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Lee Harris: Al-Qaeda's Fantasy Ideology Study Guide

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LEE HARRIS: AL-QAEDA'S FANTASY IDEOLOGY

STUDY GUIDE, 2009

Steven Alan Samson

Study Questions

1. How does a misplaced sympathy for the enemy contribute to a failure of imagination? Was 9-11 a crime, a tragedy, an act of war, an accident, or what? How we choose to define reality is of great importance. What assumption about 9-11 did **Victor Davis Hanson** (the military historian, classicist, and author of *Carnage and Culture*) share with **Noam Chomsky** (the language theorist and Blame America First polemicist)? What is the nature of war as viewed by the Prussian strategist **Clausewitz**?
2. "A Personal Recollection" might best be read in light of Kenneth Minogue's remarks about political stage-acting in "Why Despots Don't Being in Politics." What Harris calls a **fantasy ideology** resembles Plato's tyrannical soul as described in *The Republic*, Book 8. For a humorous look at a fantasy life, see James Thurber's *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*. Fantasy ideologies can be usefully analyzed in light of René Girard's theory of mimetic desire, as Girard himself did with *Don Quixote* by Miguel de Cervantes. Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is another study of fantasy (especially the "sensibility" part). A very striking examination of the role of fantasy in the career of a tyrant may be found in *Ibsen and Hitler* by Steven Sage. Our whole celebrity culture and its fixation on glamour (however that may be defined) is a testimony to the power of fantasy.
3. That last sentence naturally leads to a question Harris raises: "But what happens when it is not an individual who is caught up in his fantasy world, but an entire group—a sect, or a people, or even a nation?" What are **chiliastic** (derived from the Greek for thousand years; millennial is the Latin-derived equivalent) movements? James Billington's *Fire in the Minds of Men* (the title itself evokes revolutionary fantasies of French and German freemasons) is a massive history of Left-wing secular millenarianism from the French Revolution to the Russian Revolution. Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's *Leftism* is also very good for displaying the personal foibles and outright madness of prominent Left-wing thinkers and activists from the French Revolution forward. See also Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Eric Voegelin singles out the three ages of the medieval heretic **Joachim of Fiore** (who influenced Dante) as the epitome of the Gnostic mentality.
4. What causes "a preexisting **collective need**" for a particular fantasy? What are some of the classic examples? If you wish to analyze the collective need aspect, the opening chapter of *The Abolition of Britain* by Peter Hitchens, which contrasts the funerals of Winston Churchill and Princess Diana, is a good place to start. The funeral obsequies for Michael Jackson evoked nothing so much as the life, death, and exaltation of Princess Diana. A film that deals with the power of popular legend is *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. In 1840 Thomas Carlyle published his popular lectures *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, identified different types of heroes and featuring Mohammed, Luther, Rousseau, Napoleon, and other examples. All of these charismatic figures continue to fascinate. Beethoven broke new musical ground with his third symphony. Originally inspired by Napoleon, Beethoven tore up the original title (Napoleon Symphony) in a rage after his clay-footed hero crowned himself emperor and substituted the name *Eroica* [Heroic]. The Kansas historian James C. Malin, who probably had his fill of the great man school of history, once wrote a book with the wonderful title *Confounded Rot About Napoleon*. As an illustration of the Romantic hero-fantasy, the apotheosis of Abraham Lincoln at the time of his death and the practice of "waving the bloody shirt" (in fact a whole series of shirts) following his assassination proved to be very powerful tools for the many faceted re-imagining of America that has continued through the Progressive movement, New Deal liberalism,

the New Frontier (with its own “bloody shirt”), and the Great Society to the present day.

