

## MASTER LECTURE

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# Indirect Personality Assessment of the Violent True Believer

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The violent true believer is an individual committed to an ideology or belief system which advances homicide and suicide as a legitimate means to further a particular goal. The author explores useful sources of evidence for an indirect personality assessment of such individuals. He illustrates both idiographic and nomothetic approaches to indirect personality assessment through comparative analyses of Timothy McVeigh, an American who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, and Mohamed Atta, an Egyptian who led the airplane attacks against the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. The risks of indirect personality assessment and ethical concerns are identified.

For the past 9 years I have been intermittently consulting with various federal intelligence agencies, teaching them what we know about such things as psychopathy and helping them to understand the motivations and behaviors of various individuals who threaten our national security. Following September 11, 2001, the frequency and intensity of this work increased dramatically, and out of the awful flowering of the terrorist attacks on that autumn day blossomed a construct, “the violent true believer,” about which I want to speak.

The first adjective is my modifier, but the term *true believer* has a long provenance, recently through the work of the philosopher Eric Hoffer (1951), who captured an essential psychodynamic of the true believer when he wrote in 1951, “The vanity of the selfless, even those who practice utmost humility, is boundless” (p. 15). V.S. Naipaul (1981) also made an important contribution to this work in his literary classic, *Among the Believers*. He cogently noted that history, including personal history, has to serve theology in the mind of the true believer: an assertion that we will see is central to understanding contemporary fundamentalist terrorism.

Immediately following the September 11 attacks and in the midst of my own shock and grief, I decided that the best contribution I could make would be to help the intelligence community understand an individual who develops a homicidal and suicidal state of mind. I marshaled my resources, contacted several colleagues, and within 10 days we produced an advisory paper that was submitted to the Behavioral Analysis Program of the Counterintelligence Division of the FBI. The paper was subsequently circulated to various other law enforcement and intelligence agencies, both here and abroad, and was published in the *Journal of Threat Assessment* (Meloy, Mohandie, Hempel, & Shiva, 2001). Within the paper, we defined the *violent true believer* as an individual committed to an ideology or belief system which advances homicide–suicide as a legitimate means to further a particular goal. This construct has been the focus of my research attention during the past 18 months, and I hope that this presentation will stimulate others to pursue similar lines of empirical work.

Measurement, however, when devoid of theory, is counting, and in the course of my development of this construct, I have rediscovered the work of two mental health professionals that help with our theoretical understanding of the violent true believer. Karl Menninger, in his 1938 book, *Man Against Himself*, noted three motives for martyrdom: the

self-punitive, or suicidal motive; the aggressive, or homicidal motive; and the erotic, or sexual motive. Although Menninger inferred the aggressive motive in a martyr from his provocation of others to persecute him in order to obtain self-punitive or masochistic gratification, in our time martyrdom has taken on a much more directly aggressive aspect: the intentional killing of others as well as the self. The erotic, or sexual component was characterized by the martyr's flight from his own mother, his renunciation of actual sexuality, and his moral masochism—the eagerness with which he would directly seek suffering and death. Menninger found that early Christian church fathers even attached penalties to those who excessively indulged in suffering, hopefully tempering the behavior of those who would go beyond the bounds of righteous zeal. There appears to be a fourth aspect of the erotic or sexual component of martyrdom, and that is the idealization of sexuality in fantasy. It is no more apparent than the young Islamic martyr's promised hope, and fantasy, of dozens of black-eyed virgins in his afterlife.

The second psychoanalyst of note is Theodor Reik, who wrote *Masochism in Modern Man* in 1941. Reik identified three factors in his understanding of the relationship between masochism and martyrdom: First, there is a fantasy factor in which there is collective preparation for the act of martyrdom and an identification with a divine figure;<sup>1</sup> second, there is a suspense factor in which there is the anticipation of martyrdom. Clement of Alexandria noted this aspect when he wrote in 200 A.D., “the martyr chooses the pleasure which exists in prospect through the present pain” (Miscellanies IV.9, as cited in Reik, 1941, p. 355). And third, there is a demonstrative factor in which the martyr erects his own memorial, strives for publicity, and his colleagues sing his praises after his death.<sup>2</sup> Both Menninger and Reik, writing in the years just preceding our entry into World War II, make important theoretical linkages to help us understand the violent true believer.

