



THE ENEMY

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS

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Recalling a forbidding figure of early authority in his *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison wrote that “whether we liked him or not, he was never out of our minds. That was a secret of leadership.” In reaction to a certain mode of flag-displaying faux national unity after the cataclysmic events of 11 September 2001, I wrote an article that proposed instead a sort of activist reticence that might be better designed for a long and arduous confrontation. In this attempt, I annexed a slogan that was adopted by some French citizens after the agonizing loss to Germany of the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine. “Always think of it: never speak of it.” Instead of grand proclamations about a “Global War on Terrorism,” or consoling but misleading injunctions from President Bush to consider “America” on the one hand and “the terrorists” on the other, it would be better to cultivate a low but intense flame, designed to burn indefinitely rather than to flare up, and directed not merely at the remorseless grinding-down of al-Qaeda as an organization but at its *discredit*; at the steady, detailed refutation of Osama bin Laden’s false claim to ventriloquize the wretched of the earth. As a matter of work and habit I am a vocal person, so I cannot seriously claim to have kept literally to the second part of the injunction. But it did have the effect of ensuring that I thought about the founder and leader of al-Qaeda almost every day, and either read something about him or wrote something about him almost every month, very persistently over the next decade. And, now that he is dead, the requirement to reflect upon him has by no means been cancelled.

It became a commonplace to say that “everything changed” on that brilliant fall morning in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania. Nobody’s life has been untouched. Onerous and risible travel restrictions, involving the collective punishment of the innocent, have had their impact at the level of banality. The decision of the Bush administration to try and prohibit real-time transmission of bin Laden’s video-sermons—lest they convey coded messages to “sleeper cells!”—tested ordinary definitions of stupidity as well as added to the aura of mystique, scope and potency that rapidly formed around his person. The decision to alter the balance of power in the Muslim world, and to forcibly replace the Taliban and Ba’ath Party

despotisms in Afghanistan and Iraq, either was or was not the harbinger of the inspiring if vertiginous “Arab Spring” that burst out of such apparently unpromising soil in the opening months of 2011. On either interpretation, those interventions had momentous consequences that had not been foreseen by bin Laden, who had convinced himself and persuaded others that the United States no longer possessed the will to fight.

I live in Washington and slightly knew one of the passengers who was flung into the outer walls of the Pentagon that morning. I’m also a frequent visitor to the television studios that have, as their picture-window backdrop, a commanding view of the United States Capitol. To this day, I seldom pass the Dome without trying and failing to imagine how it might have looked if another flight—United Airlines 93—had plunged into it: a contingency that was only a few minutes’ flying time away, and averted only by a heroic combat on the part of the passengers. This catastrophe for democracy would have been visible over the shoulders of the network anchors ... The Dome is made of wrought iron and not, as many people suppose, out of marble. One has to picture molten metal obliterating that morning’s deliberations of Congress, and within a few yards of the Supreme Court and of the spacious Thomas Jefferson room of the Library of Congress. The long-planned aggression might have been, and was fully intended to be, very much worse than it was. Meanwhile, surveying the cloud of noxious dust and pulverized human remains that enshrouded the lower part of my beloved Manhattan that sunlit morning, I wrote in a first-response article for a London paper that it was as though Charles Manson had been made king for a day.

Of the various later reactions, which included a suddenly exaggerated faith in a government that had demonstrated itself as almost inconceivably unfit for the elementary constitutional mandate of “securing the common defense,” as well as a paranoid subcultural spasm that immediately suspected government collusion with the attackers, a frequently heard one was a warning against demonizing “the Other.” On this reading, Osama bin Laden was not to be categorized with that simplistic (but somehow indispensable) word *evil* but was to be regarded in the light of a nemesis. In his words and actions we were supposed to detect a reproach to our

contentment and arrogance, and a reminder that many millions of people lead lives of immiseration and oppression. His claim to speak for Islam or for all Muslims might be contested, but the religion itself was an expression of deeper yearnings that needed to be sympathetically understood. On no account—and this imperative was put forward by President Bush as well as by many liberals—were the less tender elements of his doctrine to be used as a critique of religion. A hitherto marginal propaganda term, “Islamophobia,” underwent a mainstream baptism and was pressed into service to intimidate those who suspected that faith might indeed have something to do with it.

