

Washington exploits Guantánamo “confession” to justify its crimes

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The American public was inundated Thursday with non-stop coverage of the confession allegedly given by the man accused by the Bush administration of orchestrating the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks against New York City and Washington.

The 26-page transcript supplied by the Pentagon has Khalid Sheikh Mohammed taking responsibility for literally dozens of attacks, plots and threats carried out on at least five continents over the course of 15 years.

This transcript was purportedly the record of a closed-door military hearing conducted at the US prison camp at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. It is replete with multiple redactions, including the blacking out of sections of the detainee’s testimony dealing with torture as well as of the names of every US officer and enlisted men taking part in these proceedings.

Media coverage of these events has exhibited a definite breathless quality, with a focus on the most sensationalist aspects of Mohammed’s alleged testimony, taking responsibility for everything from “A to Z” in the 9/11 attacks, to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 2002 Bali nightclub bombing, the beheading of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl as well as alleged plots to blow up other skyscrapers and landmark buildings, including New York’s Stock Exchange and Empire State Building, Chicago’s Sears Tower and London’s Big Ben, and to assassinate world figures ranging from ex-US President Jimmy Carter to Pope John Paul II.

Curiously, the confession to the savage murder of Pearl was redacted from the original version of the transcript released by the Pentagon. It was added only later, with the Defense Department explaining that it had blacked it out until authorities were able to inform the journalist’s family of what Mohammed had said.

The obvious question is: why such haste to release the transcript—which was from a hearing conducted last Saturday. The most likely answer is that the release was timed for the political benefit of the Bush White House.

After barring the press from the secret hearing, the Pentagon released the Mohammed transcript as part of a deliberate effort by the Bush administration to divert public attention away from the crimes of the administration and the deepening debacle confronting the US occupation in Iraq. The confession had the added advantage of removing the deepening political crisis surrounding Attorney General Alberto Gonzales and the politically motivated firing of eight federal prosecutors from the top of the news.

The reality is that there is little new in terms of these revelations. Much of what was included in the transcript had already appeared in reports leaked to the media as well as in an account of Mohammed’s interrogation that was included in the September 11 commission report. What is largely obscured by the media’s approach is that Mohammed’s confession was extracted over the course of four years of detention and torture in secret CIA prisons, and that thousands of others subjected to similar treatment have yet to be accused of, much less tried for, a single crime.

The unstated purpose of the confession being waved in front of the public is to justify more than five years of international lawlessness on the part of US imperialism: unprovoked wars, targeted assassinations, extraordinary renditions, secret prisons, torture and illegal spying.

Mohammed is one of 14 so-called high value detainees whom Bush ordered moved from secret CIA prisons to Guantánamo in September after the existence of the CIA “black sites” became widely publicized. The military court that he and others are being called before is known as a combatant status review tribunal, whose sole purpose is to rubber stamp the Bush administration’s definition of these detainees as “enemy combatants,” who, by definition, are denied rights under both the US Constitution and the Geneva Convention.

Once their status is confirmed, they can be held indefinitely before being brought before another military tribunal with the power to condemn them to death.

The nature of the proceeding emerges clearly from the Mohammed transcript. He was not provided with a lawyer, but rather a “personal representative,” i.e., another military officer. He was not allowed to call two witnesses that he requested, both fellow detainees at Guantánamo. Nor was he allowed to see classified evidence that was assembled against him.

According to the transcript presented by the Pentagon, Mohammed accepted his designation as an enemy combatant, while rejecting the legitimacy of the US tribunal. He insisted, however, that most of the 385 other men being held in Guantánamo—many of whom are now on hunger strike—had nothing to do with terrorism or attacks on the US and were innocent people swept up by US forces in the wake of the invasion of Afghanistan.

This assessment was supported by Mark Denbeaux, a Seton Hall law professor acting as an attorney for two Tunisians held at the Guantánamo prison camp. “The government has finally brought someone into Gitmo who apparently admits to being someone who could be called an enemy combatant,” he said. “None of the others rise to this level. The government has now got one.”

Mohammed was the only one of the 14 thus far who agreed to participate in the hearing. Another detainee called before a tribunal last week, Abu Faraj al-Libbi, issued a statement saying he would refuse to appear before any body except a court of law in the US. He pointed out that he had been denied a lawyer and could not call witnesses in his defense.

“If I am classified as an enemy combatant,” he said in the statement, “it is possible that the United States will deem my witnesses are enemy combatants and judicial or administration action may be taken against them. It is my opinion the detainee is in a lose-lose situation.”

With its focus on the details of the myriad attacks and plots to which Mohammed supposedly confessed, the mass media failed to raise any number of questions posed by the highly peculiar transcript made public by the Pentagon.

The first and most obvious is: why should anyone take either the Pentagon's account at face value, or for that matter, the account—if it is indeed genuine—given by Mohammed himself?

No independent observers were allowed into the secret hearing held in Guantánamo last weekend. All anyone has are the 26 pages issued by Defense Department. The cable and network news filled in the blanks with images of buildings and individuals supposedly targeted in the listed plots and by interviewing “terrorism experts.”

As for Mohammed, his confession would be ruled inadmissible in any genuine court. There is no question that he was subjected to forms of extreme torture. He was further intimidated by the CIA's seizure of his wife and two young children, who were threatened with similar treatment unless he told his interrogators what they wanted to hear.