#### THE VIOLENT TRUE BELIEVER: INITIAL FORMULATIONS

Our work on the violent true believer (Meloy et al., 2001) suggested a number of characteristics that I will only briefly

mention. He has a *tactical understanding* of suicide as a weapon of terrorism. He may have a strong *envious impulse* to damage or destroy the goodness that he sees in his enemy, since he cannot possess it himself. As a result of personal suffering or indoctrination, he comes to feel that he is *helplessly dependent* on the object of his envy. He attains a *sense of omnipotence* in the moments before his suicidal–homicidal act which overcomes other intolerable feelings and is the last sense of self while alive. He likely has had a *history of despair and depression* which leaves him vulnerable to recruitment. He develops a *sense of entitlement*—the specific belief that he has a right to kill others, even civilians, to further his cause—which compensates for his sense of hopelessness and helplessness, at least in this life. He entertains *grandiose fantasies* suffused with expectations of pleasure, power, and knowledge in an afterlife. These fantasies are buttressed by his anticipated joining of a select group of martyrs that have preceded him. If *psychopathy* is severe in the violent true believer, he is not likely to sacrifice himself, but will prepare others to do so. He has a capacity for complete *emotional detachment* from himself and others, particularly in the hours prior to the terrorist act. His violence is *predatory*: planned, purposeful, and emotionless. He may be *clinically paranoid* in the sense that an irrational fear of imminent attack is psychologically present, or he has developed over the course of time a paranoid pseudo-community (e.g., infidels, Americans, unbelievers) upon which he can project blame for all the ills and misfortunes of his life. And finally, he has a *sense of foreshortened future* as the date of his attack approaches.

#### SOURCES OF EVIDENCE

All these characteristics paint a general theoretical picture of the violent true believer, but how do we actually measure the personality of such an individual when we cannot directly assess him? Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, and Sechrest (1966) provided a useful elementary schematic for such an approach. We first gather any *physical evidence* upon which inferences can be built regarding the violent true believer. Such evidence comes in the form of accretion or erosion. Evidence of accretion is physical evidence that has accumulated due to the person's behavior. The five terrorists who vacated an apartment near the Newark, New Jersey airport in the early morning of September 11 left behind evidence of accretion: There were damp sheets and shaved body hair on the floor of the apartment, suggesting some type of ritualized act, perhaps to cleanse the body and shave the body hair before an act of martyrdom. This “ritual” hypothesis was later supported by handwritten pages found at the crash site in Pennsylvania and in an unchecked suitcase at Boston Logan Airport. Evidence of physical erosion may also directly infer certain human behaviors. When Oklahoma State Trooper Charlie Hanger was heading south toward Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995 at over 100 miles an hour, he was about to use

<sup>1</sup>On September 11, 2001, a passenger on Flight 93, which subsequently crashed in rural Pennsylvania, communicated via her cell phone that the terrorists put on red bandannas when they began their assault. This was likely a ritualistic act that identified them with the blood of the early Islamic martyrs. Although devoid of conscious homicidal intent, Christians also unconsciously convey passive suicidal wishes when they identify with the martyred Jesus Christ by drinking his blood and eating his body during the ritual act of Communion.

<sup>2</sup>Hamas, a fundamentalist Islamic group, financially supports small print shops in Palestine that produce colorful posters of suicide bombers within hours of their martyrdom for public display in their families' communities.

his observations of physical erosion to make the arrest of his life. An incredible explosion had just demolished the face of the federal Murrah building, killing 168 people, but Hanger was told via radio that he wasn't needed there. He dutifully did a U-turn across the interstate and began racing back to his station in Perry. Traveling again at over 100 miles an hour in the furthest left lane, he noticed to his right a yellow Mercury Marquis minding the speed limit in his same direction, but missing a license plate. Observation of physical erosion and inference took over, and this state trooper slowed down, got in back of the Marquis, and pulled it over. Immediately a young caucasian male, with his hair cut "high and tight," stepped out of the car. Hanger responded with great caution, and when Timothy McVeigh reached for his driver's license, he noticed a bulge under his armpit about the size of a shoulder holster. McVeigh was arrested and subsequently charged with the most lethal terrorist bombing until that date in the history of the United States.

Webb et al. (1966) noted a second source of indirect assessment: the gathering of *archival data* on the individual, usually in the form of public and private records. Public records might range from credit reports, to title searches, to graduation records, to certain consumer patterns; private records could range from education, medical, and military records, to bank statements, tax returns, to previously completed psychiatric and psychological evaluations. Private records also include the personal productions of the individual: letters, drawings, poems, diaries, essays, papers, books, travel itineraries, photographs, artifacts, and hobby items. The comprehensive gathering of such records may provide a detailed longitudinal history of the individual.

