

The Contemporary Demon

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In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

—*Desiderius Erasmus*

Good name in man and woman, dear my lord,
Is the immediate jewel of their souls:
Who steals my purse steals trash; 'tis something, nothing;
'Twas mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands;
But he that filches from me my good name
Robs me of that which not enriches him
And makes me poor indeed.

—*William Shakespeare*

What our reputation holds in the eyes of others is of obvious significance in our lives. Yet, all too often, how we are perceived does not coincide with what we, ourselves, identify as the truth.

The greatest injustice to a name is to brand it with a single word. By doing so, the entirety of that individual's character is confined to that one defining label. The practice of placing figures on one flank of a scale between "good" and "evil" has been a common one, perpetuated by our educational system, the media, politics, and even those who write history. The placement of the individual on this scale is intrinsically subjective and changes between one assessor to the next. One contemporary figure, Osama bin Laden, has come to represent a diabolical villain in the eyes of millions of Americans through his role in the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center. The general public knows little about his past with the exception of a few facts and video

clips provided by the news media, all of which are secondary to the image of a pitiless terrorist. This essay is not intended to defend Osama bin Laden and present the case that he is a sympathetic character but to merely point out the perils in portraying him as solely evil. An equally detrimental form of one-dimensional representation is James Loewen's concept of "heroification" described in "Handicapped by History," which has the opposite effect of generating exemplary figures from the not-so-flawless. Both "heroification" and the practice of demonizing individuals, like Osama bin Laden, oversimplify the complexity inherent in human conflict while overlooking the causal relationship between motive and behavior.

One way in which a figure is made human is through the identification of a relatable and palpable past. By overlooking Osama bin Laden's past, Americans cannot recognize him as a human being like themselves. We seek to distance ourselves from what we see as a monstrous killer. Because Osama bin Laden is a man without a past, few will recognize the descriptions journalists initially produced when Osama first emerged as a major figure in the Middle East. They heard stories "of a man known as the Good Samaritan or the Saudi Prince" who would visit the beds of wounded Arab fighters, "dispensing cashews and English chocolates [...] noting each man's name and address" for the check he would later write to the men's families (Weaver, par. 11). The convenient lapse of great spans of time is also observed in "Handicapped by History" in Loewen's study of the popular representation of Helen Keller. Just as Loewen claims that "to ignore the sixty four years of [Keller's] adult life or to encapsulate them with the single word humanitarian is to lie by omission," lending no credit to bin Laden's earlier, less malevolent years and to summarize his entire being with the word "evil" is to knowingly and partially portray him as a man lacking human compassion (Loewen 509). With only the most recent bombing embedded in

our consciousness, we are apt to judge Osama bin Laden on very narrow terms.

For lack of another perspective, the media has essentially created what Walker Percy refers to as the “preformed complex” in his essay, “The Loss of the Creature” (Percy 598). Percy defines the “preformed complex” as the tendency for our expectations to greatly influence our perceptions. The narrow lens of a stereotype is analogous to the guided tour of the Grand Canyon or the lab manual’s procedure for dissecting a dogfish discussed in Percy’s paper for it fosters “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness [. . .] the mistaking of [. . .] an abstraction for the real” (Percy 607). This erroneous generalization is inevitable when only one side of the story is explored.

Indeed, the preceding years before bin Laden’s conversion to hatred of the United States is scarcely covered by the media. Few have argued that the United States actually played a role in training the Taliban, one of them being Norman Dixon, the author of “How the CIA created Osama bin Laden.” The conflict between the Taliban and the United States in reality began as a partnership to eradicate the People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) (Dixon, par. 7). Although the PDPA “was committed to [. . .] an expansion of education and social services, equality for women and the separation of church and state,” the U.S. sought the party’s removal due to the political ties the PDPA looked to establish with the Soviet Union (Dixon, par. 8). As Loewen rightly claims, “Socialism is repugnant to Americans,” thus, the United States was determined to assist local revolutionaries rid Afghanistan of the PDPA (Loewen 519).

The United States so feared the spread of communism that the CIA went so far as to advocate the very group of fundamentalists we would later face as our adversaries. From 1978-1992, the US government reportedly sent about three billion dollars in weapons and funds to several resistance factions battling the Soviets and the PDPA, many of which the CIA knew

held anti-American sentiments (Weaver, par. 13). In fact, an organization led by bin Laden known as Maktab Khidamar (MAK) was, “the first recipient of the vast bulk of CIA and Saudi Arabian covert assistance...” (Dixon, par. 25). At the moment, it seems discomfiting to explore the possibility that we may have created our own enemies. But how could the United States, as the greatest world power, have made such an error in judgment?

