

ABC's *The Path to 9/11*, Terror-Management Theory, and the American Monomyth

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On September 10-11, 2006, ABC/Disney aired a two-part movie titled *The Path to 9/11* to mark the fifth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. The film won an Emmy award in 2007 for editing and was nominated for six others. While drawing its emotional underpinning from the attacks themselves, most of the film is devoted to what are presented as key events leading up to the tragedy of September 11, 2001, and in particular to the activities of an antiterrorism task force that included FBI agent and terrorism expert John O'Neill (whom the docudrama casts as its central heroic character, although it has multiple heroes). Earlier events explored in considerable detail include the bombing of the WTC in 1993, the pursuit and arrest of alleged terrorists in various parts of the world, the bombings of U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the struggle of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan against the Taliban, the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen, and unsuccessful attempts to kill Osama Bin Laden prior to the 9/11 attacks. The production devotes considerable attention to conflicts among U.S. intelligence, law enforcement, and diplomatic officials in the time period between the first WTC bombing and the collapse of the towers in September, 2001.

A CONVERGENCE OF THEORIES

A number of complementary theories help to explain the profound appeal of *The Path to 9/11*. The first is what James W. Carey calls the "ritual" view of communication, which "is directed...toward the maintenance of society in time, not [toward] the act of imparting information but [toward] the representation of shared beliefs"; communication is "the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action" (18-19).

The second is John Fiske and John Hartley's treatment of television as "bardic." In the bardic view, television does not merely recount events (be they factual or fictional) but (in the tradition of bards) offers meaning that is derived at least in part from "a process which offers myths with which we are already familiar and seeks to convince us that these myths are appropriate to their context" (112). Because it "constantly strives to claw back into a central focus the subjects of its messages," the bardic mediator naturally emphasizes some features—myths—of its subject at the expense of others, but the bardic emphasis usually occurs at a latent or connotative level, so the mythic features of its subject need not be "consciously apprehended by the viewer to have been successfully communicated" (87).

For example, Philip Green discusses the frequent inclusion in network news broadcasts of anecdotes, or human-interest stories, which tacitly assert "how decent ordinary Americans are" (29). He claims that "these anecdotes, in the world of television, are the glue that holds together the uneasy American Amalgam of muscular nationalism, rugged individualism, and communal conformity" (29). Of course, what is latent in some texts might explicitly be stated in others. Green writes of the lead up to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003: "By February's worldwide antiwar

demonstrations, CNN's website was reporting that 'antiwar rallies delight Iraq,' and every mention of the Mideast on CBS was accompanied by the logo, 'Showdown with Saddam,' surrounding an American flag" (37).

Studies of terror management theory yield a third perspective, which deals directly with the effects of mortality-salient events such as the 9/11 attacks. Central to its conceptual framework is the notion that reminders of people's own mortality elicit specific, predictable behaviors. According to Tom Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, terror-management theory "posits that the juxtaposition of a biological predisposition toward self-preservation...with the uniquely human awareness of the inevitability of death gives rise to potentially overwhelming terror," which is managed by "construction and maintenance of cultural worldviews: humanly constructed beliefs about the nature of reality that infuse individuals with a sense that they are persons of value in a world of meaning" (27).

Worldviews are fragile; people need constant validation. And reminders of death only increase this need. The result, the authors argue, is a "clinging to and defense of one's cultural worldview." Affected people feel "greater affection for similar others...and greater hostility toward different others," as well as "increased physical aggression toward someone critical of one's cherished beliefs" (191). If direct enemies are unavailable, affected people will create "in house scapegoats" because "residual anxiety...must be constantly projected onto tangible repositories of evil to sustain psychological equanimity" (85).

