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AUTHOR OF *IMPERIAL HUBRIS*

OSAMA
BIN
LADEN



OSAMA BIN LADEN

ALSO BY MICHAEL SCHEUER

*Imperial Hubris: Why the West Is Losing
the War on Terror*

*Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden,
Radical Islam, and the Future of America*

Marching toward Hell: America and Islam after Iraq

MICHAEL SCHEUER

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For Alec, Emily, Jessica, and Sarah, first, last, and always

For Betty, Walt, Dave, Hank, and Frank, who make a difference

For A.W. and J.M., thank you, may you rest in God's care

For the U.S. Marine Corps and the CIA, the Republic's first and best
defenders

PREFACE

On August 23, 2010, exactly fifteen years had passed since Osama bin Laden first declared war on the United States. Since bin Laden's declaration—one he reiterated in February 1998, in case we hadn't been listening that first time—Americans have heard and read an enormous amount about the man, his al-Qaeda organization, and their Islamist allies, from politicians, historians, theologians, and social scientists; from radio, press, and television pundits across the political spectrum; from admirals and generals; from westernized Muslims and evangelical preachers; from professional and armchair psychiatrists; from Just War theorists; and from the politically correct and incorrect. Armed with this torrent of advice and commentary, Americans and their government—under both parties—have sallied forth to do battle.

And they have failed miserably in every conceivable way. The Islamist enemy has not been defeated, its growth has not been stemmed, and the United States, in my view, remains largely undefended. As of this writing, the American government and most of its European peers are running the war against al-Qaeda and its allies in a manner best designed to help the Islamists achieve victory, which in their minds equates to attaining the three aims bin Laden laid out in his original declaration and subsequent messages: (a) helping to bleed

America to bankruptcy; (b) spreading out U.S. military and intelligence forces to the point where they have little reserves or flexibility; and (c) stripping away American allies and creating as much political divisiveness as possible in the United States.

To worsen matters, Washington and its European allies have banished such words as “Islamic,” “Islamist,” and “jihad” from their speeches and statements, employing the more benign term “extremist” in their stead. In his 2010 graduation speech at West Point, President Obama did not use those terms. He also did not mention Osama bin Laden. When he mentioned al-Qaeda, it was as a diminished and diminishing organization. “Al Qaeda and its affiliates are small men on the wrong side of history,” he said in terms identical to those used by George W. Bush and Bill Clinton. “They lead no nation. They lead no religion.”

Yet those waging war on America are Muslims—devoutly so—and they and a growing number of their brethren believe they are defending Islam via a defensive jihad, as prescribed by Allah and the Prophet Muhammad. By denying this, U.S. and European leaders deceive voters, and offend the very people toward whom they want to show sensitivity. Most Muslims know that since the 2003 Iraq invasion bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and their allies have been fighting a religiously legitimate defensive jihad. The only way Western leaders can maintain this semantic deception is to lie about Islam, and on that score they are proficient. Perhaps expecting questions as to why Obama forbids specifically naming America’s Islamist enemies, John Brennan, the president’s chief terrorism adviser, said, “Nor do we describe our enemy as ‘jihadists’ or ‘Islamists’ because jihad is a holy struggle, a legitimate tenet of Islam meaning to purify oneself or one’s community.”¹ As will be seen, these words do not ring true. What is worse, they mislead.

How could all this be? While there is no single answer to that question, the fundamental problem for the United States lies in the very torrent of words noted above. Since 1996, and especially since the al-Qaeda attacks of September 11, 2001, America’s political, military, and opinion leaders have successfully characterized the enemy we must defeat; yet, sadly, he does not exist. From their perspective, al-Qaeda is an organization of thugs led by a sociopath; the 9/11 attacks were atrocities; bin Laden’s pronouncements are rants, unworthy of

attention and analysis; the Islamists are either nihilists or freedom-haters, or—per Bernard Lewis—they believe the West is to blame for all their woes.² Americans, moreover, have heard and read that the “remnants” of al-Qaeda and its allies are being mopped up; that their number has dwindled to a few who, though they have managed—somewhat miraculously by any conceivable standard—to hijack and reframe the faith of 1.5 billion Muslims, have nothing to do with mainstream Islam; and that their goal is to kill all Christians and Jews and reestablish a caliphate to rule the entire world by religious fiat. This is truly the picture of an enemy that does not exist. Any other version of the story, however much based on the evidentiary record, will be read by many as a work of counterfactual or alternative history.

As to bin Laden himself, Americans have been told that he is many things, but virtually none of the portraits of him feature his piety, generosity, personal bravery, strategic ability, charisma, and patience. Rather, they stress that he is a madly ambitious, bloodthirsty, irrational, and messianic individual of limited intelligence; a man who is manipulated by his murderous *éminence grise* deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri and other conspiratorial Egyptian Islamists; and a man who lives only to call for the murder of Christians and Jews.

Would that America had the great good fortune of facing such an enemy. But we do not. Bin Laden is not the caricature that we have made of him. Indeed, if I had only ten qualities to enumerate in drafting a thumbnail biographical sketch of him, they would be: pious, brave, generous, intelligent, charismatic, patient, visionary, stubborn, egalitarian, and, most of all, realistic—he is a man who has grasped the timeless truth that wars are only won by killing. Those who claim that bin Laden is somewhat or totally mad, that his allies are not only few in number but are illiterate homicidal maniacs disconnected from “real” Islam, and that he wants to kill all non-Muslims are much like those contemporary scholars who believe that classical Athens was populated by democratic, lifestyle-tolerant, and arts-loving Athenians, and that Sparta, by contrast, was run by totalitarian and unsophisticated citizens. Yet, despite the fact Athens had a more “modern” society and a larger army, in the big war between the two Sparta won. The truth is that Sparta was neither totalitarian nor unsophisticated,