5. Why is the “theme of **reviving ancient glory**” an important key to understanding bloody-minded fantasy ideologies? How does this theme help us to understand various national, ideological, and sectarian pathologies, such as the *Dolchstoß* (back-stab) myth among Germans following the First World War, the martyrology of the Shiite Muslims and other defeated sects, and the cultural threnody of conquered peoples and lost causes. Pride may be displayed as open contempt by victors and rebels alike. And just as equally and maliciously, it may be cloaked in bitter resentment by the victims (Friedrich Nietzsche’s and Max Scheler’s *Ressentiment*). That is why, as Roger Scruton notes, the virtues of forgiveness and irony are so important to the vitality of civilization. Such an understanding is especially important today since, as a young veteran of wars in India and Sudan understood in 1901: “The wars of peoples will be more terrible than those of kings” (Winston Churchill). A useful study is Fritz Stern’s *The Politics of Cultural Despair*. Osama bin Laden invokes the golden age of the thousand year caliphate while the mullahs of Iran invoke the 7C martyrdom of Ali and his son Hussein, whose shrines are at Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, and anticipate the advent of the Hidden Imam.
6. What does Harris mean by **transformative belief**? In *Theses on Feuerbach*, young Karl Marx (one of the Young Hegelians) wrote “The philosophers have merely interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.” The impetus may be make-believe but transformative leaders often bring such make-believe into reality. Note Budziszewski on the subversion and conversion of the conscience through its capture by sin. In writing about “the will to believe,” **William James** discerned a practical way of implementing his pragmatic understanding of belief in his famous essay “The Moral Equivalent of War,” which later inspired the teaching career of Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy (*Planetary Service*) and the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s. How does Harris use the concept of “the irrational?” A classic on the subject is *The Greeks and the Irrational* by E. R. Dodds. How did **Georges Sorel** take this concept of the will to believe and convert it into an active, myth-making force (“artificially inseminated” beliefs)? Think of Budziszewski, again, on conscience as an active force rather than a passive barrier. How were the initiatives of Sorel and **Vilfredo Pareto** (two of the subjects of James Burnham’s *The Machiavellians*) applied by **Benito Mussolini** (who was himself named after an earlier revolutionary)? Harris also makes a passing reference here to the influential artistic movement of that period known as Futurism.
7. Mussolini was a classic **political entrepreneur**: “For the Sorelian myth to achieve its effect it had to be presented as *theater*.” This is yet another exercise in the idyllic imagination and an example of its modulated into the diabolic imagination, much as the “democratic soul in Plato’s *The Republic* is transformed into the “tyrannical soul.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that the “**poetic faith**” (another literary application of mimetic desire) transfers “from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing *suspension of disbelief* for the moment.” Given his ambitions to revive “the grandeur that was Rome” (Edgar Allan Poe’s phrase), why, as Harris sees it, did Mussolini choose to invade Ethiopia? Romanticized fantasies abound wherever we choose to look.
8. What is it like to be a prop in someone else’s fantasy? Ask the “beautiful people” and others who live in the public eye (or in the “evil eye” of obsessive voyeurs) and who live with this reality constantly. The stalker is the stock motivator of so many films in the action, drama, cartoon, and horror genres. Envious or covetous hatred is also one of the themes of Roger Scruton’s *The West and the Rest* and his analysis of both radical Islam and the culture of repudiation. René Girard’s linking of such scapegoating with his mimetic theory is played out repeatedly on the political and entertainment stages like a broken vinyl record. Should we wait with baited breath to see who will be the next victim? John Donne’s reply is bleak: “[S]end not to know For whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.” Anti-Semitism and anti-Americanism are two such obsessive mental derangements that play out on the larger historical stage. Who does Harris believe was the intended audience for the exercise in revolutionary theater and agitprop that we remember as 9-11? We need to understand (as the Soviet dissident Igor Shafarevich understood about

socialism) that radical Islam is a death cult: “Seen through the distorting prism of radical Islam, the act of suicide is transformed into that of martyrdom—martyrdom in all its transcendent glory and accompanied by the panoply of magical powers that religious tradition has always assigned to martyrdom.”

9. Why was there so much uncertainty and misunderstanding about al-Qaeda’s goals in the weeks and months following 9-11? The media, of course, could be depended upon to “**amplify** even the least act of terrorism into a continuing saga of national nightmare,” in ways very similar to what had done earlier with the Kennedy assassination (the book to read is James Piereson’s *Camelot and the Cultural Revolution*), the Vietnam War, Watergate, the Iran hostage crisis, and countless other incidents. The news has become our 24/7 soap opera. Ever since such 19C studies of crowd psychology as Charles Mackay’s *Extraordinary Delusions and the Madness of Crowds* and Gustave LeBon’s *The Crowd*, studies of social psychology have contributed not only to our knowledge of collective behavior but also to what William H. Riker called *The Art of Political Manipulation*. **Edward Bernays**, the nephew of Sigmund Freud who worked as an American propagandist during WWI, became a principal figure in selling the New Deal in the 1930s. As Marvin Olasky noted in *The American Leadership Tradition*: “Bernays, believing that there is ‘no being in the air to watch over us,’ argued that public relations counselors earn their pay ‘by making the public believe that human gods are watching over us for our own benefit’” (p. 204). As a consequence, so it seems, politics has become a whirlwind of fantasy images with the political demigods hurling thunderbolts at each other for our edification and entertainment, as well as our fear and trepidation at times. The psychology of collective decision-making is explored in Graham T. Allison’s classic “Conceptual Models and the Cuban Missile Crisis” and Irving Janis’s *Victims of Groupthink* about American foreign policy fiascoes.

10. What does Harris believe to have been al-Qaeda’s real objective? Here he invokes something akin to the old crime story device in Sherlock Holmes of the dog that did not bark. The question he asks is: Why did al-Qaeda *not* pursue its strategic advantage as should be expected under the Clausewitzian formula?

11. What consequences flow from Harris’s thesis? In real terms, the question is: “Are We at War?” What did **Ernst Nolte** observe about the rise of both Mussolini and Hitler? What are some of the “serious repercussions” involved in “fighting with an enemy who is not engaged in Clausewitzian warfare? What kind of “magic bullet” might appeal to someone, like Osama bin Laden or Kim Jong Il or Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who is captivated by “magical thinking?” How did President Bush regard the 9-11 attack? Why does Harris praise his use of the term “evildoer?” Why then should we retire the war metaphor? What would Harris put in its place? Harris advises using other metaphors—parasite, poison, cancer—to describe the threat. He regards fantasy ideologies as plagues or diseases that require appropriate public health protections and procedures. But in the end, given the nature of identity politics in a pluralistic welfare state, the problem with this metaphor is that some “politically correct” social pathologies enjoy political immunity even from such reasonable public health measures as screening and quarantining. Thus it must come down finally to the patient’s—that is, America’s and the West’s—**will to live**, about which Alexander Solzhenitsyn expressed grave doubts at Harvard in 1978.

Harris Review

chilastic movements
Vilfredo Pareto

collective need
Benito Mussolini

reviving ancient glory
consequences of Harris’s thesis