The enemy and us are starting to look alike

Khalid Shaikh Mohammed claims Washington as a hero, and the U.S. tortures -- such is the "osmosis of war."

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THE HISTORIAN lives for the revelatory document. So I was captivated by the Verbatim Transcript of Combatant Status Review Tribunal Hearing for ISN 10024, otherwise known as Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the Al Qaeda leader captured in Pakistan in 2003. This transcript, released Wednesday by the Pentagon, tells us more about the true nature of the war on terror than any other single document I've read. In particular, it shows us how the combatants in this war are, in subtle ways, growing alike.

"There's an osmosis in war," declares the fascistically inclined American general in "The Naked and the Dead," Norman Mailer's World War II novel. "Call it what you will, but the victors always tend to assume the ... eh, trappings of the loser." The general wanted "to translate America's potential into kinetic energy" by "absorbing" the "dream" of fascism. It was that fascist contamination that produced McCarthyism and reinvigorated racism in the South after World War II. Now the process of contamination is at work again — though in this case, intriguingly, the contamination is mutual.

The obviously sensational aspect of Mohammed's statement before the tribunal is the sheer scale of the terrorist campaign he claims to have masterminded. As Osama bin Laden's "military operational commander," he was responsible for "the organizing, planning, follow-up and execution" of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, as well as the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl, the "shoe-bomb" plot to blow up a U.S. airliner and sundry bombings in Bali, Mombasa and Turkey. Moreover, his confession alluded to more than 20 terrorist plots that he did not succeed in carrying out, including "Dirty Bomb Operations on American soil" and post-9/11 "Second Wave" attacks on the Library Tower in Los Angeles, the Sears Tower in Chicago and the Empire State Building in New York.

As if that were not enough, Mohammed informed the tribunal that he was responsible for planning the assassinations of former presidents Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, the murder of former Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, on the Island of Sumatra, Indonesia."

So breathtaking and, in certain respects, bizarre is the list of alleged targets that it is tempting to wonder if the prisoner was mocking his military audience. Yet the completed testimonial assault on the Library Tower in Los Angeles, the Sears Tower in Chicago and the Empire State Building in New York.

Yet the transcript also sheds light on the dark underbelly of Bush's presidency. The court president implicitly acknowledges that the prisoner has been tortured. He also makes it clear that the prisoner is being denied proper legal representation. Mohammed's request for two fellow prisoners to be summoned as witnesses is denied.

The transcript also reveals that the Pentagon has been actively involved in the legal defense of its captives. Mohammed's request for two fellow prisoners to be summoned as witnesses is denied.
And quite right too, you may well say. Mohammed readily acknowledges that he is an enemy combatant at war with the United States — a "jackal fighting in the nights," in his own striking phrase. But does it really honor the memory of Daniel Pearl to torture his murderer? And what of the other prisoners who, according to Mohammed, are being erroneously held in the same judicial limbo-land as himself: Afghans and Pakistanis who had nothing whatever to do with Al Qaeda?

THE OSMOSIS of this war is a reciprocal process. Consider what it reveals about Al Qaeda. It relied heavily on computers in preparing the 9/11 attacks. It has learned from Western warfare the importance of economic targets. It regards the manipulation of the media as an integral part of its terrorist mission. Its leaders speak English. And — most fascinating of all — its former military operational commander claims the greatest of America's founding fathers as his role model. I quote: "If now we were living in the Revolutionary War and George Washington he being arrested through Britain. For sure … they would consider him enemy combatant."

You can imagine the assembled soldiery rolling their eyes heavenward. An Islamist Washington fighting for liberty against American redcoats? What could be more preposterous? Pace Mailer, in this war, it is far from obvious to the two sides that they are growing subtly alike.

Only in retrospect, as the historian leafs through the documents that survive redaction and classification, will it become apparent how the war on terror turned a part of us into our enemy — and a part of our enemy into ourselves.

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