The third source of data in the Webb et al. (1966) schematic for indirect assessment is *observable* evidence. Such evidence is either simple or contrived. Simple observations take great pains to not introduce the observer into the subject's world and thereby risk influencing or shaping his behavior. If we observe an individual visiting various farm cooperatives to purchase thousands of pounds of sodium nitrate, a common fertilizer, but who has no historical connection to farming, we might well infer that the fertilizer is for another purpose, perhaps to build an IED, an improvised explosive device, as McVeigh and Nichols did. Contrived observations, on the other hand, are the bailiwick of the social psychologist: A confederate is introduced into the milieu of the subject we are observing to ascertain his or her reaction to a specific confederate behavior.

There are also standardized psychological measures that can be used in a reliable and valid manner to indirectly assess an individual. The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (Costa & McCrae, 2002) is a self-report measure of the five basic factors of personality (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) but can be completed by a close associate of the individual who needs to be assessed (simple observation) if there is enough longitudinal data to do so competently. The Psychopathy Check-

list-Revised (Hare, 2003) is a measure of psychopathy which depends on an assessment of the individual through records review (archival data) and an interview (contrived observation) but can also be completed in a reliable and valid manner without the interview. Self-report measures have historically fallen short of expectations in attempting to measure psychopathy (Gacono, 2000).

When we think about such standardized measures and the work of Webb et al. (1966), it is clear that the core of indirect personality assessment has two components: *others' observations* and *personal productions*. If you will excuse the acronym, and in the service of our short-term memory, I will call this OOPPS.

### THE IDIOGRAPHIC APPROACH

There are two scientific approaches to coherently formulating the evidence gathered in indirect personality assessment, and I would like to give examples of both from my own work. The first is the "bottom up," or idiographic approach wherein an extensive case study is completed, and then inductive reasoning is used to generalize to other individuals, perhaps of the same ilk; the second is the "top down," or nomothetic approach wherein a particular group is theoretically defined, in this case violent true believers (Meloy et al., 2001), and then deductive reasoning is used to apply the findings to one individual. Let me first give an example of the idiographic approach.

#### Timothy McVeigh

Following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, I was retained by the Department of Justice to provide forensic psychological consultation to the prosecution in the sequential trials of Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. My technical role was to prepare the prosecution for mitigation rebuttal during the penalty phase of the trials in case the defense presented mitigation evidence concerning either defendant. I was unable to interview either individual because they did not proffer a mental disability defense, and in the United States we are afforded absolute protection against self-incrimination unless we waive our Fifth Amendment privilege in a criminal trial. I was therefore faced with a rather daunting indirect personality assessment. With the help of my assistant, Dr. Joseph McEllistrem, and working steadily over the course of a year, I reviewed over 10,000 pages of documents on Mr. McVeigh, including public and private records, personal productions, and defense and prosecution interviews of over 700 individuals who knew him. These individuals ranged from family members and friends, to peers, colleagues, and military companions, to professionals that had observed and tested him. The documentation was massive, and in the course of this work, I began to formulate a deep and broad understanding of the personality and history of Timothy McVeigh: a perspective that I believed was both

scientifically sound and practical. I had never seen such voluminous data gathered on one individual, yet I was also impressed by the convergence of observations of individuals across time and place when they were simply asked to describe the subject. There were a few outliers, however, who had very divergent observations of Mr. McVeigh. Research on cross-informant agreement in behavioral observation studies typically generates only small to moderate correlations (Meyer et al., 2001). I also read the daily transcripts of the trial, which were filled with testimony of individuals that had known and observed him. The result was a written indirect personality assessment of Mr. McVeigh. Although this particular work still remains under seal by the federal court because it was never introduced as evidence to the jury, I can convey to you a number of personality aspects of Mr. McVeigh that are now in the public record.<sup>3</sup>

Timothy James McVeigh's intelligence was in the superior range (FSIQ 120 to 129). He was the middle boy among two sisters and was born into a middle-class Irish Roman Catholic family in rural western New York.<sup>4</sup> He was by temperament an introvert, although there is strong evidence that he liked to socialize and could be friendly, talkative, and personable. Despite his social skills, he did not quickly trust others and did not form close affectional relationships easily.

