic government and his government's loyalty to extremists among the Afghan rebels, who seemed to have spun out of American control.

Then, of course, maybe the aircraft just malfunctioned. This plane had a checkered history.

### *Accident or Sabotage?*

Adding to the mystery of who or what killed General Zia and fueling the “CIA did it” theory in South Asia was the less than conclusive—some would say, less than serious—investigation that took place in the wake of the crash. Pakistan was given the lead in conducting a probe on the scene, but U.S. Defense Department and aircraft experts were part of the investigating team.

It was intended to be a joint investigation with a joint conclusion, yet within two months of the crash, the American government was alone in promoting the idea, without concrete material evidence, that a mechanical malfunction had brought down the plane. Most Pakistanis didn’t see it that way. From the start, they assumed assassination.

Apparently to undercut Pakistan’s conclusions on the eve of the report’s formal release in October 1988, the mechanical malfunction story was leaked to the *New York Times* before rather different final results were presented to reporters in Islamabad. The Pakistanis declared the crash “a criminal act or sabotage leading to the loss of aircraft control.”

Furthermore, although an American ambassador and a high-ranking military officer were among the dead, the State Department and the Pentagon ruled that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was not to investigate. (The FBI got a chance to reopen the case a year later, when it was too late to examine crucial evidence.) A few members of Congress squawked at the haste with which the American government pulled down the curtains and drew its conclusion, one apparently not shared by American technical experts. In the United States, the story was as dead as Zia within a year.

For at least one American, however, the issue is still painfully fresh. And he is now

adding one more theory to the list of potential perpetrators.

When General Zia’s VIP C-130 aircraft, also known as Pak One, spiraled down at Bahawalpur, near Multan in eastern Pakistan, John Gunther Dean was the U.S. ambassador in neighboring India. Dean, a distinguished diplomat who had garnered more ambassadorships than most envoys of his generation, was also a person with strong opinions drawn from years of experience abroad, opinions he sharpened as he moved from post to post. He had on numerous occasions clashed with superiors or disagreed with the American policies he was expected to promote. He was a prickly independent thinker, not a popular breed in diplomacy.

In New Delhi in August 1988, a lot of history came together in Dean’s mind. He had an immediate suspicion about who killed Zia, but his putative perpetrator was not on the list of possible conspirators then in circulation. Dean thought the plot to rid the world of General Zia bore the hallmarks of Israel, or specifically the Israeli intelligence agency, Mossad.

Dean believed in “dissent through channels,” not leaks. And, knowing what a controversy such a public accusation would unleash, and the effect it would have not only in the United States and South Asia but also in the wider Islamic world, he decided to go back to Washington to explain his theory in person to his superiors at the State Department. That act cost him his diplomatic career.

### *Poison Gas in the Mangoes?*

Among the murkier circumstances surrounding the August 1988 crash was the presence of so many important officials and military officers on one aircraft. The belief persists to this day that Ambassador Raphael and General Wassom flew separately to Bahawalpur and were planning to return to Islamabad on the military attaché’s plane. Thus, according to that story, a last-minute decision by Raphael to board Zia’s plane for

the return flight introduced a complication for would-be plotters and an unnecessary tragedy for the Americans.

Not true, says Gen. Mahmud Ali Durrani, the (now-retired) commander of the armored division in charge of the tank tests. In a telephone interview in July from his home in Rawalpindi, the site of Pakistani military headquarters, General Durrani, who had been General Zia's military secretary from 1983 to 1986, said that the guest list for the flight on the presidential plane had been fixed by August 13, and the Americans were on it. There was an American embassy plane also in service on the 17th, but it brought other diplomats and officials from General Dynamics, the maker of the M-1 tank, he said.

The tank demonstration at a desert site called Tamewali was a bust; all sides agree on that. General Durrani said that the M-1 tank never performed well in the 90 days that three of the vehicles, capable of desert warfare, had been on loan for field trials in Pakistan. "They performed very badly, actually," he said. "I don't remember a day when all three were worthy of trials. One of the problems with the tank was that they had filters that got choked with our kind of dust. Our dust was not just sand. It was sand and clay mixed."

General Zia and his group left Bahawalpur early, ahead of a storm. The president's C-130, a turboprop workhorse of a plane, had a comfortable, air-conditioned VIP capsule inside, where Zia and his American guests were seated. It was walled off from both the four-member flight crew and a passenger and baggage section in the rear furnished only with benches.