Pyszczynski, Solomon, and Greenberg note that, in the aftermath of 9/11, the logical question of why so much of the Islamic world seems hostile to the United States is pushed to extremes:

One perspective embraced by many Americans is that Islamic terrorists are evil people who hate us because we are good and they are evil...[while] a second but equally simple-minded approach to explaining the roots of the current atrocity... [is] that "we had it coming." Either we deserved their rage or we were being punished for something else...Our point here is that these kinds of explanations for events...have more to do with maintaining one's ideology than [they are] a thoughtful attempt to understand the roots of the problem. (144-145)

In short, fear of death results in a greater reliance on notions one already has about the world and an increased need to draw lines of separation between friends and foes—whose attributes are in turn exaggerated. Walter Lippmann described the same phenomenon, using examples from World War I:

By the same mechanism through which heroes are incarnated, devils are made. If everything good was to come from Joffre, Foch, Wilson... everything evil originated in...Kaiser Wilhelm, Lenin and Trotsky. They were as omnipotent for evil as the heroes were for good. To many simple and frightened minds, there was no political reverse, no strike, no obstruction, no mysterious death or mysterious conflagration anywhere in the world of which the causes did not wind back to these personal sources of evil. (7)

The fourth theory is that of the "monomyth." Robert Jewell and John Shelton Lawrence (2003) describe two traditions of world redemption, running "from the pages of the Bible down through American history." One is "zealous nationalism," which redeems the world "by destroying enemies." The other, by contrast, is "prophetic realism," which redeems the world—for "coexistence"—by applying "impartial justice that claims no favored status for individual nations" (8). The monomyth is a species of the first tradition, zealous nationalism; it can bring forth "emotional power that the more sober prophetic realism has trouble generating" (39).

In an earlier work, Jewett and Lawrence (1977) describe the American monomyth as conveying "pessimism about democratic institutions and public responsibilities," as

well as "impatience with constitutional processes" and a "messianic expectation that society can be redeemed by a single stroke" (215). In the American monomyth, the end always justifies the mean. Jewell and Lawrence exemplify the point with a line from *Dick Tracy*: "Violence is golden when it's used to put down evil" (41). Evil requires "extermination" (224); the hero "offers a form of leadership without paying the price of political relations or responding to the preferences of the majority" (196). The hero, according to Jewett and Lawrence, "originates outside the community he is called to serve and...plays the role of the idealistic loner" (195). The hero combines "elements from the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil" (xx). In sum, the monomyth is "part of the vigilante tradition" and "an escapist fantasy" that "encourages passivity on the part of the general public and unwise concentrations of power in ostensible redeemers," while "betraying the ideals of democratic responsibility" and denying "the reliance on human intelligence that is basic to the democratic hope" (210).

Jewell and Lawrence find the American monomyth to have appeared as early as the 17th century, with stories that saw "the alien Indian culture as a demonic threat" and that "depicted violence as the means of both cleansing the wilderness and regenerating true faith in a believing community" (44). The idea of "chosen people under attack" (174), they claim, became a theme in much of popular literature in the United States, so that the contemporary American monomyth myth is "largely determined by the 'unexamined residue' of the Old West and superhero paradigms" (45).

Research on terror-management theory has encountered such "monomythic" reactions (to fears of death) in more than a dozen countries, however, so the distinctively "American" characteristics might lie, as Jewell and Lawrence contend, in how the hero remains an outsider. But the phenomenon itself is not uniquely American. In their 2003 work, Jewell and Lawrence themselves cite the Jewish golem tradition as embodying much of what they discuss as part of the American monomyth (35). (Even if the monomyth is characteristically American, its wide dissemination in popular culture, via U.S. media products, would make it international.)

BALLS, THE RULE OF LAW, AND DUE PROCESS

Much of *The Path to 9/11* presents now-common knowledge (or assumptions): the lax security that allowed the hijackers to board the airplanes, the years of planning that preceded the attacks, and the successes and failures that occurred in finding and arresting terrorists or would-be terrorists. But latent and manifest cues—that is, the bardic, monomythic signifiers—framing these stories, though occupying a relatively small portion of the film overall, are critical to its interpretation of what went wrong.

The central character in the film is John O'Neill, the former counterterrorism chief for the FBI who was director of security at the World Trade Center when the tragedy occurred and who was killed when the buildings collapsed. Much of the film traces his mounting frustration in dealing with his own superiors and other government agencies, and his personal impasses generate the monomythic yearning that propels the film's narrative.