An important developmental trauma in McVeigh's life was his abandonment by his mother and older sister when he was 16. His parents had separated when he was 11, and a psychiatrist noted (Michel & Herbeck, 2001) that McVeigh would withdraw into comic books and fantasize himself a hero as a means of coping with the continuous marital fighting at home during his latency years. It appears that the dissolution of his parents' relationship affected him in three ways: It increased his interest in "survivalism" and firearms (his primary masculine identification was with his paternal grandfather who introduced him to firearms as a boy), it lowered his motivation for academic achievement, and it severely dampened his interest in women as sexual/affectional objects worthy of active pursuit. In fact, there is no evidence that McVeigh had a sexual pair bond with any girl between puberty and his arrest for the bombing, a highly unusual finding in the case of a normatively attractive young man. This behavior is also consistent with Menninger's (1938) theory of the erotic component in martyrdom: the flight from the mother and the renunciation of actual sexuality.

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<sup>3</sup>The best public source document on McVeigh is by Michel and Herbeck (2001), two reporters who spent numerous hours interviewing McVeigh, studying the case, and who published their book just prior to his execution. The book also includes data from John R. Smith, MD, a defense psychiatrist who interviewed McVeigh for 25 hours, but never testified at his trial. The *defense* of McVeigh cost the U.S. Government \$20 million.

<sup>4</sup>A personal coincidence that I found startling was that McVeigh and I were both born in the same hospital in the small town of Lockport, New York, the community in which my father had his first parish as a Presbyterian minister.

The crystallization of McVeigh's personality in late adolescence focused upon his conscious identification as the "ultimate warrior," words he used to repeatedly describe himself to his younger sister, Jennifer (Gibson, 1994). This continuous fantasy, although it cannot be directly observed, can be inferred from numerous behaviors and personal productions: his intense interest in weapons and survivalism, his distrust and devaluation of women, his enlistment and success in the U.S. Army, his exceptional skill in weaponry, his intense political interest in defending Second Amendment rights to personal possession of firearms, his commendations in the U.S. Army, and his combat performance in Desert Storm. This narcissistic fantasy, although pathologically grandiose, was for a time supported by reality and compensated for other losses until he returned from Kuwait and attended the Special Forces Assessment Selection Program (SFASP) in April, 1991. The hoped for realization of his fantasy was to become a member of the Special Forces, or "green berets."

McVeigh's personal failure, however, and voluntary withdrawal from SFASP was likely a humiliating and deeply dysphoric experience. He had been physically sedentary during the first Gulf War, despite his combat experience, and could not complete the initial endurance runs for his Special Forces selection program. Although invited to return and try again, he never did, and his subsequent behavior at Ft. Riley, Kansas suggested this was an important alienating event for him from the U.S. Government and his infantry experience, yet his conscious identifications thrived. He remained in his own mind the "ultimate warrior" in search of another war, socially adrift and probably clinically depressed.

McVeigh found another war through the politics of the so-called Patriot or militia movement. Although he never successfully joined any of the groups—a behavior consistent with other "lone terrorists" in the United States (Puckett, 2001)—and was asked to leave at least one meeting of the Michigan Militia due to his vocal advocacy of violence, he formed a "leaderless cell" composed of himself, Terry Nichols, and Michael Fortier. His own writings, and the voluminous publications he collected and read, provided the conscious rationale to target his new enemy, the U.S. Government. The personality profile that emerged at the time was that of a poised, overcontrolled individual who would present very well to the outside world. He was self-sufficient and self-reliant and capable of organizing and moving effectively toward his own goals. He was also mildly shy, sensitive, and serious, gravitating toward esoteric political and philosophical beliefs. These abstract ideas helped him justify his sense of being different from, and superior to others, and defended against underlying feelings of inadequacy, dependency, and anger toward authority figures whom he believed were arbitrary and unreasonable.

McVeigh was also brooding, analytical, and introspective. He would intellectualize his anger and other feelings rather than express them directly. He would be seen by others as a quiet, ruminative person who would shun frivolous pursuits.

His personality seemed similar to the “hypervigilant narcissist” described by Gabbard (1989).

Social events in the United States, particularly the burning of the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas on April 19, 1993, provided a conscious rationale for his fury toward the government, particularly law enforcement agencies such as the ATF and FBI. His *affective* aggression became *predatory* 1 year later (Meloy, 1997) when he began to actively plan with Terry Nichols the Oklahoma City bombing.