The plane was packed with Pakistani officers—"some who should have been there and some who should not have been there," said General Durrani, who dismisses the theory that the crash might have been a military plot. Among those on board was Gen. Akhtar Abdul Rehman, chairman of the Pakistani joint chiefs of staff and an

architect of the anti-Soviet guerrilla war in Afghanistan.

Gen. Mirza Aslam Beg, the deputy chief of army staff, was scheduled to fly back in another, smaller plane. His decision to return alone fueled suspicion immediately, but in the days and weeks that followed, he made no attempt to take over the government or to derail the national elections planned for November of that year. And when Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party won those elections, the army did not intervene to prevent her becoming prime minister, a rare step for a woman in an Islamic country.

Zia's plane took off from Bahawalpur at 3:46 P.M. Barely five minutes later, according to witnesses on the ground, the plane began to "porpoise" or "roller coaster" in the sky before dropping into the barren desert below with all its propellers still running at full speed, drilling into the earth. It burst into flames on contact.

There was agreement among Pakistani and American experts that there was no midair explosion and no evidence of hostile fire on the plane. It seemed likely that the pilot and copilot had simply lost control—and lost consciousness?—minutes, if not seconds, into the flight. In those last doomed minutes, air traffic controllers could not raise any response from the plane. General Durrani, who by then had returned to his home base at Multan and did not see the crash, dismisses as "garbage" the report that the copilot was heard shouting to the pilot, "What are you doing?" There was no flight data recorder or voice recorder on the C-130.

Pakistan's official report on the crash found traces of chemicals in the wreckage of the plane, a lot of which was buried in the sandy earth or scattered around the site by the impact of the crash. Those chemicals, the Pakistanis said, were phosphorous, chlorine, potassium, antimony, and pentaerythritol tetranitrate. They were all viewed as potential elements in explosives.

Of special interest to reporters as well as conspiracy theorists at the time was the phosphorous found on mango seeds or skins in the wreckage. There had been instant speculation when the C-130 went down that mangoes loaded onto the plane at the last moment may have contained explosives; now it was possible to speculate that the fruit was laced instead with a debilitating, possibly fatal gas. Khalid Hasan, a Pakistani analyst writing in the independent Pakistani newspaper *Friday Times* in 2004, said that it was VX gas. Ambassador Dean was also told in New Delhi that there was VX gas, which not many countries possessed.

General Durrani, who was at the Tamewali test site when President Zia arrived in a helicopter from Bahawalpur, said in July that there were two sets of mangoes on the plane when it went down. After the tank test, he had sent two crates of the local fruit on the helicopter back to Bahawalpur with General Zia, to be transferred to the C-130. That made him suspect in some eyes. But his mangoes had been thoroughly checked, one by one, by security, he says. "I believe some mangoes were also loaded at Bahawalpur, which were presented by the local military and civilian leadership," he said. He had no control over those, or other baggage put on the plane.

Nonetheless, he thinks the mango theory is "faulty," because Pakistani investigators who focused on the mangoes did so with explosives in mind, yet there was no explosion in the air or on the ground.

"The aircraft did not explode," General Durrani said, "It came down, hit the ground at a steep angle of about 60, 70 degrees, whiplashed the tail part forward [over the front of the aircraft] then the plane burnt exactly where it was. There were no explosions. In fact, I went there the next morning and visited that site and there was a complete profile of the aircraft there on the ground—the wingspan and the engines half dug into the ground and the tail that had whiplashed forward."

General Durrani did not address the possibility of a nonexplosive but highly toxic gas in the unchecked fruit or other objects. No autopsies were performed on the Pakistani crew to test for gas poisoning. Various reasons were given, one being that their bodies were too fragmented to be examined effectively and/or that Muslim practice required burial of remains within 24 hours, too soon for forensic work to be done. General Durrani said that the bodies of the passengers and crew were reduced to bits of charred flesh, and that the victims were identifiable only by clothing or pieces of identification. Pakistan lacked the technical expertise to deal with that.

#### *Geopolitics Takes Over*

Robert Oakley, a member of President Reagan's National Security Council, was sent to Pakistan immediately after the crash to take charge of liaising with the Pakistanis in the wake of the tragedy, and then stayed on as ambassador, replacing Raphel. In an interview in May, he said that his first task in Islamabad was "to get into this question of investigating this plane crash and who was behind it and what was behind it." By then, Ghulam Ishaq Khan, a former finance minister and president of the Senate, had become acting president.