That yearning occurs most often through the rhetorical motif of testicles, referring to the willingness, usually couched in a masculine aggression, to break rules, including those of due process—to act without regard to formal structures or chains of command. Some women in the film, notably a Filipina police officer and a female CIA agent, clearly fall within the category. They, just like their male counterparts, have "balls" or "nuts" or "cojones." One terrorist is said to have "balls of steel," but even this reference seems to be one of grudging respect for his daring. "Balls" refers

to more than courage; it refers to defiance—of authority, of laws and conventions, of egalitarian politics. More than courage is required to defend the society and punish evil; in the monomyth, civilization is collapsing because of extraordinary enemies. Only extraordinary heroes—superheroes—can save it. This hero cannot be hampered by democratic values and the rule of law because these pertain to an intact social system, not to incipient chaos.

The monomyth's superhero thus appears as a subordinate caught inside the broken system. Early in the film virtuous "ordinary guys," lower-ranking law-enforcement personnel, are appalled at the incompetence or negligence of superiors. After the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, these subordinates remove evidence containing the vehicle identification number of the van used in the bombing, in violation of orders from superiors who presumably would leave it to be buried in rubble. The rule-breakers are chastised by their superiors, even as the audience is shown that it was this insubordination that led to the identification and arrest of the alleged terrorist who had rented the van. In another incident early in the film, a former Egyptian army officer who wants to inform the FBI of terrorist plots complains to his FBI contact that the agency is not taking the would-be terrorists seriously. Later the Egyptian is temporarily lost as an informant because, as his contact complains, "that was an upstairs decision."

The social, political, and intelligence systems depicted in the film are hopelessly incompetent or negligent or corrupt. For example, the assassin of rabbi Meir Kahane, of the Jewish Defense League, is saved by his savvy lawyer, William Kunstler, who "got him off on the murder charge." The film does not, however, reveal Kahane's checkered past. Subtlety here, like the rule of law, would be an impediment. So Kahane's biography is whitewashed, just as the assassin's is neatly blackened. ABC needed only to reach for a handy—and mainstream—resource to characterize Kahane fairly. Here is the rabbi's entry in *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

After being imprisoned for conspiring to make bombs, Kahane moved to Israel in 1971. There Kahane formed the Kach Party and stirred nationalist fervor against Arabs, whom he campaigned to remove (violently, if necessary) from Israel and all Israeli-occupied areas. He won a seat in the Israeli Knesset (parliament) in 1984, but his term ended when Israel banned the Kach Party for its antidemocratic and racist beliefs.

The Kahane assassination functions here to blame the democratic system and in particular the elites who, as functions of a broken system, make the decisions that result in the nation's failure to protect the innocent and to punish the guilty. When the vehicle identification number of the van used in the 1993 WTC attack is traced to an individual, one of the law-enforcement officers directly involved in the investigation recognizes the alleged perpetrator and exclaims, "We were trailing those guys... We couldn't convince the guys upstairs, so the operation was suspended."

After the van-bomb suspect is arrested, the film quickly moves to the search for alleged co-conspirator (and explosives expert) Ramzi Yousef outside of the United States. During a fire at his apartment in the Philippines, he escapes, but his computer is seized by a Filipina police officer who, when told she needs a warrant, states, "we'll get one," and then proceeds without a warrant, gaining supposedly valuable information from the computer. The FBI's head of counterterrorism and the hero of the film, John O'Neill, praises her and makes clear his perception of the difference between what she did in the Philippines and the restrictions under which he is chafing in the United States. In one segment, O'Neill states, "I don't want any lawyers getting in our way"; then he notes that, if a warrantless seizure like that had "happened here," the evidence would have been inadmissible. His chagrin is obvious.

In a later sequence, American agents and a Pakistani army unit pursue

Yusef in Pakistan. Although they apprehend him, the film drags out the process by which authorization for his seizure is obtained. The intent of the slowdown in this nervous wait for authorization seems to be, again, to underscore the frustration that law enforcement faces with due process and with the implicit indecisiveness or incompetence of their superiors—even though the operation actually is successful and Yusef is apprehended.

