

The Audacious Ascetic by Flagg Miller review – banality of evil, Al-Qaida style

The huge cache of audio cassettes left behind by Osama bin Laden show him and his supporters to have been disturbingly mundane

Peter Conrad

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The British Library recently balked at acquiring an archive of Taliban documents, fearing that researchers might be tempted to rehearse terrorist outrages. American universities have fewer scruples. In 2002 US special forces scooped up a cache of 1,500 cassette tapes from a house in Kandahar that Osama bin Laden had occupied. The damp and dusty archive – a mind-numbing repository of rants, anthems and theological diatribes, with conspiratorial mutterings and sessions of military roistering mixed in – was vetted by the FBI and then released to CNN, which soon passed it on to Williams College in Massachusetts; later it was consigned to Yale. As the tapes bounced between institutions, no one seems to have bothered to listen to them. Now, selectively transcribed and interpreted by the linguistic anthropologist Flagg Miller, they allow us to eavesdrop on Bin Laden during the 1990s as he rallied his followers, first to upbraid Islamic renegades in Saudi Arabia, then to prepare an assault on infidel America.

The result, oddly, is to leave al-Qaida’s evil genius looking less demonic than he seemed in the aftermath of 9/11. Bin Laden worked hard to mythologise himself. He posed as an ascetic Bedouin, an abstemious desert-dweller who only allowed his children to smile if they didn’t bare their teeth while doing so; he cultivated a ravenous appearance that he hoped would terrorise the pampered, over-fed Christian enemy. In Flagg Miller’s book, however, he turns out to be not unlike Jeb or George W Bush: he was a child of privilege, the son of a millionaire who owed his fortune to business deals with American oil companies in the Gulf. He even has a likeness to the egregious Donald Trump, since he possessed a “lust for screen time” that angered his more covert colleagues.

Although Bin Laden pretended to be vindicating the displaced and dispossessed, his main talents were as a fundraiser and a self-publicist. He abominated western luxuries, and repeatedly raged against American apples, surely the epitome of harmless insipidity. Yet he treated himself to desert boots custom-made in Mayfair, sported an American military field jacket to keep out the cold, drove about in fast, flashy cars, and had a taste for fine Syrian food. “He was not,” according to a member of his entourage, “a McDonald’s kind of guy.”

It’s a little disappointing to see Bin Laden shrivel, like every other politician, into a self-serving hypocrite. But his lethal mystique, Miller suggests, was mostly the invention of American paranoia. In 2004 the naval strategist Thomas Barnett, once employed by Donald Rumsfeld, crowed that 9/11 was a “gift” to the US: here was “the Big One”, a catastrophe that could be used to justify a clampdown on civil liberties. Bin Laden usefully personified evil, although the adversary was in fact decentralised, faceless or, like Isis, hydra-headed.

Miller shrewdly notices the cunning with which the CIA “doctored” Bin Laden’s fulminations. Criticisms of usury and apostasy in Saudi Arabia were omitted, so it sounded as if his sole concern was a showdown with the west. The myopic Americans could only envisage him in their own image, as a distorted replica of their better selves: a television journalist likened Bin Laden to the swaggering warmonger Teddy

Roosevelt, and in 1995 a CIA report marvelled at the munificence that made him “the Ford Foundation of Islamic terrorism”.

Bin Laden’s warriors turn out to be less maniacal than expected, and also less devout. In tapes that sample daily life in Afghan training camps, they sound like a disgruntled rabble, fixated on creature comforts here and now rather than the glorious immortality they were promised.

A cook preparing breakfast for an elderly Yemeni mullah scrambles eggs while he fantasises about roast lamb, sweets in Mecca and Saudi Arabian honey; somewhat belatedly he remembers to add “God is greater”. The mullah dodders off into a lewd reverie about a female teacher at his school in Aden, who swayed about “in high, high heels”. He gets so excited by the recollection that he knocks over a kerosene stove and then spills some water, which prompts the cook to chuckle that the old man has had “a wet dream!” The levelling humour of the episode is at once endearing and dismaying: given that we’re all so grubbily human, why do we waste time quarrelling about who is holier?

Flagg Miller, I assume, is competent as an Arab linguist; it’s a pity that he’s so cack-handed when writing his own language. He muddles up “principle” and “principal” or “wither” and “whither”, thinks that “bereaving” means “grieving”, and imagines that the US military academy at West Point is at a non-existent location called Westpoint. He even manages to misspell Tabasco, which Bin Laden rails against in one of the tapes, probably because his profligate brother Salem once ordered 5,000 cases of the spicy sauce: perhaps he thought it wouldn’t be available in the afterlife. Paradise may be plentifully stocked with dark-eyed virgins, but martyrs might be well advised to take a supply of condiments with them.

The Audacious Ascetic is published by Hurst (£22). [Click here](#) to order it for £22 with free UK p&p

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