It can certainly be misleading to take the attributes of a movement, or the anxieties and contradictions of a moment, and to personalize or “objectify” them in the figure of one individual. Yet ordinary discourse would be unfeasible without the use of portmanteau terms—like “Stalinism,” say—just as the most scrupulous insistence on historical forces will often have to concede to the sheer *personality* of a Napoleon or a Hitler. I thought then, and I think now, that Osama bin Laden was a near-flawless personification of the mentality of a real force: the force of Islamic jihad. And I also thought, and think now, that this force absolutely deserves to be called evil, and that the recent decapitation of its most notorious demagogue and organizer is to be welcomed without reserve. Osama bin Laden’s writings and actions constitute a direct negation of human liberty, and vent an undisguised hatred and contempt for life itself.

At the time, I wrote that the attacks on our civil society and institutions were an expression of “fascism with an Islamic face.” This involved a back reference to Alexander Dubček’s definition of Czechoslovak reformist communism as “socialism with a human face,” and to Susan Sontag’s echoing irony in calling martial law in communist Poland “fascism with a human face.” Obviously, these allusions can’t be preserved in every reiteration, and so a slightly vulgarized version—“Islamofascism”—got into the language and was briefly used by the White House before being dropped on the grounds of cultural sensitivity. (I have heard it argued that one would not blacken another monotheism in this way. Nonsense. In the 1930s the expression “clerical fascist” was in common use on the left, to

describe the sympathy of the Vatican for reactionary and violent movements like those of General Franco in Spain, Ante Pavelić in Croatia, and Father Jozef Tiso in Slovakia. To this day, the papacy continues to struggle for a form of words that conveys an apology for its actions and inactions during that period.)

Overused as the term “fascism” may be, bin Ladenism has the following salient characteristics in common with it:

- It explicitly calls for the establishment of a totalitarian system, in which an absolutist code of primitive laws—most of them prohibitions—is enforced by a cruel and immutable authority, and by medieval methods of punishment. In this system, the private life and the autonomous individual have no existence. That this authority is theocratic or, in other words, involves the deification and sanctification of human control by humans makes it more tyrannical still.
- It involves the fetishization of one book as the sole source of legitimacy.
- It glorifies violence and celebrates death: Not since Franco’s General Queipo de Llano uttered his slogan of “Death to the intellect: Long live death” has this emphasis been made more overt.
- It announces that entire groups of people—“unbelievers,” Hindus, Shi’a Muslims, Jews—are essentially disposable and can be murdered more or less at will, or as a sacred duty.
- It relies on the repression of the sexual instinct, the criminalization of sexual “deviance,” and the utter subordination to chattel status—more extreme than in any fascist doctrine—of women.
- It has, as a central tenet, the theory of paranoid anti-Semitism and the belief in an occult Jewish world conspiracy. This manifests itself in the frequent recycling of the Russian czarist fabrication *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*—once the property of the Christian anti-Semites—and, in bin Laden’s famous October 2002 “Letter to the

Americans," the published fantasy of a Jewish-controlled America that was first published by the homegrown American Nazi William Pelley in 1934.