In yet another scene, American operatives discuss working with the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan to kill Osama Bin Laden, who has been identified as a leader and supporter of terrorism. An agent identified as “Patricia” advocates using the Northern Alliance to get Bin Laden, but George Tenet, the director of the CIA, worries about killing innocents and various legalities and, in particular, who will be held accountable if the operation goes bad. Orders from the administration are eventually interpreted as meaning that Bin Laden can be killed by accident, but not on purpose. When Ahmad Shah Massoud, the leader of the Afghan Northern Alliance, is informed of what appears to be indecisiveness, he responds, “Are there any men left in Washington, or are they all cowards?”

When the terrorist bombs go off at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, the aftermath is shown in bloody detail. There seems little question that the audience is expected to blame the American leadership’s failure to take more decisive action in killing or kidnapping Bin Laden, but just in case the connection is not made, in a scene right after the depiction of the Nairobi tragedy, Patricia, the “ballsy” CIA agent who earlier advocated hunting Bin Laden in Afghanistan, bursts into a meeting and, although in tears, shouts at CIA Director Tenet, “We’re responsible for that because we didn’t act on the information we had, and we could have had him!”

Richard Clark, another of the film’s anti-establishment heroes, sounds the call: “we’re at war.” In its context, Clark’s statement means that wartime rules—or no rules at all—must apply now. A CIA agent named “Kirk” states that “war is about killing the enemy and destroying his property. It’s not about sitting around a conference room covering your own asses.” Kirk asks, rhetorically, “How do you win a ‘law and orderly’ war?” O’Neill answers, “You don’t.” (The scene invites comparison with the ethical scenarios of World War II, particularly the 1943 British film *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp*, in which an elderly officer, admirable but somewhat naïve, is reluctant to accept the notion—widely held by other officers of the time—that in modern war there are no rules and that the use of any means at one’s disposal in war is the only realistic policy.)

Madeleine Albright, then Secretary of State, is depicted after the terrorist attacks on the U.S. embassies in east Africa in a scene in which she outlines the Clinton policy of not wanting to make war directly on the Taliban and not wanting a commitment of ground troops in Afghanistan, but indeed wanting to kill Bin Laden, who is believed to be responsible for the terrorist attacks in Africa and who was already under indictment in the U.S. for involvement in other alleged terrorism. A missile strike to kill Bin Laden is authorized, but fails. The failure is attributed by Northern Alliance leader Massoud to the U.S. having warned Pakistan of the attack (presumably because missiles crossed its territory) and of informants in Pakistan having then warned Bin Laden’s group. This was one of the more controversial parts of the film at the time it was aired, as Clinton Administration officials denied any such warning was given, but in the film’s recounting of the story, such a warning is not only given but justified by representatives of the Clinton Administration. Within the mythology evoked by *The Path to 9/11*, it becomes a strikingly subversive example of how following rules and Administration policy (which in this case may not have even existed) supposedly hampered efforts to stop terrorism.

The first segment of *The Path to 9/11* ends shortly after the unsuccessful attempt to kill Bin Laden with the Northern Alliance, depicted as martyrs, suffering from retaliation—the result of the alleged U.S. failure to support the Alliance. One of the first themes the second installment in the two-part mini-series takes up is how the elite fail to cooperate or even trust the seemingly virtuous fraternity of antiterrorists (ballsy heroes like “Patricia,” John O’Neill, and Richard Clark), who want more aggressive action but encounter roadblocks. In a conversation with a CIA representative early in the second part, O’Neill is told, “I don’t have clearance” to share critical information, and O’Neill erupts in frustration: “What kind of game are you guys playing?”

