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# **Loving the Enemy: Militant Visions of the West**

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## **Loving the Enemy: Militant Visions of the West**

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*Précis: This paper makes the argument that militants associated with Al-Qaeda speak from within the world of their enemies and possess no place outside it. Whether these enemies are Western democracies or Muslim liberals, militants derive strength from exploiting their weaknesses and contradictions rather than from some alternative ideology or social order. This accounts for the rapidity of militant mobilization as much as its diversity of recruitment, neither of which depend upon the indoctrination of young Muslims into a wholly foreign movement--however exotic their rhetoric and appearance. This intimacy with the world of their enemies is also what makes many such militants into suicidal individuals rather than the members of a collective movement, since their task is to destroy this world from the inside. The great paradox of violence of the Al-Qaeda variety is that it seeks the fulfilment of its enemies' ideals rather than proffering any of its own, thus rendering militancy conceptually invisible and immune to attack by the liberal societies whose contradictions it seeks to illustrate.*

While scholars, journalists and policy-makers in Europe and America invariably describe Al-Qaeda as a foreign, exotic and difficult to understand threat, militants who identify with it routinely view their enemies in the most familiar of terms. Whether or not they really understand the West, these men's professions of intimacy with it hint at a more complex relationship. This essay describes the ways in which terrorist figureheads like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Osama bin Laden draw their energies from a parasitic relationship with the Occident they attack, conceiving of themselves as speaking from within its borders.

How does the radical Muslim's intimacy with his enemy help us to understand the character of globalized militancy today? For one thing it becomes meaningless to search for the source of terrorist energies in some secret history or arcane text, the preserves of specialists on Islam or the Middle East. Indeed given the many claims of familiarity and even fondness that militants make

about their enemies, opposing them to the West for analytic if not political reasons becomes absurd. Similarly these men's Islam cannot be set against another, moderate form of the religion since we shall see that militants too make extensive use of liberal categories and ideals.

The task that confronts us is to forego the easy identification of Muslim terrorism with some alien past or place, neither of which can account for the emergence of "home-grown" militants integrated within Euro-American societies. Also to be foregone is the expertise of specialists on Islam, who are unable for the most part to link these forms of terrorism with the globalized societies in which they occur. The analysis that follows seeks to reassess the meaning of militant rhetoric and reasoning by focusing upon the relationship that terrorists profess to enjoy with the West, in the process defining more clearly what they have to say about war and justice.

### **Competing in goodness**

In passages much cited by Muslim liberals, the Quran appears to advocate religious and other forms of pluralism by asking different communities to compete with each other in goodness according to their own lights. Muslim militants, too, or at least those gathered under the sign of Al-Qaeda, seem to have taken these scriptural passages to heart, a particularly egregious example of which can be found in the testimony of the 9/11 organizer, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. On the one hand, of course, competing in goodness with the enemy is only the obverse of competing with him in evil, which plays such a large part in militant rhetoric. But on the other hand competing in goodness goes beyond merely the mirroring of another's actions, and I will argue implies caring for the enemy's goodness as a quality that requires protection. This indeed is the closest the kind of militant I am describing comes to the Christian virtue of loving his enemy.

In the redacted and unclassified version of his hearing at Guantánamo Bay on March 10, 2007, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed pleaded guilty before a tribunal he considered illegitimate, thus turning his hearing into one for the tribunal itself, since his own guilt or innocence had ceased to be an issue for it. Indeed Mohammed's admission of guilt was so extensive as to place the charges laid against him quite in the shade by reversing the normal relationship between law and criminality, in which it is the person charged whose claims of responsibility tend to be minimal. Acknowledging guilt in this excessive way not only deprives it of meaning but returns responsibility into the keeping of the law, where it remains something impersonal with which the person charged has only a formal and not an existential relationship. Perhaps this is why Khalid Sheikh Mohammed could afford to speculate upon responsibility as a theoretical

category during his hearing, in which he concluded a long list of criminal claims with the following statement about the utterly conventional character of guilt:

What I wrote here, is not I'm making myself hero, when I said I was responsible for this or that. But you are military man. You know very well there are language for any war. So, there are, we are when I admitting these things I'm not saying I'm not did it. I did it but this the language of any war. If America they want to invade Iraq they will not send for Saddam roses or kisses they send for a bombardment. This is the best way if I want. If I'm fighting for anybody admit to them I'm American enemies. For sure, I'm American enemies.<sup>1</sup>

In one way this passage suggests the difficulty of locating responsibility in a global arena. Thus Mohammed's lengthy list of claims threatens to spiral out of control and turn responsibility into an absurdity, so that he is finally forced to ground it by reducing these global claims into merely the illustrations of his enmity for America. But in another way this admission of guilt in someone else's language if not in one's own ends up opening the door to a highly pluralistic vision of human relations, in which the refusal to recognize someone's legitimacy does not preclude the building of a relationship with him. The formal admission of guilt, in other words, functions like a gift that establishes relations even in the absence of recognition. This is how Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, for example, described his refusal to present evidence at his hearing under oath:

Take an oath is part of your Tribunal and I'll not accept it. To be or accept the Tribunal as to be, I'll accept it. That I'm accepting American constitution, American laws or whatever you are doing here. This is why religiously I cannot accept anything you do. Just to explain for this one, does not mean I'm not saying that I'm lying. When I not take oath does not mean I'm lying. You know very well peoples take oath and they will lie. You know the President he did this before he just makes his oath and he lied. So sometimes when I'm not making oath does not mean I'm lying.<sup>2</sup>

Having set the terms of engagement with his captors by offering them an admission of guilt without by that token according them any legitimacy,

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<sup>1</sup> Unclassified Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN 10024, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup> ISN 10024, p. 21.

Mohammed went on to discuss the substance of this engagement, which for him consisted in being true to oneself. In fact Khalid Sheikh Mohammed spent the whole of his hearing trying to get his American captors to be true to their own principles, which he took to be those of the promotion and protection of human rights, while at the same time treating their accusations as if they were questions regarding his own truthfulness to Islamic principles. Here, then, was an example of the testing in goodness of which the Quran spoke, and of whose pluralist character militants make so much. But while in militant rhetoric more generally it is the willingness to die for one's principles that demonstrates how true one is to oneself, in Mohammed's testimony this demonstrative role is played by the admission of guilt, which allows a relationship of mutual testing to occur between the bitterest of enemies. How else are we to explain the detainee's numerous and often carping objections to the accusations brought against him, as well as to the procedures of the tribunal at Guantanamo Bay, in light of his equally frequent admissions of guilt? It was not his innocence that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed tried to prove during his hearing, but rather the coherence and internal consistency of the charges levelled against him, which he sought only to correct by their own light. The first of these corrections occurs after the reading of the charges against the detainee:

Paragraph a. On the morning of 11 September 2001, four airliners travelling over the United States were hijacked. The flight hijacked were: American Airlines flight 11, United Airlines flight 175, American Airlines flight 77, and United Airlines flight 93. At approximately 8:46 a.m., American Airlines flight 11 crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, resulting in the collapse of the tower at approximately 10:25 a.m. At approximately 9:05 a.m., United Airlines flight 175 crashed into the South Tower of the World Trade Center, resulting in the collapse of the tower at approximately 9:55 a.m. At approximately 9:37 a.m., American Airlines flight 77 crashed into the southwest side of the Pentagon in Arlington, Virginia. At approximately 10:03 a.m., United Airlines flight 93 crashed in Stoney Creek Township, Pennsylvania. These crashes and subsequent damage to the World Trade Center and the Pentagon resulted in the deaths of 2,972 persons in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania.

Paragraph b. The Detainee served as the head of the al Qaeda military committee and was Usama bin Laden's principal al Qaeda operative who directed the 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States.

Paragraph c. In an interview with an al Jazeera reporter in June 2002, the Detainee stated he was the head of the al Qaeda military committee.

Paragraph d. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained information about the four airplanes hijacked on 11 September 2001 including code names, airline company, flight number, target, pilot name and background information, and names of the hijackers.

Paragraph e. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained photographs of 19 individuals identified as the 11 September 2001 hijackers.

Paragraph f. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained a document that listed the pilot license fees for Mohammad Atta and biographies for some of the 11 September 2001 hijackers.

Paragraph g. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained images of passports and an image of Mohammad Atta.

Paragraph h. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained transcripts of chat sessions belonging to at least one of the 11 September 2001 hijackers.

Paragraph i. The Detainee directed an individual to travel to the United States to case targets for a second wave of attacks.

Paragraph j. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained three letters from Usama bin Laden.

Paragraph k. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained spreadsheets that describe money assistance to families of known al Qaeda members.

Paragraph l. The Detainee's name was on a list in a computer seized in connection with a threat to United States airlines, United States embassies

and the Pope.

Paragraph m. The Detainee wrote the *Bojinka Plot*, the airline bomb plot which was later found on his nephew Ramzi Yousef's computer.

Paragraph n. The *Bojinka Plot* is also known as the Manila air investigation.

Paragraph o. The Manila air investigation uncovered the Detainee conspired with others to plant explosive devices aboard American jetliners while those aircraft were scheduled to be airborne and loaded with passengers on their way to the United States.

Paragraph p. The Detainee was in charge of and funded an attack against United States military vessels heading to the port of Djibouti.

Paragraph q. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained a letter to the United Arab Emirates threatening attack if their government continued to help the United States.

Paragraph r. During the capture of the Detainee, information used exclusively by al Qaeda operational managers to communicate with operatives was found.

Paragraph s. The Detainee received funds from Kuwaiti-based Islamic extremist groups and delivered the funds to al Qaeda members.

Paragraph t. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained a document that summarized operational procedures and training requirements of an al Qaeda cell.

Paragraph u. A computer hard drive seized during the capture of the Detainee contained a list of killed and wounded al Qaeda martyrs.

