

THE SUNDAY TIMES

The Audacious Ascetic: What the Bin Laden Tapes Reveal About Al-Qa'ida by Flagg Miller

Catherine Philp

Published at 12:01AM, October 3 2015

In December 2001, after the fall of the Taliban, I joined the crowds who flocked to gawp at Mullah Muhammad Omar's hastily vacated home in Kandahar. Ordinary Afghans were stunned to see the luxury in which the reclusive cleric had been living, complete with pink-tiled bathroom and all mod cons. Not so the homes of Osama bin Laden, who lived by the ascetic standards he preached. His disdain for the modern ran from television sets to refrigerators, all of which were banned from the multiple houses he maintained around Afghanistan. Yet in one compound, looters stumbled across an unlikely haul: 1,500 cassettes forming an audio library for bin Laden and his coterie. The collection nearly didn't survive. The Afghan family who found them swiftly hauled them off to a recently opened music shop in Kandahar where the owner bought the lot, intending to wipe them and load them up with pop songs previously banned by the Taliban. They were rescued in the nick of time by a CNN cameraman and moved from intelligence agencies to academic institutions before ending up in the hands of Flagg Miller, a linguistic anthropologist. He found a hodgepodge collection of speeches, sermons, poetry and bafflingly mundane conversations from the front lines of jihad, recordings that chart bin Laden and al-Qaeda's evolution.

Acquaintances always ask Miller the same question: isn't it creepy to hear bin Laden's voice? In reality, not at all. Only 24 of the tapes feature his voice and the long, rambling speeches he gives paint a portrait far removed from the monster of the American imagination.

His singular focus on the fight against the West emerges far later than the CIA would have us believe. Instead bin Laden directs his ire at Saudi corruption and "apostates" who have strayed from the true path of Islam, from Egyptian Nasserists to Iraqi Baathists. Any animus towards the West is directed at the corrupting products it produces, a threat to the studied asceticism he was cultivating to distance himself from his wealthy origins. He rails in particular against American apples, Pepsi and Tabasco sauce, each of which he considered a threat to the pure Muslim soul.

This, Miller suggests, is the beginning of bin Laden's mythmaking, the cultivation of an ascetic persona that sat oddly with his known penchant for robes and desert boots custom made in London, expensive foreign cars and pure-bred Arabian

horses. One early idea for influencing American foreign policy was to boycott its products and write complaining letters to US embassies around the world. Hardly the stuff of nightmares.

Even his infamous 1996 “declaration of war” against the West is recast in the context of the longer speech, where bin Laden’s preoccupation with the Saudi monarchy takes centre stage again. Al-Qaeda is mentioned only once and never as a global terrorist network under bin Laden. At no stage do the 9/11 attacks appear monstrously inevitable, a realisation Miller found hard to swallow. Bin Laden’s followers, too, come across as somewhat less radical than advertised. One curious recording eavesdrops on breakfast in a mujahidin training camp, where a genial cook struggles to prepare a dish of eggs on an uncooperative stove while fantasising about superior Saudi and Syrian cuisine. Others join in a reverie about roast lamb, a rare luxury in the camps. Abu Hamza, a visiting Yemeni, fantasises about a memorable female teacher he had in Aden who tottered around in “high high heels.” Not all exchanges are so jolly. Plaintively, one fighter remarks: “Jihad is hard. One is always cleaning.”

Miller’s account, however, is by no means a mass-market read. He does well in contextualising the often heavy-going material with the more interesting details of bin Laden’s life and has undeniably added to our understanding of the man. This is a treasure trove for those already engaged in the subject; others may find it, like bin Laden’s speeches themselves, heavier going.

The Audacious Ascetic: What the Bin Laden Tapes Reveal About Al-Qa’id by Flagg Miller, Hurst, 320pp, £22. To buy this book for £19.80, visit thetimes.co.uk/bookshop or call 0845 2712134