The objective of calling attention to these facts is to demonstrate how conditional representations can be, including our perceptions of evil. In W.J.T. Mitchell’s “Representation”, a diagram draws a line connecting the “maker” of the representation to the “beholder” (Mitchell 12). Essentially, the beholder controls what significance the representation holds. Thus, representation becomes a by-product of the beholder’s disposition and beliefs; it becomes “that by which we make our will known” (Mitchell 21). To demonstrate the influence of circumstantial bias, identify the following speaker who is passionately praising the “freedom fighters” who draw arms with bin Laden.

Throughout the world ... its agents, client states and satellites are on the defensive — on the moral defensive, the intellectual defensive, and the political and economic defensive. Freedom movements arise and assert themselves. They're doing so on almost every continent populated by man — in the hills of Afghanistan, in Angola, in Kampuchea, in Central America ... [They are] freedom fighters.¹

This speaker is none other than US President Ronald Reagan on March 8, 1985, a time when we had considered the Afghan fighters our allies (Weaver, par. 3). It seems that our representations are

¹ For more information on the context of this quote, consult Mary Anne Weaver’s “The Real bin Laden”: http://newyorker.com/archive/content/?010917fr_archive07.

contingent on current political context if we had once praised the efforts of the likes of Osama Bin Laden. Near the closing stages of the Cold War, bin Laden was not the enemy; it was the Soviet Union and communism that we regarded as the very essence of evil itself. Clearly, the face of evil is ever-changing.

It was following the death of over 6,000 civilians in New York that the majority of the American population and media began to stigmatize bin Laden as the ultimate embodiment of evil. In many respects, this is understandable, for the nation witnessed the first mass murder of thousands of innocent civilians on our very own soil. The immense tragedy of the event drew all attention to this single incident, making all other aspects of the discord between the Osama bin Laden and the US mute by comparison. For the first time, the conflicts and ugly wars sustained by the US government was thrust into public awareness. The television clips of the aftermath and coverage of the overwhelming list of missing persons is devastating to any viewer. Human nature dictates that we should consider an assailant who threatens the security of our families and our society as ruthless and cruel, but the word “evil” is a heavily loaded word that denies that person his or her fundamental right to be regarded as an individual rather than a prototype of good or evil.

Although it may be unthinkable for some, Osama bin Laden’s perspective must be addressed. Every facet of his character must be dissected to locate every ounce of rationale that shaped the mindset capable of launching an attack like that of 9-11. Osama bin Laden has repeatedly called his attacks on the U.S. a “holy war” and conversely believes that the *jihad*, or struggle for Islam, has the purpose of defending the Islamic nation from an equally, “evil” United States from his viewpoint. In the context of a war, Osama bin Laden believes that he is defending his people through such acts as the World Trade Center bombing. After all, if the massacre of numerous innocents single-handedly qualifies him as an evil person would not Harry S. Truman be equally deserving of

that title for his decision to bomb millions in Nagasaki and Hiroshima during WWII? Is this comparison unjust? Why do the circumstances count on one side of the battle field and not on the other? Certainly the means are far from wholesome, but Osama bin Laden’s intent is deeply rooted in religious respect. He and his followers, “believe that [. . .] they alone are preserving Islam from extinction” and that, “they are benefiting the world even if they are committing random massacres” (Berman 21).

However, the mentality that we are “good” and our foes are “evil” is not unique to American society. Osama bin Laden is plagued by the same narrow-minded view. As a religious zealot, his pious fervor has overridden all other sources of reason. He has developed the delusion that his fanatic acts of violence are justified simply because he is fighting for “The Cause of Allah” (*Observer Worldview*, par.2). Martin Luther King, Jr. once remarked, “Nothing in the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance and conscientious stupidity.” Religious extremism is not something new to this century or the last. As far back as the 1600s, the philosopher John Locke recognized religious extremism as “faults from which human affairs can perhaps scarce ever be perfectly freed” (Locke). We, as a civilized society, should take every measure in preventing similar thoughts from saturating our perceptions. As many Islamic leaders have already professed, we cannot take fanatics like Osama bin Laden as a representation of the Islamic faith as a whole no more than we can accept that the militants who bomb abortion clinics and destroy the life they wish to preserve are representative of all Christians.