These points in common are by no means exhaustive, but they do represent the most serious and determined and bloodthirsty attempt to revive totalitarian and racist ideology since 1945. For this reason, I always argued that the threat from bin Ladenism was actually *greater* than was often alleged, since the mass indoctrination of uneducated young men with such ideas is in itself a lethal danger to society and to international order. However, I also wanted to argue that the menace of bin Ladenism was simultaneously being *overrated*. This was because, in common with fascism, it was also delusional and self-defeating. Like the Nazis, the bin Ladenists dream of the restoration of a lost and glorious past, in their case in the form of the Ottoman Muslim caliphate that held spiritual and temporal sway over the Islamic world (and many non-Muslim subject populations) until 1918. Having gambled and lost everything on its proclamation of a holy war against Britain and France and Russia—in concert with German imperialism—in the First World War, the caliphate was formally dissolved by Kemal Atatürk in 1924. All subsequent attempts to revive it have been, and will continue to be, dismal failures. Not only does this program of reactionary imperial nostalgia make nonsense of the idea that al-Qaeda is in some way anti-imperialist, it also guarantees defeat in the real world. And al-Qaeda seeks not merely the return of the medieval *status quo ante*, as in the return of Andalusia to Islam, but its *extension*, as in the conquest of the whole of Spain. (The Iraqi branch of al-Qaeda murdered the United Nations envoy to Baghdad, Sérgio Viera de Melho, for the stated reason that he had earlier overseen the independence of East Timor from Indonesia: a grant of self-determination to a Christian population in a largely Muslim archipelago that was by definition profane and unpardonable.)

It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that the signature method and distinction of bin Ladenism is not so much the act of gratuitous and indiscriminate murder, lurid though that may be, as it is the commitment to suicide and the professed anxiety to make a bloody transition to the

hereafter. Like the Nazis, the cadres of jihad have a death wish that sets the seal on their nihilism. The goal of a world run by an oligarchy in possession of Teutonic genes, who may kill or enslave other “races” according to need, is not more unrealizable than the idea that a single state, let alone the globe itself, could be governed according to the dictates of an allegedly holy book. This mad scheme begins by denying itself the talents (and the rights) of half the population, views with superstitious horror the charging of interest, and invokes the right of Muslims to subject nonbelievers to special taxes and confiscations. Not even Afghanistan or Somalia, scenes of the furthest advances yet made by pro-caliphate forces, could be governed for long in this way without setting new standards for beggary and decline.

This conclusion—that the long-run defeat of bin Ladenism is inscribed in its own doctrines and practices—does not mean that the attempt to inflict it is not extremely dangerous. (The more an attempt at Islamization fails, the more it blames Jews and Crusaders and the more it exports its violence.) But it does mean that we should stop describing its zealots as “radicals,” when what they represent is the most primeval form of conservatism. It also means that we should rid ourselves of the delusion that they represent a brown-skinned “Third World” revolt against an American-dominated world order or against, say, the injustice done to the Arabs of Palestine. Al-Qaeda actually began as an Asian organization, committed to wrenching out separate Islamist states from the territory of that continent’s two leading democracies: majority-Hindu India and the predominantly Christian Philippines. Since 2001 it has conducted repeated attacks on the newly democratized society of Indonesia, killing civilians in Bali and Jakarta with the express purpose of injuring the country’s tourist industry. It should go without saying that such policies are not even intended to combat poverty and unemployment. Rather, they have the effect of extending and deepening such problems—as is very probably the real intention. It should also go without saying that a state for Palestinians is brought no closer by the detonation of bombs at Madrid’s main railway station or by the demand that all of Iberia revert to Islamic rule.

I here make what I hope is not a digression from the main argument. If I

am right that the defeat and discredit of bin Ladenism is inevitable, then it ought to follow that panic measures, or measures taken in fear, are even less justifiable. The resort to extralegal methods of interrogation, for example, or any want of care in protecting civilians from the consequences of military action, are not to be excused in any case. But when considered in historical or cultural context, where it will be seen that patience and skill and long engagement are the requisites, they reveal themselves as a double offense. (It's a relatively paltry point by comparison, but in more than one of his broadcast sermons, notably the one transmitted on election eve in late October 2004, bin Laden does taunt the United States with its propensity for being stampeded into overreactions by even pin-prick attacks, and it is highly distasteful to think of this jeer being validated.)