McVeigh used a variety of methods to maintain his “ultimate warrior” fantasy and to advance his pathologically narcissistic belief that his act of bombing the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building was his destiny with history: (a) He was intensely interested in *The Turner Diaries* (MacDonald, 1978), a fictional account of a race war in which a federal building is bombed, and identified with the hero of that Great Revolution, Earl Turner;<sup>5</sup> (b) he personally identified with certain American patriots such as Samuel Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Patrick Henry, evidenced by his collecting of their writings, dissemination to others, and articulation of their beliefs to others; (c) he selected April 19, 1995, as the date of the bombing to not only avenge the deaths at Waco, Texas 2 years earlier, but to commit what he saw as a revolutionary act on the birthday of the American Revolution, April 19, 1775, in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts. Memorialized in a poem by R. W. Emerson, “The shot heard round the world,” the destiny of McVeigh’s “ultimate warrior” fantasy was to become the first hero of the second American Revolution. This hypothesis was supported by the clothing and amulets found on him at the time of his arrest: a T-shirt inscribed with a violent and patriotic statement by Thomas Jefferson, “the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” and one of several commemorative coins found in his pocket inscribed on one side, “Battle of Lexington/Concord, April 19, 1775” and the other side, “shot heard round the world.” These items concretized his fantasy, and (d) he used the alias “Robert Kling,” which was likely a reference to the Klingons, a fictional group of great warriors in the “Star Trek” television series.

Timothy McVeigh did not realize his destiny and became neither a hero nor a martyr, at least in the mind of others. He was executed in Terre Haute, Indiana, on June 11, 2001, exactly three months before the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

## THE NOMOTHETIC APPROACH

The second approach to indirect personality assessment is the study of a large group of violent true believers, the development of a typology, and the deductive application of it to

<sup>5</sup>This book was actually written by William L. Pierce, the leader of the National Alliance, a contemporary neo-Nazi group in the United States. McVeigh attempted to contact Pierce by telephone in the days before his bombing.

individual cases to determine its usefulness. This “top-down” approach has begun with our study (Meloy et al., 2001) and may eventually yield a theoretical typology that can be validated with a large sample of cases. I want to empirically ground our theoretical “violent true believer” today by focusing on the case of Mohamed Atta, the man who flew American Airlines Flight Number 11 into the north tower of the World Trade Center.<sup>6</sup>

### Mohamed Atta

Mohamed Atta was born in 1968 in the farming village of Kafr el-Sheikh on the Nile delta of Egypt. He was the son of an ambitious young lawyer who moved his wife, two older daughters, and son to Cairo when Atta was 10 years old. Mohamed al-Amir Awad al-Sayed Atta, the father, was a devout Sunni Muslim, urban in outlook, and very anti-American. In subsequent interviews following September 11, he refused to acknowledge his son’s participation and railed against the Israelis and the evils of America. “Mohamed. Oh God! He is so decent, so shy and tender. He was so gentle. I used to tell him, ‘toughen up, boy!’” (*New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2001, p. B4).

Father was very strict and stressed the children’s academic success. Eventually, his two daughters would receive doctorates. Mohamed was described as an effeminate, serious child who was relentlessly pushed by his father and doted upon by his mother. “I used to tell her she was raising him as a girl and that I have three girls, but she never stopped pampering him” (Corbin, 2002, p. 114). He was a polite, timid, and shy boy who was likely humiliated by his father for being too close to his mother. One reporter noted that he would continue to periodically sit on his mother’s lap until he enrolled in Cairo University (Yardley, 2001). There are few available photos of him smiling as a child, but those that exist are colored by anxiety in which he is being affectionately touched by his mother or two sisters. The father would forbid his playing with peers in the service of his educational studies. The father was also disliked by his neighbors for being overbearing and aloof and did not invite any socializing. Immelman (2001)<sup>7</sup> noted that the history of Mohamed Atta is very consistent with the “puritanical compulsive” syndrome described by Millon (1996; Millon & Davis, 2000). Such individuals as adults are “austere, self-righteous, and highly controlled ... intense anger and resentment ... (are) given sanction, at least

<sup>6</sup>All of the biographical data on Atta is contained in open sources, particularly the work of Corbin (2002) and reporters at the *New York Times* (September 15, 2001 to March 22, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>Immelman (2001) applied his Millon Inventory of Diagnostic Criteria (Immelman & Steinberg, 1999) to an analysis of Atta’s personality. His patterns were primarily Conscientious/compulsive and Retiring/alooof, with secondary patterns of Reticent/inhibited and Aggrieved/self-denying. There were subsidiary elevations on Dominant/asserting and Distrusting/suspicious features.

as they see it, by virtue of their being on the side of righteousness and morality” (Millon, 1996, p. 520). From a psychodynamic perspective, we see the wellspring of conscious obedience, managed through reaction formation, and unconscious defiance and fury, managed through displacement (Immelman, 2001); such contradictory wishes are tightly contained and controlled within a developing personality whose primary identifications are found within an aggressive superego (Milrod, 2002).