To further illustrate the subjectivity involved in this matter, consider a poll conducted by Al Thawra, an official Iraqi daily newspaper, in January 2002. It reported that Osama bin Laden “has been elected ‘the preferred political figure [of 2001] for his rejection of American hegemony and aggression in Afghanistan” and that 98% of those surveyed supported the attacks in New

York.² Paul Berman in his article, “The Philosopher of Terror,” recognizes that although Al Qaeda’s popularity was “hard to imagine at first, [it] has turned out to be large and genuine in more than a few countries” (Berman 1). This is not a shocking revelation, if one considers why bin Laden is conversely viewed as a hero to some Muslims. His followers truly believe that he seeks to drive the United States out of the Middle East, not out of sheer hatred, but because the U.S. has taken arms with his enemy: the aristocratic ruling class obstructing the establishment of their “new [Islamic] state, based on the Koran” (Berman 16). Just as, “every explorer names his island Formosa, beautiful,” each individual believes his opponent the villain (Percy 597). Before Copernicus, the world believed that the earth was the center of the universe. This habit of viewing the world through our own perspective is a natural but nonetheless is a perilous human inclination.

The damage is even more consequential when a figure of authority affirms the public generalization placed on Osama bin Laden; it serves to legitimize the statement that bin Laden is wholly evil. As we know, President George Walker Bush has publicly referred to bin Laden as “an incredibly evil man”.³ As the leader of our nation, he is merely vocalizing the viewpoint held by many of his constituents, but nevertheless such a confirmation serves to exacerbate the situation. The rippling effects of providing such a laden label on an individual is evident in the widespread hatred and satirization of bin Laden that resembles early 20th century propaganda portraying Germans as the merciless Hun. Examples of portrayals of Osama Bin Laden as an evil caricature are provided in the following.

² For more on the CNN article that reported this poll, see: <http://www.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/01/13/bin.laden.poll/index.html>

³ The President was quoted by CNN news. The article, “Bush: Tape a 'devastating declaration of guilt',” can be found at <http://www.cnn.com/2001/US/12/14/ret.bin.laden.video/index.html>.

Figure 1. Osama bin Laden is equated with the character, Dr. Evil, from the movie, *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me*. Source: <http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/images/blosamaminibin.htm>



Figure 2. Bush is portrayed as the archetype of good while Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are referred to as “the bad and the ugly.” Source: <http://politicalhumor.about.com/library/images/blosamagoodbadugly.htm>



These images are unmistakably indicative of America's association of bin Laden with evil. Take note of the captions in Figure 2. The equally deleterious practice of "heroification" is demonstrated in this image where President Bush is portrayed as categorically "good." As images like these become ingrained in the American mind, one possible ramification is the generalization that all Muslims are evil. There have already been several incidents where American Muslims have been the victim of misplaced anger. The effects are seen in local news reporting "threats against local mosques and vandalism at a Lynnwood place of worship" (Green, par.1). Yet this is just one example of the "tax" misrepresentation can impose (Mitchell 21).

It is true that, "every representation exacts some cost [. . .] in the form of lost immediacy, presence, or truth, in the form of a gap between intention and realization [. . .]" (Mitchell 21). What lies in that gap is the catalyst that causes a man from a family with "close [. . .] ties to [Saudi Arabia's] pro-US royal family" to turn against the United States and distance himself from his own familial network (Dixon, par. 29). Through heroification, Loewen contends that "students [. . .] develop no causality in history" (Loewen 522). Likewise, demonizing Osama bin Laden reduces him to an enigma, a mysterious super villain without a traceable path leading to his current fanatic state. As a consequence, when the US is faced with the next "Osama bin Laden," we will have learned nothing from our past; and history will have the potential of repeating itself.

Eradicating one evil figure one at a time does not provide the best solution to a problem that calls for more than just bullets and bombs. Pursuit of such a strategy will only serve to fuel an endless, vengeful cycle.

This recurring theme of inertia and entrapment within a single action, pathway, or frame of mind is most vividly depicted in an anecdote of Johnny the horse, from James Joyce's "The Dead." Made to drive a starch mill day in and day out, the poor creature of

habit was dressed up to draw a carriage in a grand military review in the park, but reverted to the learned behavior when the parade turned. Encircling a statue, round and round but never going beyond the confines of that path, Johnny's progress mirrors that of a mind imprisoned within a one-dimensional perspective. All attention is drawn to one fixed point, whether it is King Billy's statue, as was the case for Johnny, or the concept of eradicating the world of one "evil" man. The ingrained thought or action has been lodged so solidly into our consciousness that it has become somewhat of a plague, permeating our judgments, leaving us blind to recognizing anything beyond our own perspective.

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