"I talked to the president of the country and the chief of the army staff and the head of the air force and, with the support of the State Department and Defense Department in Washington, we agreed there would be a joint report, not separate reports, and that the report would be issued after everything had been completed, and there wouldn't be any interim reports," Oakley said. "This irritated some people who wanted to know, 'What's going on?' But the Defense Department and State Department were absolutely firm, saying that this is the only way we could do it." [They said,] 'If there are any leaks and things it is going to upset the Pakistanis no end. It's going to destroy the likelihood that they are going to be honest

with us, and we won't end up with a credible report." Ironically, the leaking was done in Washington.

Oakley said he told the Pakistanis that "with a joint report we avoid a lot of mutual recriminations and undue suspicions." But in a matter of weeks, Oakley added, Americans could see a mechanical conclusion shaping up. [From] "the U.S. team, which was sent to do the investigation on the ground, plus all the intelligence backup that we had from all possible sources, our conclusion was there was no evidence to support the idea of any outside force, outside intervention, outside involvement," he said. "There was no indication on the plane that anything had come from the outside to cause the crash. There was also no indication of any explosives or any explosion inside the plane.

"The conclusion of our technicians and others who looked at it, including the records of all C-130s—both the Air Force records and the Lockheed Martin records—[was] that this was a mechanical malfunction," Oakley said. "They said it was very, very likely to be a mechanical malfunction, although we can't prove it because we didn't have enough pieces from the wreckage. Everything that had happened to the plane was consistent with previous incidents—I think there were 19 or 20 of them—where C-130s sort of porpoised [due to] malfunction of the rudder—the hydraulic system."

The United States expected Pakistani disagreement. "We believed that the Pakistanis would not endorse this view," Oakley said. "The Pakistanis said, 'We can't pinpoint any specific evidence to show that there was outside involvement, or that there was an explosion of some kind from outside the plane or inside the plane, but we believe that in all probability some outside element was involved somehow in the crash.' We ended up with a split opinion, if you will, in public."

In Washington, geopolitics had taken over. "One of the first things that had to be done after Zia's death to maintain a good

relationship between the United States and Pakistan was to put this issue to bed," Oakley recalled. "They had their say and we had our say, and we couldn't prove conclusively that there was no outside conspiracy, and they couldn't prove conclusively that there was."

Pakistanis have suggested that Washington didn't want to blame anyone at that point, including the Russians, because their goodwill was essential to completing the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan without last-minute setbacks.

In Islamabad in the days and weeks after General Zia's death, Oakley, anxious that relations with Pakistan remain on an even keel in the critical last months of the Soviet presence in the region, heard all the rumors and suspicions. The Israelis were not among those held suspect, he said. But might Israel have wanted to preempt a Pakistani nuclear bomb, which Zia had not only promoted but had also promised to share with other Islamic nations? "The prospects for Pakistan actually having a bomb were quite far off, and removed, although there was a certain amount of speculation that maybe eventually something would happen," Oakley said. "At that stage, 1988, that was not an imminent prospect."

Yossef Bodansky, a strategic analyst with close ties to Israel who is known for his long shots—and a proponent of the theory that the Soviet security service, the KGB, would have been the most likely assassin of Zia—wrote a decade later that Pakistan was, indeed, capable of assembling nuclear weapons by 1988. And South Asians, along with everybody else, had recently seen what Israel was willing to do to stop Islamic nations from becoming nuclear powers. In June 1981, the Israelis had bombed Iraq's Osirak nuclear facility to prevent Baghdad from moving into weapons production.

#### *Ambassador Dean's Suspicions*

For almost two decades, John Gunther Dean remained silent about what had led him to

suspect the Israelis in the Pakistani crash, and about the price he feels he has paid for trying to interest Washington in his suspicions. But over the last few years, Dean, now 80 years old, has been collecting his papers and his thoughts for public consumption. He has been interviewed extensively for an official oral history, part of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Collection of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training in Arlington, Virginia. A large collection of his diplomatic documents have been donated to the National Archives and deposited in the Jimmy Carter Library in Atlanta.