And lastly, Paragraph v. Passport photographs of al Qaeda operatives were seized during the capture of the Detainee.<sup>3</sup>

Despite their length, these charges are in fact drawn from rather limited sources of evidence—a computer hard drive and an Al-Jazeera interview. As if offended by the meagreness of this evidence, especially given the rich detail of his own lengthy if also uncorroborated confessions, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed proceeded to criticize the charges laid against him on factual and procedural grounds, though without of course trying to claim his innocence while doing so. This made his criticism into an act of reformatory kindness:

PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE: The Detainee responds to the unclassified summary of evidence with the following key points.

PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE: “Some paragraphs under paragraph number 3, lead sentence are not related to the context or meaning of the aforementioned lead sentence. For example, paragraph 3-a is only information from news or a historical account of events on 11 September 2001, and note with no specific linkage being made in this paragraph to me or the definition of Enemy Combatant. As another example, subparagraph 3-n makes no linkage to me or to the definition of Enemy Combatant.”

DETAINEE: Are they following along?

PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE: Ah, they have that in front of them for reference.

PRESIDENT: Yes.

DETAINEE: Okay.

PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE: Point number 3. “There is an unfair ‘stacking of evidence’ in the way the Summary of Evidence is structured.

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<sup>3</sup> ISN 10024, pp. 5-7.



In other words, there are several sub-paragraphs under parent-paragraph 3 which should be combined into one sub-paragraph to avoid creating the false perception that there are more allegations or statements against me specifically than there actually are. For example, sub-paragraphs 3-m through 3-o, which pertain to the *bojinka* plot should be combined into one paragraph, as should paragraphs 3-a through 3-h, which pertain to 9/11.”<sup>4</sup>

Aware that much of the evidence adduced against him was derived from a computer hard drive and an Al-Jazeera interview, in which he was said to have claimed to be the head of Al-Qaeda’s military committee, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed asked the tribunal to produce two witnesses on his behalf from among the detainees at Guantánamo Bay. One was Ramzi bin al-Shibh, who had been with him during the Al-Jazeera interview, and the other Mustafa Hawsawi, with whom he’d been captured and who owned the computer from which the evidence had been drawn. Mohammed’s point was that in the absence of any corroborating evidence, the statements of these two witnesses had to be taken into account, one of whom could state that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed did not in fact claim to lead Al-Qaeda’s military committee, and the other that no link could be made between Mohammed and the information found on the hard drive, since the computer in question did not belong to him. The tribunal determined that neither of these witnesses would be able to produce testimony relevant to determining Khalid Sheikh Mohammed’s status as enemy combatant, and so denied his requests that they be produced. Mohammed’s aim, however, was not to prove his guilt or innocence so much as to reveal the incorrectness of the hearing itself and so to call for its reformation in order that America might be true to itself as the global protector of human rights. Thus he points out that the facts used against him often don’t even belong in the category of circumstantial evidence, such as, for instance finding a picture of the chief 9/11 hijacker Muhammad Atta on a computer that didn’t belong to the accused. Many hundreds of thousands of Americans, said Mohammed, might well possess such a picture, which turned this particular “fact” into nothing more than a piece of general information elevated into a hollow accusation:

DETAINEE: most of these facts which be written are related to this hard drive. And more than eleven of these facts are related to this computer. Other things are which is very old even nobody can bring any witnesses for that as you written here if it will be ah a value for you for the witness nearby you will do it. This computer is not for me. Is for Hawsawi himself. So I’m saying I need Hawsawi because me and him we both been arrested day. Same way. So this computer is from him long time. And also the problem we are not in court and we are not judge and he is

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<sup>4</sup> ISN 10024, pp. 8-9.

not my lawyer but the procedure has been written reported and the way has mostly as certain charged against me; tell him [Arabic phrase].

TRANSLATOR: [Translating] They are only accusations.

DETAINEE: So accusations. And the accusations, they are as you put for yourself ah definition for enemy combatant there are also many definitions for that accusation of fact or charges that has been written for any ah. [Arabic phrase]

TRANSLATOR: [Translating] Person is accused.

DETAINEE: So, if I been accused then if you want to put facts against me also the definition for these facts. If you now read number N now what is written the *bojinka* plot. Is known many lead investigation it is not related to anything facts to be against me. So when I said computer hard drive/hard disk, same thing. All these point only one witness he can say yes or not cause he is this computer is under his possession him computer. And also specifically if he said Mohammad Atta picture been this hard drive. I don't think this should accepted. There are many 100 thousand Americans who have a lot of picture on their computer. You cannot say I find Muhammad Atta on your computer then you use this fact against you. Or you find any files in your computer to be what about it's mine, it's not my computer. If this witness, he will state that this known and here that has been ninety percent of what is written is wrong. And for Ramzi, for reporter in Jazeera, he claimed that I state this one and you know the media man. How they are fashionable. What they mean in their own way in a whole different way. They just wrote it so he say I state. But I never stated and I don't have any witnesses and witness are available here at Guantanamo. He is Detainee. He was with me. Which he been mostly in all my interview with him. Me and them, there was three person, me and Ramzi and this reporter. So if you not believe me, not believe him, believe my witness Ramzi. Then he's what he state the reporter most is false. I'm not denying that I'm not an enemy combatant about this war but I'm denying the report. It not being written in the proper way. Which is really facts and mostly just being gathered many information. General information that form in way of doing, to use in facts against me.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> ISN 10024, PP.11-12.

While Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's finicky attempts to correct the tribunal's procedures had no bearing on his own guilt or innocence, they did have a great deal to do with the fate of others detained in US custody. For Mohammed, while acknowledging his own guilt, altruistically asserted that the lack of procedures that marked his capture had also resulted in the capture and detention of many innocent Muslims, whom he advised the Americans to treat carefully:

DETAINEE: I want to just it is not related enemy combatant but I'm saying for you to be careful with people. That you have classified and unclassified facts. My opinion to be fair with people. Because when I say, I will not regret when I say I'm enemy combatant. I did or not I know there are other but there are many Detainees which you receive classified against them maybe, maybe not take away from me for many Detainees false witnesses. This only advice.<sup>6</sup>

So when we say we are enemy combatant, that right. We are. But I'm asking you again to be fair with many Detainees which are not enemy combatant. Because many of them been unjustly arrested. Many, not one or two or three. Cause the definition you which wrote even from my view is not fair. Because if I was in the first Jihad times Russia. So I have to be Russian enemy. But America supported me in this because I'm their alliances when I was fighting Russia. Same job I'm doing. I'm fighting. I was fighting there Russia now I'm fighting America.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these men, claimed Mohammed, had fought in Afghanistan during the first, US-supported war against the Soviets and then stayed behind, having nothing to do either with Al-Qaeda or the Taliban, while others joined any battle in the name of Islam, or anyone in power in Kabul, without any predisposition against America.<sup>8</sup> Even the Taliban, he pointed out, did not share Al-Qaeda's purpose and entertained no anti-American feelings until the US invasion.<sup>9</sup> Indeed the Taliban had even tried to assassinate Osama bin Laden, and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed relished the irony not only of having these would-be assassins detained with him in Guantánamo Bay, but also of asking for them to be treated fairly despite his enmity for them:

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<sup>6</sup> ISN 10024, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> ISN 10024, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> ISN 10024, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> ISN 10034, p. 22.

So, this is why I'm asking you to be fair with Afghanis and Pakistanis and many Arabs which been in Afghanistan. Many of them been unjustly. The funny story they been Sunni government they sent some spies to assassinate UBL then we arrested them sent them to Afghanistan/Taliban. Taliban put them into prison. Americans they came and arrest them as enemy combatant. They brought them here. So, even if they are my enemy but no fair to be there with me.<sup>10</sup>

In a remarkable transformation, then, the man who began by proudly admitting to numberless murders and terrorist plots ended up pleading in an almost Christian way that justice be rendered others, and even his own enemies, in accordance with American principles of human rights. Whether or not he did so out of vanity, so that he could be the most notorious Al-Qaeda operative in custody, or in order to save his accomplices, it is nevertheless extraordinary that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed should have concluded his testimony at Guantánamo Bay with a plea for the human rights of strangers:

The American have human right. So, enemy combatant itself, it flexible word. So I think God knows that many who been arrested, they been unjustly arrested. Otherwise, military throughout history know very well. They don't war will never stop. War start from Adam when Cain he killed Abel until now. It's never gonna stop killing of people. This is the way of the language. American start the Revolutionary War then they starts the Mexican then Spanish War then World War One, World War Two. You read the history. You know never stopping war. This is life. But if who is enemy combatant and who is not? Finally, I finish statement. I'm asking you to be fair with other people.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout his statement Khalid Sheikh Mohammed referred to war as a language, and even as the common language that enemies shared with each other, one rendered universal by its very partiality. For in a world of differences it was the only common element, whose ironical role it was to bring people together even as it appeared to drive them apart. Mohammed went so far as to describe the intimacy that war wrought by comparing it to a marriage that produces corpses in place of children:

The way of the war, you know very well, any country waging war against their enemy the language of the war are killing. If a man and a woman

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<sup>10</sup> ISN 10024, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup> ISN 10024, pp. 24-5.

they be together as a marriage that is up to the kids, children. But if you and me, two nations, will be together in war the others are victims. This is the way of the language.<sup>12</sup>

So in a startling reversal of received views on the subject of human difference, Khalid Sheikh Mohammed described conflict as the element of similarity in men's affairs, attributing difference to more peaceable forms of interaction. The way to peace, therefore, was to depart the common language of war and be true to oneself, in the way we have seen he asked America to remain true to its principles of human rights. For the intimacies of war had no end, each side being able to justify its actions by those of the other, so that the responsibility of neither could ever be determined. Mohammed used George Washington as an example of this endless intimacy, claiming that it was impossible to differentiate the hero of the American Revolution from Osama bin Laden as far as the universal language of war was concerned:

So, we derive from religious leading that we consider we and George Washington doing same thing. As consider George Washington as hero. Muslims many of them are considering Usama bin Laden. He is doing same thing. He is just fighting. He needs his independence.<sup>13</sup>

When I said I'm not happy that three thousand been killed in America. I feel sorry even. I don't like to kill children and the kids. Never Islam are, give me green light to kill peoples. Killing, as in the Christianity, Jews, and Islam, are prohibited. But there are exceptions of rule when you are killing people in Iraq. You said we have to do it. We don't like Saddam. But this is the way to deal with Saddam. Same thing you are saying. Same language you use, I use. When you are invading two-thirds of Mexican, you call your war manifest destiny. It up to you to call it what you want. But other side are calling you oppressors. If now George Washington. If now we were living in the Revolutionary War and George Washington he being arrested through Britain. For sure he, they would consider him enemy combatant. But American they consider him as hero. This right the any Revolutionary War they will be as George Washington or Britain.<sup>14</sup>

If the heroes and villains of one nation were reversed in another, and Osama bin

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<sup>12</sup> ISN 10024, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> ISN 10024, p. 22.

<sup>14</sup> ISN 10024, p. 23.

Laden could play the role of George Washington to America's Britain, how then might responsibility finally be determined in war? By anchoring its language to some external source of authority—though not of course to an institution like the UN that was as partial as any state. The kind of authority Mohammed meant was something freely chosen and highly individual in character, a law for oneself that might or might not be shared with others, something like human rights. Not conscience, in other words, since it presupposed a common law against which to measure one's actions, but something completely external was required, for the fragmentation of a collective legal order in the global arena seems to have made individual judgements super-legalistic by devolving all the duties of jurisprudence upon them. And this indeed is what has finally happened to Islamic law in the rhetoric of militant pluralism: torn from its traditional moorings to become the source for a thoroughly individualized jurisprudence whose first and only rule is being true to oneself. Thus Khalid Sheikh Mohammed spoke in his halting and ungrammatical way about his own efforts to exit the undifferentiated realm he called the language of war by judging it according to the *sharia* as a freely chosen though completely external authority:

I don't like to kill people. I feel very sorry they been killed kids in 9/11. What will I do? This is the language. Sometime I want to make great awakening between American to stop foreign policy in out land. I know American people are torturing us from seventies. [REDACTED] I know they talking about human rights. And I know it is against American Constitution, against American laws. But they said every law, they have exceptions, this is your bad luck you been part of the exception of our laws. They got have something to convince me but we are doing same language. But we are saying we have Sharia law, but we have Koran. What is enemy combatant in my language?

DETAINEE (through translator): Allah forbids you not with regards to those who fight you not for your faith nor drive you out of your homes from dealing kindly and justly with them. For Allah love those who are just. There is one more sentence. Allah only forbids you with regards to those who fight you for your faith and drive you out of your homes and support others in driving you out from turning to them for friendship and protection. It is such as turn to them in these circumstances that do wrong.

DETAINEE: So we are driving from whatever deed we do we ask about Koran or Hadith. We are not making up for us laws. When we need Fatwa from the religious we have to go back to see what they said scholar. To see what they said yes or not. Killing is prohibited in all what you call the people of the book, Jews, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

You know the Ten Commandments very well. The Ten Commandments are shared between all of us. We are all serving one God. Then now kill you know it very well. But war language also we have language for the war. You have to kill.<sup>15</sup>

No less than any Muslim liberal, our militant acknowledged the shared heritage of Christians, Muslims and Jews, as well as the proscription on killing within their common tradition, only to justify his own murders as juridically approved exceptions to this law. Through a translator, Mohammed cited the Quran in support of this exception, reiterating the now standard argument by which responsibility for violence is evaded if it simply mirrors that of one's opponent. Even this invocation of a legal exception, however, falls into the mirroring practices that characterize the language of war, since it does nothing more than reflect the legal exception that is Guantánamo Bay, with its "enemy combatants" and proceedings conducted without benefit of lawyers and by the use of secret evidence. According to Mohammed, the difference between his form of legal exception, and that by which his captors worked, was that the exceptionality of Guantánamo Bay remained disconnected from any legal norm. But the validity or otherwise of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed's reasoning is irrelevant to the point at hand, which is that the pluralistic global society militants inhabit depends upon self-rule rather than the rule of others. And self-rule is being true to the path one has chosen.

### **The ventriloquist**

After a three-year gap in his media appearances, Osama bin Laden staged a successful comeback as a small-screen star a few days before the sixth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. I do not mean to be ironic by this description of a man who is after all nothing more than a celebrity these days, deprived as he is of any control over the fans he inspires, and himself a fugitive with neither financial nor military resources to command. While Bin Laden's influence no doubt derives from his warlike past, his power has today become suprapolitical in character, though it also is a kind of power peculiar to the age of mass media. Indeed his Muslim admirers apart, Osama bin Laden's celebrity status is also acknowledged by his detractors, who attend so closely to their idol's appearance that commentators in the press seemed to be obsessed by the dyed or even false beard sported in this videotape by the world's most wanted man. He might as well have been an MTV star.