Remaining for a moment with the question of legality and illegality: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1368, unanimously passed, explicitly recognized the right of the United States to self-defense and further called upon all member states "to bring to justice the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of the terrorist attacks. It added that "those responsible for aiding, supporting or harboring the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of those acts will be held accountable." In a speech the following month, the United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan publicly acknowledged the right of self-defense as a legitimate basis for military action. The SEAL unit dispatched by President Obama to Abbottabad was large enough to allow for the contingency of bin-Laden's capture and detention. The naïve statement that he was "unarmed" when shot is only loosely compatible with the fact that he was housed in a military garrison town, had a loaded automatic weapon in the room with him, could well have been wearing a suicide vest, had stated repeatedly that he would never be taken alive, was the commander of one of the most violent organizations in history, and had declared himself at war with the United States. It perhaps says something that not even the most casuistic apologist for al-Qaeda has ever even attempted to justify any of its "operations" in terms that could be covered by any known law, with the possible exception of some sanguinary verses of the Koran.

An old Spanish proverb has it that "no man is without his aspect of

honor.” Having unambiguously said that bin Laden was the physical embodiment of an evil doctrine and a wicked set of actions, ought I not to inquire into whether there was a human pulse to be detected? Some element of redeeming idealism, conceivably, or at least some excuse or justification? I admit to having been struck, very early on, by a certain vague kind of nobility in his carriage and appearance. The widely spaced and liquid eyes, the long and fluted fingers, the relatively well-modulated voice: These are not typical of the hoarse, crude, brutal figures who lead the Taliban, say, or who organized the fantastically sadistic and homicidal so-called “insurgency” put together by the Jordanian jailbird and psychopath Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, founder of al-Qaeda in Mesopotamia. (This ghastly individual was awarded the Iraqi “franchise” by bin Laden in 2004, but it seems that his awful, unslakable thirst for the blood of Shi’a Muslims was considered slightly excessive by both bin Laden and his deputy Ayman Zawahiri.)

Michael Scheuer, the head of the special CIA unit that supervised the search for bin Laden, was reporting not just the views of his enemy’s devoted adherents when he made the comparison to “a modern-day Saladin.” In his own words he described him hyperbolically as having demonstrated “patience, brilliant planning, managerial expertise, sound strategic and tactical sense, admirable character traits, eloquence, and focused, limited war aims. He has never, to my knowledge, behaved or spoken in a way that could be described as ‘irrational in the extreme.’” Not content with this portion of the recognition that might be due to a formidable adversary, Scheuer went on to conclude that

“There is no reason, based on the information at hand, to believe bin Laden is anything other than what he appears: a pious, charismatic, gentle, generous, talented and personally courageous Muslim. As a historical figure, viewed from any angle, Osama bin Laden is a great man, one who smashed the expected unfolding of universal post–Cold War peace.”

How does this verdict read now that we can match it against a finished life: a life that ended with bin Laden as a cosseted pensioner of the Pakistani national-security state, apparently insulated from any fighting,

watching replays of himself on video and dying his beard to conceal the onset of grayness? The small elements of vanity here may not be vestigial or insignificant, and should be borne in mind as we proceed.

Osama bin Laden was the only son of a Syrian woman, who was one of the more than twenty wives of Muhammed bin Laden, an uneducated Yemeni who grew rich as a contractor by gratifying the whims of the Saudi Arabian royal house. The marriage did not last long, and the father died when Osama was ten, leaving him as one of fifty-four children. In Christian folklore there is a saying that "In the boyhood of Judas, Christ was betrayed," and it is not difficult to imagine the young man suffering from a lack of attention. He certainly fulfilled the more predictable part of the pattern of neglected youth by replicating it in his own private life. The best estimate of Jean Sasson's book *Growing Up bin Laden* is that Osama was married five times and fathered "at least" 11 sons and 9 daughters. The coauthors of the book are his fourth son, Omar, and his first wife (and cousin), Najwa. Omar claims that his father encouraged him to take part in a suicide "mission," treating him with contempt when he declined. They recall lives of sequestration and loneliness, being locked into the house all day in the case of the children to being kept in strict *purdah* and isolation— forbidden even to step into the garden—in the case of the spouse. According to the accounts of neighbors, these were also the prevailing conditions in the walled villa provided by the Pakistani dictatorship in Abbottabad.