The following scene offers a more detailed exploration of what the filmmakers believe typifies the malignant elite who are to be blamed for the September 11 tragedy. After the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen, O’Neill, by now positioned as the protagonist, travels to Yemen to investigate the attack. In a key framing incident in the film, he is treated rudely by U.S. Ambassador Barbara Bodine, who in the film shares the debilitating elitism of George Tenet and Madeleine Albright. Bodine seems to fit Rush Limbaugh’s conception of the “Feminazi,” the militant feminist. She refers to O’Neill as “the epitome of the ugly American,” states that she will not have him “inflaming tension” with the developing Yemeni democracy, orders the women on his staff to dress in accordance with local custom, and makes clear to O’Neill that she is in charge. Her intellectualism, her sensitivities to offending Yemenis, and her respect for Yemeni authorities, even her status as Ambassador, are all placed in direct contradiction to O’Neill’s presumably more down-to-earth and less “politically correct” approach. She is the conservative construct of the liberal, castrating bitch. O’Neill presumably tells her off, although the precise outcome of this altercation is not explored. The sequence appears, instead, to be aimed at depicting something more essential. Convention, protocol, hierarchy, procedure, conformity—the apparatus of politics is so ineffective, the film suggests, because, like the Ambassador herself, it is essentially feminine: its anger is directed inward, as submission, compromise, deferral, guilt, self-loathing, or simply endless talking. America needs masculine force: direct, insubordinate, even violating aggression, “the ugly American.” (The crudeness of this monomythic division between masculine force and feminine conformity had reached its satirical, and scatological, extreme in the 2004 film *Team America: World Police*, which concludes that only “dicks”—not “pussies,” who try to negotiate with North Korea’s Kim Jung-Il—can penetrate and thus destroy the “assholes” of the world. The “dicks” abrogate international law and cause massive collateral damage but nonetheless kill the one-dimensional terrorists, whose vocabulary consists almost entirely of the words “Mohammed” and “jihad.”)

Back in the United States, the same theme is taken up in a high-level meeting that depicts CIA Director Tenet and Madeleine Albright as hesitant to support Richard Clark’s proposal that the U.S. “hit every target.” Albright speaks of international law and “other considerations,” including efforts to secure an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Clark repeats, “We are at war.” O’Neill complains about his trip to Yemen: “our own ambassador shot me down.” At the end of this segment, the Clinton Administration authorizes spying from an unarmed drone. After Bin Laden is seen from the camera-equipped drone, the image is interrupted, presumably because the drone has been shot down. Patricia, the “ballsy” CIA agent, again complains bitterly that, if the drone had been armed, Bin Laden would be dead.

As the film nears its conclusion, the heroes make more explicit statements that lay the blame in advance for the impending 9/11 tragedy. O’Neill confides to an associate that he is “considering getting out” because “political correctness takes the day.” He says, “We’re not safe yet, and no one seems to care.” Two additional key incidents not directly involving O’Neill then reinforce the theme. An FBI agent in Minneapolis wants to look at the files on a computer of a suspected terrorist discovered

in a flight school, but, illogically, “the higher ups” won’t let her because what the FBI already knows “doesn’t prove he’s a terrorist.” In another incident, an immigration agent refuses U. S. entry to a Saudi man without any clear evidence that he poses a threat. The agent expects “repercussions” from his own higher ups, but, in his view, the Saudi man “hates the United States, and I’m not letting him in.”

The line is clearly drawn between the virtuous—who are practical and effective in combating terrorism, even if it entails a disrespect for the formalities of due process, for international law, and for the sensitivity to other cultures—and the malignant elite—who are intellectual (rather than street smart), arrogant, ineffective, and therefore doomed to draw foreign terrorists to American soil.

PROPHECY, MARTYRDOM, AND ABANDONMENT

The monomyth includes the story of doom: a truth-telling hero who is not taken seriously until it is too late, or a truth-telling hero who suffers at the hands of ignorant and often impervious superiors. Because the logic of this story leads inexorably to destruction, the protagonist’s warning feels utterly credible, and the narrative of doom feels tragically prophetic, especially if the audience already knows the outcome. Biblical writers understood very well the power of this strategy, whereby the future would be predicted accurately because, of course, the prophecy was composed decades or centuries after the event in question. Film, too, is no stranger to the strategy. In *The Court-Martial of Billy Mitchell* (Dir. Otto Preminger, 1955), for example, an Army general in the 1920s struggles to get the defense establishment to take seriously the threat of air attack and to give higher priority to what eventually would become the U.S. Air Force. Mitchell is court-martialed after going public with his criticism of the military leadership. In his trial, as presented in the film, he predicts that the United States will be attacked in Hawaii by Japan. His prediction, though clearly *post facto* to the audience, has the effect, nonetheless, of placing Mitchell in the role of prophet and martyr: he was punished for advocating the very emphasis on air power that the U.S. would adopt later in World War II as official policy.