He is also seeking to reopen the question of his reputation within the State Department, where he was, in effect, declared mentally incompetent in 1988 on his visit to Washington following the crash. In diplomatic parlance, he lost his medical clearance. His security clearance was also lifted, and he ultimately resigned from the Foreign Service. He was 62.

The State Department produced as evidence that he was not in a fit mental state a letter from the department's chief medical officer for the South Asian region, Dr. David Koch, who said that Dean appeared in late August 1988 to be "under stress." Further neurological tests were done on Dean, with his cooperation, when he was in Washington. He also had his own tests done and has marshaled medical opinion to counter the official diagnoses.

A former foreign service officer who worked on the case said that it was Dean's state of mind and not his suspicions of Israel that were, at least officially, always the key factor in the startling nonreception he received in Washington. Stephen J. Solarz, then a congressman who was a leading figure on Asian affairs on Capitol Hill—and a friend of both Israel and India—said he was given to understand that Dean had suffered a nervous breakdown.

In any case, Dean was ordered not to return to India. He was sent to his country home in Switzerland to "rest" for more than

six weeks and then allowed to travel to New Delhi to pack and say his goodbyes. A successor had already been chosen for the Delhi ambassadorship well before Dean's ill-fated trip to Washington, and he knew that there were plans to replace him, perhaps several months before Zia's death.

Policy issues were also a factor in the way Dean was treated, other diplomats from that era say. Among some policymakers in the Reagan administration, Dean was thought to be too close to India and its then prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and too willing to accept and explain away India's persistent support for the Najibullah government in Kabul. (At one point, the Indian government gave Najibullah the run of the press center in Delhi to meet the international press corps. His outrageously heavy-handed performance could not have helped his cause very much, however.) India, echoing Moscow, wanted at the very least a coalition in Kabul with a pro-Soviet faction retaining some power in the capital. This was not in the American plan at that point, though there were proponents of a coalition solution in Washington.

Still, this doesn't quite explain the timing, or the suddenness with which Dean was "drummed out" of the American diplomatic corps—or how quickly his medical clearance was reinstated before he retired formally and irrevocably from the diplomatic service in April 1989. "If I'm wrong," he said to me recently, "I don't mind people telling me I'm wrong. But don't say I'm mentally deranged."

Dean is perhaps primarily interested in clearing his own record, which culminated, ironically, in a distinguished service award for a career that included opening postcolonial West Africa to the United States and crafting an agreement in Laos that saved that country from the kind of civil wars that consumed Vietnam and Cambodia. Later, he served as ambassador in Cambodia (where he disagreed with Henry Kissinger about ruling out negotiations with the Communists,

even the Khmer Rouge) as well as in Denmark, Lebanon, Thailand, and finally India.

But in seeking to reopen the case of what happened to General Zia, Dean also wants to remind policymakers and the public of the unanswered questions about the deaths of Pakistan's president and an American ambassador beloved by his foreign service colleagues, deaths that should not so easily be written off. Dean is eager to encourage a new look at the events surrounding the crash and more research into the possibility of American-Israeli collusion in effectively sinking the subsequent investigation.

Dean does not say that he believes Israel was totally to blame for the crash of the Pakistani C-130. Rather, he says that there could have also been other familiar hands sharing in the plot: India (whose relations with Israel have improved dramatically since then), the Afghans, perhaps some Pakistanis, or the KGB. It was the sophistication of the suspected plot's execution that intrigues him, and points him to Israeli planning. If it was an assassination, it was a very neat job.

The only comprehensive American journalistic investigation into the mystery was written by Edward Jay Epstein and published in *Vanity Fair* in September 1989. (Epstein, who now writes mostly about Hollywood, did not respond to e-mails about whether he had continued to follow the story.) His account does not mention Israel, but does conclude that there was much more to investigate.

Dean now lives in retirement in Paris and Verbier, Switzerland, with his French-born wife, Martine. I had encountered him first when he was ambassador in Bangkok and later in New Delhi, where my assignments as a *New York Times* correspondent coincided with his diplomatic postings, and I knew of his work in various other Asian embassies. But we had been out of touch for more than a decade.