Indirect personality assessment, however, cannot be divorced from the social and political events that surround the developing individual. In Atta’s case—particularly given his father’s vocalized hatred of America and his sympathies for the Muslim Brotherhood, a theopolitical organization in Egypt founded in 1928 to establish a strict Islamic regime and persecuted during Atta’s childhood by the Sadat regime—these events shaped his adolescent world view. When he was 11, the Iranian Islamic Shia revolution established a theocracy and overthrew a secular leader strongly identified with the United States. When he was 13, Anwar Sadat was assassinated by a small group of soldiers who identified themselves as “Commanders of the Caliphate” (Weaver, 1999). When he was 15, in 1983, two truck bombings in Lebanon left hundreds of U.S. Marines dead, prompted the immediate withdrawal of American troops from this neighboring country, and ushered in the first use of homicide-suicide mass murder in our contemporary era. When he was 21, the Soviets were driven out of Afghanistan by Islamic fundamentalist warriors known as mujahedeen, partially funded by the United States. All these historical events conjured up what Berman (2003) labeled, “Islamism’s medieval image of jihadi warriors waving scimitars at the Zionist-Crusader conspiracy” (p. 182).

Despite the social upheavals in the Middle East, Atta stayed the course and enrolled as an architectural major in the Faculty of Engineering, Cairo University. He was considered a serious, intelligent, meticulous, and religiously devout student, and graduated in 1990. Two years later, with the insistence and financial support of his father, he moved to Germany and enrolled in the Hamburg-Harburg Technical University. Those who knew him there described Atta as special, quiet, reserved, polite, intellectual, very religious, gloomy, anhedonic, pedantic, and without any tolerance for Westernized sexual behavior, quite evident in Hamburg at the time (Corbin, 2002). He remained an orthodox Muslim but without any obvious political agenda.

In 1994, at the age of 26, Atta began traveling on study tours to Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and back to Egypt as a part of his graduate education. He was noted by others to be increasingly dogmatic and passionate concerning the superiority of Islamic planning and building. He made a pilgrimage, or *hajj*, to Mecca the next year, and this was probably where initial recruitment approaches toward him were made by Al Qaeda. But the emotional crisis which enveloped him and changed the course of his life awaited him in Cairo. It was there upon his re-

turn that he fully witnessed the “Americanization” of Egypt, the influence of the United States on the Egyptian government and urban development, and the market capitalism which benefitted the wealthy in his country at the expense of the poor. His friends from Germany traveling with him also noted his increasing frustration and rage at Egyptian President Mubarak’s biased politics against the Muslim faith, fueled he believed by U.S. foreign policy. His anger, however, was tempered by fright, since he no longer saw his degree as the way to a prestigious job in Cairo. He feared being marked as a criminal, a member of the militant Egyptian Gama’a al-Islamiya, with whom he intellectually identified.

But his father would have none of this. Mohamed Atta was directed to return to Hamburg and finish his degree. He complied. His rage toward the first authority figure in his life was never directly expressed through disobedience, but became a displacement needing an object. Confused, angry, lonely, likely depressed, and socially adrift, Atta withdrew from his German friends and sought an emotional refuge. He found it in the Al-Quds Mosque in Hamburg, known to German intelligence for its militancy. It was here in 1996 that Atta began his aggressive immersion into radical Islam, found a displacement for his fury and defiance in the object of America, and began to organize with like-minded young men from other Muslim countries. He even wrote a will on April 11, 1996 at the age of 28: “I want my family and everyone that reads this will to fear Almighty God and not be deceived by what happens in life. Fear God and follow his prophets if you are a real believer” (Corbin, 2002, p. 123).

Atta’s relations with women were also changing. Although there is no evidence of any sexual affectional bond during his entire life, there was a Palestinian girl that caught his eye in Syria. She called him her “little Pharaoh,” and he admired her, but marriage was out of the question. She was too emancipated. As he became immersed in radical Islam, moreover, his authoritarian attitudes and plain antipathy toward women became more evident. Here is another excerpt from his will: “I don’t want women to come to my house ... I don’t want any women to go to my grave at all during my funeral, or any occasion thereafter ... the person who will wash my body near my genitals must wear gloves on his hand, so he won’t touch my genitals” (Corbin, 2002, pp. 126–127). Atta’s renunciation of his own mother and flight from actual sexuality was almost complete as he began his preparation for martyrdom. As a violent true believer, Atta viewed the sexuality of women as a threat and a danger that could hedonically pollute the asceticism of a warrior.