In *The Path to 9/11* John O’Neill makes similar predictions about an attack on U.S. soil. Near the end, he recalls the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center and says that terrorists will return to “finish the job.” O’Neill becomes a martyr of sorts before September 11 when he loses a briefcase with classified information and is disciplined and humiliated (as part of a series of events that cause him to leave the FBI and, ironically, to become the head of security of the World Trade Center). And he is martyred one final time when, like a captain going down with his ship, he re-enters the World Trade Center as it is collapsing, and he is killed.

O’Neill is not the only prophet and martyr in the film. The head of the Afghan Northern Alliance, Ahmad Shah Massoud, actually comes closer to fitting the conventional American monomyth hero (such as Captain America or Superman) than O’Neill does because O’Neill is presented in many ways as an “ordinary guy.” Although a foreigner, Massoud does much in the film presumably to warn and protect that nation. His inclusion as one of the heroes calls attention to how the lines dividing “like us” and “against us” are drawn. Like the Arab leader in Hitchcock’s 1956 version of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, Massoud is “like us” because he is friendly to the west and is targeted for assassination. *The Path to 9/11* does not depend primarily upon ethnic identification in making heroes and villains; in fact, it attempts to transcend ethnicity and includes some Muslims from outside the United States as its sympathetic characters. Yet the actors cast in these roles speak English and tend to fit western conventions of physical attractiveness—in contrast, for example, to Ramzi Yousef,

whose damaged eye is used to stigmatize him. What matters is not race or even religion, per se, but honor and loyalty.

The people of the Middle East in *The Path to 9/11* fall into four categories: (a) evil terrorists; (b) the bulk of the Arab population, which is presented visually as somewhat exotic and at least vaguely threatening; (c) Israelis, whose ethnicity is barely represented but is hypostatized as western; (d) virtuous Middle Easterners. Massoud is one of four virtuous Middle Easterners. The second, although partly motivated by money, is the former Egyptian army officer introduced early in the film who feeds information to the FBI and thereby aids in the identification and arrest of sheik Omar Abdel Rahman. The third is a young student who risks his life to collaborate with the Americans and Pakistani army in the capture of Ramzi Yousef. And the fourth is the Pakistani colonel in command of the unit involved in Yousef's capture, who is presented as an intelligent, well-spoken, highly-disciplined officer, firmly committed to apprehending terrorists.

Massoud is, of course, the primary hero of this group. While there is a brief reference in the film to the possibility that he was involved in selling drugs, this accusation is passed over quickly and the audience is given no good reason to believe it. Portrayed by actor Mido Hamada as a mixture of Errol Flynn, Teddy Roosevelt, and Billy Dee Williams' "Lando Calrissian," Massoud is presented as an Afghan patriot who fought against the Soviets and then against his former allies, the Taliban. From the moment his name is mentioned, he is positioned as the arch enemy of Osama Bin Laden. The film devotes considerable time to his relationship with the CIA contacts who struggled to get him increased U.S. support. He is the leader of the forces that would have killed Bin Laden had the Clinton administration not worried so much about collateral damage in the attack. Massoud is portrayed as friendly, dashing, and, above all, competent, a genius at fighting with antiquated and inferior weapons against the fanatical but formidable Taliban. He praises Ronald Reagan, saying that the former President knew what he needed, but now he gets "only trinkets."

In terms of the framing monomyth, Massoud's prophetic statements warning his American contacts of impending attack increase his credibility and/or likeability for viewers, and, given his honor and loyalty, Massoud's martyrdom (as a death reminder) elicits the responses predicted by terror-management theory (exaggerated positive affect toward perceived friends and exaggerated negative affect and aggression toward outsiders or perceived enemies).