As a celebrity, of course, Bin Laden is part of the West he criticizes, remaining firmly inside it despite all attempts to play up his foreign provenance or exotic

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<sup>15</sup> ISN 10024, p. 24.

beliefs. And of this insider's role Osama bin Laden himself is fully aware, not least because his attacks on America in particular are given voice in this videotape through the lips of dissenting figures like Noam Chomsky and Michael Scheuer.<sup>16</sup> While not himself a socialist or a liberal, in other words, Bin Laden adopts the anti-capitalist or anti-establishment stance of such people to voice his opposition to the West. His own critique of the Occident is therefore an imminent or internal one, but more than that it is a form of ventriloquism in which the prince of terrorists speaks through the mouths of American citizens rather than in his own name. In itself this adoption of ready-made positions is not strange, marking in fact the language of most politicians in Europe and the United States, but in the case of Osama bin Laden it illustrates additionally the fact that he possesses no position outside the world of his enemies. This is why he can so easily identify with the plight of American soldiers in Iraq, whom he compares with their Muslim victims in the following passage referring in particular to the large number of Blacks serving in the US armed forces:

If they leave their barracks, the mines devour them, and if they refuse to leave, rulings are passed against them. Thus, the only options left in front of them are to commit suicide or cry, both of which are from the severest of afflictions. So is there anything more men can do after crying and killing themselves to make you respond to them? They are doing that out of the severity of the humiliation, fear and terror which they are suffering. It is severer than what the slaves used to suffer at your hands centuries ago, and it is as if some of them have gone from one slavery to another slavery more severe and harmful, even if it be in the fancy dress of the Defense Department's financial enticements. So do you feel the greatness of their sufferings?<sup>17</sup>

It is because he speaks through a disparate set of figures without occupying a position of his own that Bin Laden can be said to turn internal or immanent critique into a form of terrorism, since all he does is to deploy one kind of argument against another in a battle which none is meant to survive. It is a form of rhetorical suicide bombing in which the Muslim critic is destroyed alongside his infidel enemy, given that the Islamic element in Bin Laden's argumentation serves as a false externality, a merely decorative covering for Marxism, Third Worldism and God knows what else. Yet the internality of such a position to America or the West means that Osama bin Laden can address his enemies in the most intimate, familiar and direct of ways, often mentioning them by name and always claiming to understand their motives perfectly. Indeed Al-Qaeda's founding father goes so far as to confess sharing many of the interests of his

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<sup>16</sup> Jeffrey Imm, "SITE Transcript and Video Link to Bin Laden Video (Updated)", *Counterterrorism Blog* ([http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/09/obl\\_transcript.php](http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/09/obl_transcript.php)), pp. 4, 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.



capitalist or neo-conservative foes, at one point even joking about sharing their hypocritical innocence as much as their guilt for shedding Muslim blood:

This innocence of yours is like my innocence of the blood of your sons on the 11<sup>th</sup>—were I to claim such a thing.<sup>18</sup>

By contrast the way in which the West engages Al-Qaeda is strikingly different, with Bin Laden invariably seen as being irredeemably alien, rarely if ever addressed by his enemies, and usually described as sharing nothing at all with them. And yet what could be more familiar to political life in the West than the spectacle of a leader being fed bits of information and summaries of important books by his research assistants, the very procedures that allow Bin Laden to quote Noam Chomsky or assail capitalism? However the crumbling of a position that is truly external to the world of his foes results not only in the fragmentation of Osama bin Laden's critique, but in the dissolution, as well, of any alternative world-view he might hold. In addition to lacking a unified ideology or even a utopia, therefore, Al-Qaeda ends up promoting a perverse and paradoxical pluralism instead. So its founding fathers routinely ask their opponents not to convert to Islam so much as remain true to themselves—or rather to their own ideal of human rights. If anything Islam is conceived only as the fulfilment of this ideal, thus making conversion into an act of self-fulfilment:

And with your earnest reading about Islam from its pristine sources, you will arrive at an important truth, which is that the religion of all the Prophets (peace and blessings of Allah be upon them) is one, and that its essence is submission to the orders of Allah alone in all aspects of life, even if their Shariahs (Laws) differ.<sup>19</sup>

But conversion is by no means the sole option that Bin Laden and his friends offer the West, dwelling rather upon the possibility of a harmonious co-existence in which Christians, Muslims, Jews and others can be faithful to their own ideals. Disingenuous though it might be, this pluralistic vision forms a fundamental element in Al-Qaeda's rhetorical logic, and is lavishly illustrated in this videotape by invocations of the protection that Muslims extended to Jews fleeing the Inquisition, as well as by the words of praise that are heaped upon Jesus and Mary in the Quran.<sup>20</sup> Indeed Osama bin Laden states that intolerance

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. pp. 2-3 and p. 8.

of genocidal proportions is a characteristic of the West, mentioning as examples the Jewish holocaust and the use of atomic weapons in Japan.<sup>21</sup> Interesting about these illustrations of Muslim pluralism is the fact that they are drawn directly from the apologetic literature of liberal or “moderate” Islam, whose quest for an accommodation with the West goes back to the beginnings of colonial rule in the nineteenth century. And this appropriation of a rival Muslim tradition constitutes yet another instance of Bin Laden’s ventriloquism—which is to say his unwillingness or inability to adopt a position external to the world he fights, resulting therefore in an attempt to destroy this world from the inside.