The 9/11 Commission, meanwhile, basing itself on evidence given by the CIA, described him as someone prone to “inflating his own role,” who saw himself as a “self-cast star, the superterrorist.” According to some media accounts, cynical US intelligence officials referred to Mohammed as the “Forrest Gump of Islamic terrorism,” for his tendency to place himself at the center of every single event over the course of decades.

Another question largely glossed over by the media is why the hearings to determine the status of Mohammed and 13 other former prisoners of the CIA are being held in secret. Clearly, the main purpose of this secrecy is not to protect “national security,” but to prevent the American public and indeed the world at large from hearing any detailed testimony as to the torture the detainees have undergone at the hands of US intelligence.

The secrecy surrounding the hearings is also designed to shield a number of countries—reportedly including Jordan, Egypt, Poland, Thailand and Morocco—which provided the US with sites for its clandestine prisons and, in some cases, assisted in the torture.

Finally, and most importantly, the secrecy is meant to protect high-ranking US officials, including Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and others, who undoubtedly issued orders to torture prisoners, acts that are crimes of war that could bring them before an international tribunal for prosecution.

There is another question left unanswered in the media frenzy surrounding the Guantánamo “confession”. Who is Khalid Sheikh Mohammed really, and what were his relations with the intelligence services of the United States and its allies? Supposedly he is the hardest and most ruthless of terrorists, yet he is the only detainee who agreed to participate in the kangaroo courts in Guantánamo, offering a detailed confession.

His capture, it should be recalled, took place four years ago in March 2003. It was the result not of some covert US operation, but rather of the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), Pakistan's secret service, going and picking him up at the house where he had been living in Rawalpindi, the city where both the ISI and the Pakistani military are headquartered.

It has been widely reported that Mohammed, who was born in Kuwait and educated as an engineer at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University in the US, had functioned as either an agent or asset of the ISI in the 1980s and 1990s, and freely traveled on a Pakistani passport.

As noted in the transcript released by the Pentagon, Mohammed participated in the US-financed mujahideen guerrilla war against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan in the early 1980s, when he and others, including Osama bin Laden, received funding, support and training from the CIA.

In 1992, he went to Bosnia, working to mobilize Muslim fighters in support of the US-backed government that had seceded from Yugoslavia that year. Later, he took a special interest in the war between Russia and Muslim forces in Chechnya. Throughout his career, Mohammed is said to have lived a lavish and decidedly secular life-style.

In short, this is an individual who was not an Islamist and whose activities over the course of more than a decade appear to have dovetailed

neatly with those of the CIA, directly serving the interests of American foreign policy.

That such an individual is identified as the “mastermind of September 11” only raises once again the essential question surrounding the still unexplained and tragic events of that day: was the US government informed in advance of the 9/11 plot and did it deliberately allow it to take place in order to provide the Bush administration with the pretext that it required to launch its already planned campaign of military aggression and conquest in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf?

It is not only Mohammed's history as an apparent “asset” of both the CIA and Pakistani intelligence that raises this question. Any serious examination of the information that has emerged about how these attacks were prepared strongly suggests that intelligence officials in the US actively intervened to prevent the plot from being exposed and to protect those who ultimately carried it out.

Those quickly identified as the hijackers after 9/11—Mohammed Atta, Khalid al-Midhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi and others—were well known to US intelligence and had been under surveillance, in some cases for years, by the CIA. Nonetheless, they were allowed to enter and reenter the US, living openly and flying on transcontinental airplanes under their own names. The latter two individuals were even given housing by the FBI's chief informant on Islamic radicalism in southern California.

Such questions, however, are raised neither by the media nor by the Bush administration's ostensible political opposition, the Democratic Party. On the contrary, both rallied in support of the essential aim of the administration in releasing the Khalid Sheikh Mohammed transcript: terrorizing the American people and diverting public opinion.

Particularly revealing was the response of Democratic presidential candidate Senator Barak Obama of Illinois.

“Obviously, just from the confession, we see the scope of the planning that was done by al-Qaeda,” he declared on the morning television news program “Today” Thursday. “I think it just redoubles our need to make sure that we are securing the homeland...and that we are aggressive in terms of human intelligence, and really snuffing out these terrorist networks.”

To talk of the need to be “aggressive in terms of human intelligence” in relation to a case in which US intelligence officials acknowledge the use of the most extreme forms of torture, to the extent that the suspect cannot even be presented publicly, has unmistakable significance. Indeed, the entire subtext of the public discussion of Mohammed's confession—obviously embraced by Obama—was that torture is both legitimate and necessary.

Obama went on to make the case that the Democrats demand for a withdrawal of combat troops—though by no means all troops—from Iraq was predicated on their redeployment... to Afghanistan.

“We have not followed through on the good starts we made in Afghanistan, partly because we took so many resources out and put them in Iraq,” he said. “I think it is very important for us to begin a planned redeployment from Iraq, including targeting Afghanistan.”

What emerges from this reaction to the Mohammed transcript is the bipartisan support for militarism abroad and sweeping attacks on democratic rights at home. Both major big business parties are agreed that the wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan must continue and that the open-ended “war on terror” should be used to justify military aggression internationally. They also both support the use of police state powers and stepped-up spying at home to defend the interests of America's ruling financial aristocracy. To the extent that there are differences, they are only over how well these methods have been employed and over what constitute the best tactics for accomplishing their shared goals.



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