His role as prophet comes at a press conference during a visit to the United States, where he says that, if President Bush is "not interested in peace in Afghanistan, if he doesn't help the Afghan people to arrive at their objective of peace, then America and the rest of the world will have to face the problem of the Taliban and Osama Bin Laden themselves." The prophet-patriot says shortly thereafter, "I have to return to Afghanistan. I have a war to fight." But he warns his CIA contacts, "They're planning something, terrorism beyond comprehension" that will take place in the United States; "If they kill me, they're coming. That will be your signal." He says the threat has to do with aviation and hijacking and that it will be "spectacular"—a "prophecy" that naturally rings true.

Massoud receives no American support. His forces are attacked viciously in response to the failed U.S. efforts in Afghanistan to kill Bin Laden. And the virtuous leader loses his life, the victim of a suicide bombing, supposedly perpetrated by emissaries of Bin Laden. "We let him down," his CIA contact says afterward. The failure evokes not just mythology but historical memory. In his warnings that go unheeded and in the suffering that Massoud and his associates endure, there are echoes of other virtuous foreigners allowed to lose because of no support from the United States or its allies: Haile Selassie and the Ethiopians valiantly resisting Italian invasion in the 1930s; the Hungarians rebelling against a communist government in 1956; the

nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek losing the war in mainland China in the late 1940s; the Cuban exiles rising up against Fidel Castro in 1961; and the Iraqi resistance fighters following the rout of Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait in 1991.

THE FACES AND DEEDS OF EVIL

Evil receives a fairly crude depiction in *The Path to 9/11*. While the malignant elite within the United States are treated as ignorant, misguided, ineffective and arrogant, they are not, in the style of the McCarthy era, accused of actual treason, collaboration with the enemy, or deliberate evil. The evil enemy is drawn in traditional comic-book or adventure-movie fashion, embodied primarily in a specific individual (earlier Ramzi Yousef and later Osama Bin Laden) with a few identifiable close associates (such as Ayman al-Zawahiri). Evil, like virtue, is a person, a body, a face, not an abstraction.

Thus, despite some negative depictions of Islamic religious practices (just before the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center and again in a terrorist training camp, Muslim prayers are presented as if they are incantations), the implication of Islam itself in terrorism is left ambiguous or even rejected. The monomyth deals concretely in social groups and actions rather than in ideological or religious categories. The judge sentencing Ramzi Yousef states that terrorist violence is not a part of Islam, and the informer who helps capture Yousef is an Islamic-studies student so opposed to terrorism he is willing to risk his life to stop it. While some attempt, then, is made to distance Islam from terrorism—not all Muslims are portrayed as evil—all of the principal evil characters are indeed Muslims, and there is actually little context to help the audience understand why these men are evil: what they actually believe, how they came to embrace terrorism, why so many young men are willing to give their lives, and what the cause is for which they are willing to die. In other words, as an abstraction, Islam is neither inside nor outside the circle of perceived friends whom mortality-salient events separate so hysterically from perceived enemies, but, as actual people, Islamists—Muslims—embody evil.

One terrorist brags that he is willing to kill for his god. When apprehended, the actor portraying Ramzi Yousef snorts like an animal. Another villain, an associate of Bin Laden, is referred to as "evil eye." In many respects, the terrorists are presented as simply diabolical, much as the archetypal title character of Fritz Lang's *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* is motivated by necrophilic desires for destruction and chaos. Bin Laden, called The Tall One, is yet another incarnation of the villain who is reduced to a characteristic bodily feature, thus rooting the enemy in a physical world accessible to the hero's own physical deeds.

THE ORDINARY (IRISH) AMERICAN

The heroes of *The Path to 9/11* have unfamiliar names; they are subordinates, with common sense and down-to-earth approaches to problems, unlike Secretary of State Albright and Ambassador Bodine, whose intellectualism and political correctness seem misguided and dangerous. The ordinary heroes, especially John O'Neill and his closest associates in law enforcement, including local police, live on the edges of proper procedure. They do not have high London or Boston accents. They work more than they talk; they get the job done; they fight for what they believe—if only the elite will let them. They are, in the film's vocabulary, "scrappy," a term that, along with the singing of *Danny Boy*, is used to evoke not just O'Neill's heritage but the heritage of an immigrant group that, after the nineteenth century, came to define "Americanism," according to William H.A. Williams (199).