In the 1970s, bin Laden attended courses at King Abd-al Aziz University in Jeddah, where he was taught among others by Muhammad Qutb. This instructor's brother had been Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian fanatic (executed by the Nasser regime in 1966) whose paean of hatred against the United States, that Jew-dominated cesspit of incest, sodomy and fornication, has been the foundational text of al-Qaeda's propagandists. Sayyid Qutb at least visited America and spent a little time there, whereas bin Laden has never evinced the least desire to learn about other cultures and societies from experience. However, he does seem to have developed a complex feeling of resentment and envy toward America and Americans. Though he spent some time on the Pakistan–Afghan border, helping to administer the

distribution of Saudi-supplied aid and weapons to the mujahidin fighting against the Soviet occupation, he consistently denies credit to the United States for the decisive role it played in the demoralization and eventual defeat of the Red Army. This might be no more than an ordinary jealousy, except that it is suggestively replicated in the cases of Iraq and Bosnia-Herzegovina. When Saddam Hussein invaded and annexed Kuwait in 1990, bin Laden asked the authorities in Riyadh to be appointed as a defender of the Saudi kingdom and the leader of an “Arab Afghan” contingent to fight against the godless Ba’athists. When this offer was rejected, he protested at the Saudi invitation to American troops to come and do the job instead. And, when a decade later it was proposed that Saddam Hussein be removed from the scene altogether, he threw all his weight into the opposite scale. If he himself was not to be the leader of the enterprise, it seems, then nothing would do. He loudly condemned Western inaction in the face of the “ethnic cleansing” conducted by Slobodan Milošević. But one would not know, from any of his extensive, rambling commentaries on world events, that the United States led two military expeditions to the Balkans, in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, with the express purpose of preventing the mass expulsion and slaughter of largely Muslim populations. In the warped, selective world-view of bin Laden, it cannot be that the Satanic and Semitic United States has rescued or helped rescue several Muslim peoples—Afghans, Kuwaitis, Bosnians, Kosovars, and Iraqi Kurds and Sh’ites—from foreign occupation and/or genocide.

To describe this unstable combination, of extreme personal ambition and highly subjective “denial,” as “sound strategic and tactical sense,” in Michael Scheuer’s words, seems perverse at best. And especially so since it led bin Laden to commit the extraordinary error, based on the most egregious misreading, of launching a mass attack on American civilians on American soil. Consider for a moment the situation, from the point of view of jihad, as it was in the early fall of 2001. Having been expelled under American and Egyptian pressure from Sudan in 1996, when he was extremely fortunate to have avoided arrest and possible extradition, bin Laden had successfully relocated to Afghanistan, where he was to enjoy the patronage and protection of the newly installed Taliban. This put at his

disposal the resources of a state, albeit a small and impoverished one, and allowed considerable scope for training camps and recruitment. In addition, he was favored by the Pakistani regime, which used the Taliban as its colonial proxy in Afghanistan, to supply “strategic depth” in the long-running confrontation with India. Within Pakistan itself, Taliban and al-Qaeda sympathizers were to be found even in the upper echelons of the nuclear program. Meanwhile the Saudis, loyal to the cynical pact that earned Wahhabi clerical endorsement of the ruling dynasty in return for heavy subsidy of Wahhabi clericalism, were putting billions of dollars at the disposal of madrassas and mujahidin alike. Spectacular attacks on a relatively ambitious scale, on the USS *Cole* in Aden harbor in Yemen, and on the American embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, were carried out with near-impunity and did not succeed in evoking any very determined American response.

Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote that the thought of God’s existence was unbearable, because one could not aspire to *be* God. It can only have been some kind of theistic megalomania that persuaded bin Laden, in these otherwise highly propitious circumstances for his movement, that the next step should take the form of an insane gamble: an outright assault on the American heartland. And it can only have been under the influence of beliefs that were, indeed, “irrational in the extreme” that he further concluded that such an attack would constitute a knockout blow. He was to persist in this folly for some time after 11 September, telling Al Jazeera’s veteran correspondent Taysir Alluni, in an interview on 21 October 2001, that it would be very much easier to destroy the American empire than it had been to bring down the Soviet one. On the same occasion, he generalized wildly from some random stock-market reports to “prove” that the American economy would not recover from the damage the nineteen martyrs had inflicted on it. (An especially pathetic example of his style: “One of the well-known American hotel companies, Intercontinental, has fired 20,000 employees, thanks to God’s grace.”)

Whether it was because of the fantasy of divine endorsement or because he exaggerated the ignominious American scuttle from a relatively minor commitment in Somalia, bin Laden committed the sin of

hubris on a colossal scale. I wrote at the time that he had done the West an enormous unintentional service, by in effect blowing the whistle on his own global plot. Wherever he went, immediately after Tora Bora in 2001, it cannot have been where he had wanted or expected to be. And he had lost his control over the Afghan state (running away even as his Taliban “hosts” took heavy casualties) while badly compromising his relations with the ruling circles in Riyadh and Islamabad. However, not even I was prepared, at the time, to believe that he had readied no follow-up strategy of any sort. Even the most low-level thug, from Northern Ireland to Lebanon, had learned by then to rig another car bomb at the other end of the square, to immolate the remaining civilians as they try to catch their breath, and to maim and kill the arriving medical personnel. (I was briefly convinced that the anthrax-laden packages in the U.S. mail had been designed for this psychological purpose.) But it seemed that there was to be no second wave and that bin Laden had indeed been duped by his own propaganda. Surveying that annoyingly serene visage of his, it turned out, I had been failing to understand that it was the expression of a man untroubled by doubt, and fanatically convinced of his own faultless rectitude. Such men are indeed a danger to us, but they are a deadly danger to those who blindly trust and follow them. As James Fenton puts it in his poem *Prison Island*, “Fear the kerchiefed captain who does not think he can die.”

I now consider myself further vindicated by the findings from the Abbottabad raid (in which the awful words “Black Hawk down,” uttered in the first few minutes of the operation, led not to panic and despair and self-flagellation but to the cool and calm deployment of another helicopter). Internal discussions captured on disc and tape show bin Laden fretfully casting about for a way to duplicate the impact of 9/11, and again to take the war to “the far enemy,” while many of his deputies argue for lower-cost and lower-risk “operations” against softer targets nearer at hand; Afghan schoolgirls, perhaps, or Egyptian Christians. Or maybe another frontal assault on culture, like the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the treasures of the Afghan national museum. This sorry dispute, surely, was a dank and dismal way for the “pious, charismatic, gentle, generous, talented and personally courageous Muslim” to spend his final days. It also seems to have been the nearest he ever got to anything approaching self-

criticism.

I also consider myself vindicated, this time not only against Michael Scheuer but against people like Bruce Lawrence, whose introduction to bin Laden's collected speeches (printed by the publishing arm of *New Left Review*) compared him to Che Guevara: a comparison certainly not intended as critical. How often have we read, in an attempt to give a shallow patina of "liberation theology" to bin Ladenism, that he set himself against the numerous regional dictatorships that enjoyed an overwarm relationship with Washington? Yet of all these despotisms, is there a worse example than that of Pakistan? Part military dictatorship and part Islamic theocracy, merciless in its exploitation and neglect of the poor, callous in its discrimination against minorities such as the Baluchis, exorbitant in its corruption, a rogue system in respect of the illegal sale and active proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the paymaster and protector of Osama bin Laden. In return, he lent his forces to Pakistan's Talibanization of Afghanistan and to the export of sectarian violence across the Kashmiri frontier with India. This sordid relationship was well known long before the exposure of the Abbottabad compound, which only reemphasized bin Laden's parasitic client relationship with Islamabad, and showed him to be a villa-dwelling dependent and not an ascetic cave-dwelling guerrilla. If there is a nastier despotism than that of Pakistan, it is probably Sudan, with whose rulers bin Laden had an almost symbiotic business and ideological relationship, in his capacity as the chair of a crooked multinational corporation, until 1996. More recently, he threatened the use of deadly force against United Nations peacekeepers if any attempt was made to arrest Sudan's flagrant campaign of racist murder against the African population of Darfur.