In two days of conversations in May in the Deans' apartment in the fashionable

16th arrondissement of Paris, he spoke of years of accumulated personal annoyances with Israeli diplomats abroad, pro-Israeli members of Congress, and the lobby group AIPAC—the American Israel Public Affairs Committee—who seemed to assume that because he was a Jew born in Germany who fled the Nazis with his family in 1939 he would be an automatic supporter of Israeli governments and policies. He was disturbed that a small country like Israel seemed to have so much power in Washington, among both Democrats and Republicans. “I was AIPAC's Peck's bad boy,” he said.

Dean is on record as having blamed the Israelis of trying to kill him in Lebanon in 1980, when he was the American ambassador there and had been criticized in the Knesset for being too pro-Palestinian. He was dismayed to discover, with American government help, that the ammunition that struck his convoy of three cars coming down from the hills near Beirut was American, from a batch sold to Israel.

His ambassadorship in India appears to have been fraught from the start. He said that after arriving in New Delhi in 1986, he was frequently lobbied by congressional delegations or the State Department to intercede with the Indians on Israel's behalf. (For example, to have Israel's lone, low-level consulate in India, in Bombay, upgraded during a period when India fawned on Yasir Arafat and made life miserable for Israeli diplomats.)

Dean said he was also pressed to speak up in South Asia about Israel's views on how dangerous General Zia was becoming to the region. Israel seemed intent on demonizing Zia. But did that mean they would be willing to eliminate him? “If you ask me,” Dean said, “do I have 100 percent proof? No. All I know is I had people from Congress coming to me and saying, John, a man of your background, you have to go and help on the Israeli issue. I said, What are you talking about? I'm the American ambassador [in India]. Whatever my religious views are, are



between myself and my maker. I resent this. Go and talk to Arnie Raphel—and Arnie Raphel by the way was Jewish, and he got along great with Zia. Why did these Congress people come to me and say, John, you gotta help curb the Pakistani ambitions for a bomb? Why did they come to me to ask the Indians to be more forthcoming with Israel?”

Dean thus leaves the impression that there is much personal baggage behind his analysis of the Zia mystery. But that does not diminish or change the widespread shared sense among others who were there at the time that the aircraft malfunction theory was never really credible. And in South Asia, where investigations too often fizzle out inconclusively, no one but the Americans could have worked methodically through a case like this with any hope of resolution.

General Durrani, who calls the Israeli thesis “far-fetched” and to be expected to have emerged in South Asia, “where we have a habit of blaming the Jews for almost all bad things,” nevertheless agrees that it was a bewildering decision and a serious mistake in Washington not to field a full-scale investigation of the 1988 crash while material evidence still existed. “I don’t know why the U.S. didn’t come into this and do a proper investigation,” he said. An American investigation might well have found undeniable evidence of a fatal mechanical fault, helping to quash some, if not all, of the conspiracy theories that continue to flourish, among them the most persistent and damaging of all to the United States: that the CIA got rid of General Zia and didn’t care if it had to kill an American ambassador in the process.

“This is not an infallible aircraft,” General Durrani said. “I had traveled many times on it with the president and many times we had mechanical, electrical problems. On three, four occasions, we had to

abandon the aircraft for one reason or the other. This is what I regret very deeply, that a proper scientific investigation was not done.”

### *The Unfinished Story*

The unfinished story of the sudden death of General Zia is not without relevance today, when the United States is dependent on the support of another unpredictable Pakistani general, Pervez Musharraf, in a new era of involvement in Afghanistan and the search for Osama bin Laden.

In the 1980s, General Zia was not only amassing, or trying to purchase, a significant arsenal of sophisticated American aircraft and weaponry, but he was also suspected of working on a nuclear weapon to match India’s. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto had dubbed it the “Islamic bomb,” and Zia proclaimed that he would be happy to share it with other Muslim nations. This alarmed not only India but also Russia and Israel, among others. Since then, Pakistan has only upped the level of anxiety with a now openly acknowledged nuclear weapons program. Worse, the country has been found to be a purveyor of dangerous and illegal nuclear exports.

If getting rid of General Zia—if that is what happened—was intended to solve some of the problems in dealing with Afghanistan, the record shows that that hope was at best an illusion. But even if Zia died in a genuine accident, both the Pakistanis and Indians have refilled wells of cynicism about the United States from what looked like the American indifference to solving the riddle of his death.

Given prolonged American involvement with Pakistan, isn’t it time to look back with greater diligence and seriousness at this mystery? The longer the tragedy goes unexamined in any rigorous, if not conclusive, way, the more internally contradictory and bizarre this story becomes. ●