There is also evidence that Atta and his coterie adhered to an extremist Islamic sect known as *Takfir wal Hijra*, which means “unbelief and migration.” Some have referred to this sect as Islamic fascism, and it appears to have its roots in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, a most influential Egyptian Sunni Arab and member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was martyred by Nasser in 1966. *Takfir*is believe that it is permissible to slaughter unbelievers, including

their families, women, and children (Berman, 2003; Corbin, 2002; Weaver, 1999).

Atta spent a portion of 1997 in a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan. He returned to Germany, transformed by those Westerners who knew him into an arrogant, unfriendly, misogynistic, and affectless man. He rented an apartment with several of his companions who would later be implicated in September 11, established a “prayer” room at the University, and activated the terrorist cell. Atta, however, still had the wherewithal to complete his thesis in October, 1999, at the age of 31. The dedication of his thesis declared his absolute servitude to his new father: “My life and my death and my sacrifice belong to Allah, the Lord of all the Worlds” (Corbin, 2002, p. 142). Eight months later, traveling on a new passport, he arrived in Newark, New Jersey on a student visa and headed for Florida to begin pilot training.

### PATHWAYS TO TERRORISM

The histories of McVeigh and Atta, the former an American terrorist with no conscious intent to commit suicide and the latter an Egyptian violent true believer with both homicidal and suicidal intent, strikingly illustrate several *pathways* to terrorism. Although their temperaments and characters are static factors which contributed to their violence risk, there were dynamic clinical and situational aspects to their lives which changed over time and when viewed retrospectively, provide a developmental line of approach to understanding the “pathways of ideas and behaviors that may lead to violent action” (Borum, Fein, Vossekul, & Berglund, 1999, p. 327). The threat assessment implication of this approach is that it may provide behavioral markers along the pathway that will facilitate evaluations and interventions.

What are the similarities between McVeigh and Atta? Despite their wildly divergent cultural, national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, both static and dynamic similarities are evident.

1. Both men were distrustful of and alienated from women, and there is no indication that either one had a sexual-affectional bond with a woman before death. The disavowal of any sexual-affectional bond with a woman (neither man was homosexual) is particularly striking given their young adult age when hormonally driven sexual urges are quite prominent, and may be a marker for the increasing emotional potency, and defensive capability to ward off sexual desire, of their absolutist beliefs.
2. Both men had generally introverted temperaments, were in the superior range of intelligence, and experienced a physically and sexually nontraumatic, compliant childhood. There was no evidence of antisocial behavior during childhood or early middle adolescence.
3. Both men experienced rejection from their chosen occupational path in young adulthood and likely felt both anger and humiliation concerning this loss.

4. Both men became socially adrift, characterized by geographical mobility, emotional withdrawal from previous friends, likely depression, and increasing anger toward the dominant economic and political forces in their country.
5. Both men experienced a conversion to and identified with an extremist movement that espoused absolutist beliefs, derogated critical thought, and blamed an external object for all their troubles. Within this identification arose a *totalitarian state of mind* in which omnipotence was idealized, intolerance of difference was magnified, hatred was exemplified, paranoia was rampant, and the entitlement to kill those who do not believe was embraced. Aggressive and sadistic super-ego identifications were physically unleashed and were behaviorally evident in their written rationalizations that justified their killing of unbelievers to advance a cause.
6. Both men organized an active terrorist cell to carry out a mass murder of civilians.
7. Both men successfully operationalized and carried out their terrorist act, and both died as a result of it.
8. Both men harbored grandiose fantasies as a reward for their act of violence. McVeigh would become the first hero of the second American revolution, a culturally consistent individualistic fantasy; Atta would “ascend in the storm” and take his place with Allah among the martyrs who had preceded him, the *shahids*, a culturally consistent collectivistic fantasy.
9. Both men were described by friends and associates as increasingly intense, humorless, angry, ideologically rigid, dogmatic, and strident during the 2-year incubation period before their act.