Surveying the other dictatorships of the area, whether pro-American or otherwise, can one argue that al-Qaeda did anything to challenge their rule or hasten their recent demise? The Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad, now fully exposed as a murderous one-man and one-party state, helped facilitate the transit of jihadists into Iraq, where the forces of al-Qaeda made a military alliance with the former security services of the Saddam Hussein regime, and blew up the Golden Dome mosque in Samarra with

the undisguised aim of unleashing a confessional war between Sunni and Shi'a. The Saudi system did attract bin Laden's hostility, but only because he considered its repressive brand of Wahhabi Islam to be insufficiently dogmatic and fundamentalist. It was chiefly in the more open and tolerant countries, such as Turkey and Tunisia and Morocco, that al-Qaeda used its methods of indiscriminate bombing and killing, against such targets as historic synagogues and tourist cafes.

Dotted throughout bin Laden's later sermons, in a rather too obvious attempt to ingratiate himself with a certain strand of radical opinion, there are some puerile or sophomoric allusions to the Kyoto treaty on global warming, along with recommendations of the essays of Noam Chomsky and the films of Michael Moore. But these gestures are eclipsed by the foam-flecked passages in which he accuses the United States of inventing the AIDS virus, or of being the prey of homosexuals and the gambling industry. And hovering over all of this, so crudely and so obviously that some people apparently ceased to notice it, is always the central theme: the self-granting of general permission to take certain kinds of life. President Bush was wrong to say that this was an attack on "America": long before 9/11 the full weight of such arrogations was being felt by the Hazara population of Afghanistan, and by Indians, whether secular or Hindu.

Shrouded as he was for a decade in an apparent cloak of anonymity and obscurity, Osama bin Laden was by no means an invisible man. He was ubiquitous and palpable, both in a physical and a cyber-spectral form, to the extent that his death took on something of the feel of an exorcism. It is satisfying to know that, before the end came, he had begun at least to guess at the magnitude of his 9/11 mistake. It is essential to remember that his most fanatical and militant deputy, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, did not just leave his corpse in Iraq but was isolated and repudiated even by the minority Sunnis on whose presumed behalf he spilled so much blood and wrought such hectic destruction. It is even more gratifying that bin Laden himself was exposed as an excrescence on the putrid body of a bankrupt and brutish state machine, and that he found himself quite unable to make any coherent comment on the tide—one hopes that it is a tide, rather than

a mere wave—of demand for an accountable and secular form of civil society. There could not have been a finer affirmation of the force of life, so warmly and authentically counterposed to the hysterical celebration of death, and of that death-in-life that is experienced in the stultifications of theocracy, where womanhood and music and literature are stifled and young men mutated into robotic slaughterers.

It was sometimes feebly argued, as the political and military war against this enemy ran into difficulties, that it was “a war without end.” I never saw the point of this plaintive objection. The war against superstition and the totalitarian mentality *is* an endless war. In protean forms, it is fought and refought in every country and every generation. In bin Ladenism we confront again the awful combination of the highly authoritarian personality with the chaotically nihilist and anarchic one. Temporary victories can be registered against this, but not permanent ones. As Bertold Brecht’s character says over the corpse of the terrible Arturo Ui, the bitch that bore him is always in heat. But it is in this struggle that we develop the muscles and sinews that enable us to defend civilization, and the moral courage to name it as something worth fighting for. As the cleansing ocean closes over bin Laden’s carcass, may the earth lie lightly on the countless graves of those he sentenced without compunction to be burned alive or dismembered in the street.