The Irish American by the early 20th century had become a “gatekeeper for the WASP,” a sort of “buffer between the Yankee middle class and the hordes of ‘non-Anglo-Saxon’ newcomers pouring into America” (194); “within American popular culture, the Irish were defined as patriotic, hardworking, happy people, examples of the old verities of family and community” (242). Not only did the Irish Americans represent a more desirable alternative in the eyes of some Yankees to the newer immigrants whose languages were not English and whose customs may have seemed more exotic, but, Williams contends, they also came to represent an alternative to “the values of the white-collar, organizational man of the new urban, business culture... Irish Americans were depicted as...relaxed, fun-loving, yet moral, sentimental, and, for all their Celtic exuberance, responsible, patriotic citizens” (232).

To the elite, the ordinary American is simple and ugly. But that simple ugliness, for O’Neill and his compatriots, is the essence of honor and loyalty.

The heroes of *The Path to 9/11* and the manner in which the story is framed are generally consistent with what terror-management theory and Jewell and Lawrence’s construct of the American monomyth would lead one to expect. With the exception of Massoud in Afghanistan, they are presented as heroic because of their ordinariness, their lack of pretension, and their anti-intellectual and anti-elitist stances. Even though in the end they fail to prevent the attacks of 9/11, they oppose the diabolical forces that threaten the physical or psychological security of a U.S. audience terrorized by the attacks. While two of the key heroes die after having failed to defeat the enemy, in both cases their defeat is attributed, at least in part, to the ineffectiveness, negligence, arrogance, and slavish adherence to democracy and the rule of law. Their superiors, the film alleges, betrayed them by refusing to use any means at their disposal to combat the terrorist foe, thus forsaking what FDR, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, called the “righteous might” of the injured (115).

THE MONOMYTH VS. HISTORY

In its pessimism about the rule of law and ability of a democratic society to cope with evil, the film’s narrative is defiantly monomythic. Some might argue that the facts presented in the film are essentially accurate even though they are structured to give a particular perspective on what led to the September 11 attacks. This argument would ignore the critical points, however, at which significant liberties are taken with the historical record. There is, for example, no evidence that the U.S. notified Pakistan of the missile strike that was intended to kill Bin Laden, much less that somehow this resulted in Bin Laden’s being warned of the attack. Likewise, even within the film, there are few unambiguous concrete examples of how legal considerations (such as the need for a search warrant) actually impeded investigations in a way that would have clearly averted the 9/11 tragedy. There is no evidence on record to suggest that the heroes’ bravado and “balls” effectively combated the terrorist threat.

Perhaps the greatest license in *The Path to 9/11* is taken in the depiction of Massoud of the Northern Alliance. While in the film he is portrayed as a crusader—for exactly what kind of future the film does not explicitly reveal, but his association with the CIA, his opposition to Bin Laden, and his apparent concern for Americans’ welfare, strongly imply that his future would be consistent with conventional American values—this depiction contrasts rather sharply with descriptions of Massoud and the Northern Alliance encountered elsewhere. In one commentary on *The Path to 9/11*, published shortly after the film aired, Mike Ward noted reports that the Northern Alliance “in reality locks prisoners in metal boxes until they die of exposure, peddles drugs, and, it’s believed, practices systematic rape as an instrument of warfare.”

These facts, however, do not count. The anti-historical perspective that weak-willed liberals and intellectuals are to blame for the tragedy of 9/11 seems to overwhelm

this film. But perspective does not require distortion. The docudrama *Guts and Glory: The Rise and Fall of Oliver North* (1989), for example, has a point of view—that zealous patriotism and a sense of moral rectitude led North to circumvent the law—but the film explains how North, in many respects a decent and admirable person, made his decisions, even how, at the end of the film, he is unable to reject the notion that the ends justify the means. The film respects the intelligence of its viewers, who might not agree with North but who can understand his motives, perceptions, and actions. *The Path to 9/11*, however, is a spectacular piece of mythmaking, not of understanding or explanation, telling us more about ourselves as traumatized consumers of history than about the people who made it.

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