Unlike his previous attacks on the malice and hypocrisy of American or British warmongers, Osama bin Laden’s comeback videotape focuses primarily on the failure of the very pacifists and socialists he so approvingly cites. Despite their unprecedented global demonstrations against the war in Iraq, for example, or their electoral rout of administrations like the one in Washington, Bin Laden points out that the war’s opponents have remained politically impotent. It is their inability to change the course of events that leads him to blame the interests upon which liberal society is founded, and the corporate interests of modern capitalism in particular, for what he considers to be the failure of democracy. If demonstrations, opinion polls, elections and other constitutional methods of registering disapproval are ineffective in changing government policy, though they may well change the party in power, this is because the democratic system itself is based on an accommodation of interests rather than on the simple representation of popular will, of the sort favoured by fascism or communism for instance:

And I tell you: after the failure of your representatives in the Democratic Party to implement your desire to stop the war, you can still carry anti-war placards and spread out in the streets of major cities, then go back to your homes, but that will be of no use and will lead to the prolonging of the war.<sup>22</sup>

As proof of this argument Osama bin Laden points to the Vietnam War, which was brought to a close not by public disapproval, however overwhelming, so much as by military defeat and a realignment of corporate interests in the US. He gauges the failure of American popular opinion during the Vietnam War by the fact that its termination did not result in justice being done—neither for its Vietnamese nor even its American victims. And because no government officials were brought to justice over Vietnam, Bin Laden claims that the interests these men represented could simply lie dormant, mentioning the American Vice-President Dick Cheney and the Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld as good examples of Vietnam-era officials returning to their old

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp. 3-4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

habits in Iraq.<sup>23</sup> Conspiratorial though this account may be, it disdains the moral absolutism of similar theories on both Left and Right, presupposing as these do the existence of a sharp dividing-line between friend and enemy. After all Osama bin Laden is not averse to claiming a community of interest even with his worst enemies, capitalists and neoconservatives in this case:

Since the 11<sup>th</sup>, many of America's policies have come under the influence of the Mujahideen, and that is by the grace of Allah, the Most High. And as a result the people discovered the truth about it, its reputation worsened, its prestige was broken globally and it was bled dry economically, even if our interests overlap with the interests of the major corporations and also with those of the neoconservatives, despite the differing intentions.<sup>24</sup>

Now democracy's success or failure is usually judged by reference to the people and society it defines, with outsiders engaged by no other principle but that of convenience. And while such convenience might well translate into relations of mutual advantage among states, the international order cannot itself be democratic without the establishment of a universal state. At the end of the day, therefore, this international order remains a state of nature, with nothing but the fear of reprisal preventing countries from exploiting, oppressing or annihilating each other. Bin Laden, however, holds American democracy to account precisely from the perspective of those outside its demesne. Such a perspective takes humanity itself as its subject, which is why our celebrity terrorist is concerned most of all by the failure of democracies to respect the human rights of those beyond their borders. But his critique of democracy is not limited to the recognition that its citizens' freedom depends upon the un-freedom of others. Instead Osama bin Laden begins his speech by telling us how even the richest and most powerful of democracies can be adjudged failures in a global arena. For example he points out that despite all its might the United States was shaken to its constitutional foundations and led into a global war after 9/11 not because of any profound domestic issue but merely by the unexpected actions of a few foreigners:

To preface, I say: despite America being the greatest economic power and possessing the most powerful and up-to-date military arsenal as well; and despite it spending on this war and its army more than the entire world spends on its armies; and despite it being the major state influencing the policies of the world, as if it has a monopoly of the unjust right of veto;

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

despite all of this, 19 young men were able—by the grace of Allah, the Most High—to change the direction of its compass. And in fact, the subject of the Mujahideen has become an inseparable part of the speech of your leader, and the effects and signs of that are not hidden.<sup>25</sup>

In a global arena, Bin Laden seems to be saying, the most insignificant powers and accidental events possess as much political weight as the deepest of domestic concerns, such that it becomes impossible to preserve the integrity of democratic politics within their traditional borders. Whether 9/11 compelled America to respond militarily by offering it an opportunity to re-position itself globally, or by confronting it with the necessity of protecting its interests, in other words, her subsequent transformation of the world's political landscape possessed what would traditionally be considered a superficial cause, and one that was external to the workings of this mighty democracy. For the paradoxical thing about Al-Qaeda was that its votaries could with their negligible resources create battlefield conditions at heart of a great power, though they could not of course threaten either its government or military in any significant way.