Identifying such similarities should not diminish the individual differences between McVeigh and Atta, and I compare these two case studies to only illustrate the value of both inductive (empirically derived formulations from a case study) and deductive (theoretically derived formulations from an hypothesized group applied to an individual) methods of indirect personality assessment. My psychological exploration of these individuals is severely truncated by virtue of the absence of comprehensive psychological testing or an extended clinical encounter with either person. I have used both cases to illustrate several pathways to terrorism, a model of threat assessment that is clearly superior to previous approaches (Borum et al., 1999).

### THE RISKS OF INDIRECT PERSONALITY ASSESSMENT

Indirect personality assessment contains many risks. Insufficient data can lead to unsupported inferences that have no basis in the reality of the individual’s life. The psychologist’s ignorance of cultural, ethnic, social, religious, and political differences on the part of the subject can lead to gross errors in the

relative importance of various facts and eventual findings and opinions. An absence of a theory of mind on the part of the psychologist can result in the generation of hypotheses that have no coherency or consistency. And in the context of terrorism, the psychologist can be accused, justifiably or not, of being a corrupt agent of the state. Here is a portion of the court transcript from *United States v. Terry Nichols* on the day that the defendant was sentenced for the Oklahoma City bombing. The defense attorney speaking is Michael Tigar, Mr. Nichols' counsel. I had submitted an indirect personality assessment of Mr. Nichols to the court the previous day to rebut many of the statements made in a report by the defense psychiatrist:

Now, your honor, we saw today a letter from this Dr. Reid Meloy. We did file a letter from Dr. Gordon not based on any doctor-patient privileged communications—we're not waiving that—but just because he's a concerned citizen. He saw the trial. But what a commentary Dr. Meloy's letter is, your honor. I've never had a chance to address it, and I'll do it now. What a commentary.

You know that in the Soviet Union, if the court please, they had psychiatrists who would analyze people and say they were anti-government, so they had to lock them up. Some of them became great novelists, but others, of course, simply wasted away. But at the very least, in the former Soviet Union, the psychiatrists met with the people before they went into court and gave their opinion that they were anti-government and should be locked up.

Here is Dr. Reid Meloy, your honor, who claims to be a scientist. He reads the contents of Mr. Nichols' library, reads a bunch of material that your honor has held to be inadmissible and completely irrelevant even for sentencing purposes, sits across the room with his ponytail neatly coiffed in one of his scoochies or rubber bands or whatever, sees Mr. Nichols from no closer than 40 feet distance, and then writes a letter, professing to give an opinion that he calls science, your honor. If that is the executive branch's version; that they've got a bunch of shrinks that are going to read the contents of our library, observe us from 50 feet away, and give our expert opinion, we should all be locked up. Well, I'm going to get my toothbrush, your honor, because I'm sure I exhibit behavior—maybe I'm doing it right now—that's every bit as dangerous as everything that Dr. Meloy found. (Trial transcript, June 5, 1998)

The data I reviewed on Terry Nichols was as extensive as the data I reviewed on Timothy McVeigh. When Mr. Tigar sat down, Chief Federal District Judge Richard Matsch sentenced Terry Nichols to life in prison.

### APPLICABLE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

The principles, standards, and guidelines of our profession provide useful parameters for indirect personality assessment. Ethical Principle A of the American Psychological Association (2002) inspires us to be alert and guard against the misuse of our influence. Ethical Standard 9.01(b) requires us to note the limitations of the reliability and validity of our

opinions without a direct examination of the subject. The Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychologists Committee of the American Board of Forensic Psychology (1991) urge us to attempt to corroborate critical data which form the basis of our professional product, and when we cannot do this, to acknowledge the uncorroborated status of our data (VI. F. 1).

The lambasting that I took from Mr. Tigar was worn by me as a badge of honor because I was certain of the ethical and scientific care with which I had rendered my opinions in the Nichols case. His anger was a measure of his tactical failure; when facts and opinions cannot be disputed, attorneys are only left with personal attacks. Perhaps he was most incensed by the relevancy of a quote from Eric Hoffer (1951) which I included as a postscript to the report on Terry Nichols:

For there is often a monstrous incongruity between the hopes, however noble and tender, and the action which follows them. It is as if ivied maidens and garlanded youths were to herald the four horsemen of the apocalypse. (p. 11)

I want to thank you for inviting me to speak to you today. I would like to close with the dedication that Karl Menninger inscribed in his book, *Man Against Himself*, in 1938, on the eve of World War II:

To those who would use intelligence in the battle against death—to strengthen the will to live against the wish to die, and to replace with love the blind compulsion to give hostages to hatred as the price of living. (p. v)

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