But this means that the terrorist threat, however numerous its potential victims, has never compromised America's national security from the outside. At most it left open the possibility of an internal transformation in the country's politics, for instance by threatening to erode the electoral support of administrations unable to protect their citizens. Yet it was precisely this negligible militant network that managed to evacuate a great democracy like the United States of its integrity by erasing the line normally drawn in political theory between superficial and weighty causes, or between domestic and international ones. In fact this very inability to sustain the boundaries of a democratic order is what allows Osama bin Laden to speak from inside its crumbling rhetoric, whose marshalling by the US president, as he points out in the passage quoted above, illustrates more than anything else how the language of democracy has been hijacked by a rag-tag band of amateur terrorists, given that American policy now appears to be dictated by their doings.

Only in the global arena was a negligible force like Al-Qaeda able to subvert the integrity of an immense country like the United States, by forcing it to respond to a barely understood problem beyond the self-proclaimed limits of its democracy. But more than threatening these limits, the global arena is if anything put at risk by democratic politics, which Bin Laden argues have become irrational within its more capacious boundaries. So quite apart from engaging in vast massacres of civilian populations in places like Japan or Vietnam, a democracy like the United

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

States will also compromise the future of humanity itself by ignoring the dangers of climate change to cater to the narrower interests of some among its citizens. As far as Osama bin Laden is concerned, then, democratic politics becomes suicidal in the global arena because it cannot abandon the factionalism that makes it possible in the first place. Rather than blaming America's rejection of the Kyoto Accords on particular interests, in other words, Bin Laden attributes it to the politics of interest that underwrites democracy in general:

In fact, the life of all of mankind is in danger because of the global warming resulting to a large degree from the emissions of the factories of the major corporations, yet despite that, the representatives of these corporations in the White House insist on not observing the Kyoto Accord, with the knowledge that the statistics speak of the death and displacement of millions of human beings because of that, especially in Africa. This greatest of plagues and most dangerous of threats to the lives of humans is taking place in an accelerating fashion as the world is being dominated by the democratic system, which confirms its massive failure to protect humans and their interests from the greed and avarice of the major corporations and their representatives.<sup>26</sup>

While it is clear that Bin Laden is doing nothing more than trotting out a set of stereotyped popular concerns about climate change, greedy corporations and African poverty in the quotation above, interesting about his reasoning is the fact that democracy rather than America or even the West ends up becoming the rather abstract and structural cause of all this destruction. And this only because the dominant role played by its factional politics means that democracy is unable to attend seriously to the long-term interests of humanity as a whole. True or false, such a view is manifestly global in dimension, taking as it does the entire human race as its subject. So against the suicidal factionalism of democracy, which he thinks can only sacrifice the long-term future of humanity for short-term corporate interests, Osama bin Laden sets up the virtues of *sharia*. For the divine law is universal precisely because it happens to be removed from a present-day politics of interest, thus assuming the kind of neutrality that is partial to none:

So it is imperative that you free yourself from all of that and search for an alternative, upright methodology in which it is not the business of any class of humanity to lay down its own laws to its own advantage at the expense of the other classes as is the case with you, since the essence of man-made positive laws is that they serve the interests of those with the capital and thus

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

make the rich richer and the poor poorer.<sup>27</sup>

Bin Laden recommends the purely civilian, informal and even individual interpretation and application of *sharia* in an almost anarchistic way. He revels in the sacrifices demanded by divine law, which for him illustrate its supremely disinterested and therefore impartial nature. At the end of the day, therefore, Bin Laden might well see the impediments placed in the way of women, sectarian minorities and others by this law as sacrifices equivalent in some sense to the military ones required of Muslim men, neither one being avoidable if the law's neutrality was to be safeguarded, its universal claims resting as they did on sheer archaism.

Having detached Islamic law from the grip of the nation-state and emphasized its sacrificial nature, Osama bin Laden has effectively transformed the militant's obedience of *sharia* into an act of sovereignty. For the law is no longer embodied in a set of institutions to which one must submit, but manifests itself in militant acts that possess the force of law in their own right. Yet more than their freedom from institutional authority, what makes these acts sovereign is that they neither claim nor defend any interest, rather destroying interest itself in spectacular gestures of sacrifice that we have seen unite both perpetrators and victims into a single humanity. In other words militant acts are sovereign because they are spendthrift: deriding the protection that law normally extends interests of various kinds to sacrifice life itself as the ground of all interest. In this sense the militant act is law making rather than law abiding, though it be in the most anarchic of ways.

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<sup>27</sup> Jeffrey Imm, "SITE Transcript and Video Link to Bin Laden Video (Updated)", *Counterterrorism Blog* ([http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/09/obl\\_transcript.php](http://counterterrorismblog.org/2007/09/obl_transcript.php)), pp. 5-6.

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