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**The Killing of Anwar al-Awlaki:  
How the United States Lost a Crucial Battle in the War of Ideas**

by

Charles M. McNiel, Major, USAF  
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Master of Science, Flight Test Engineering

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Advisor: Dr. Jonathan K. Zartman

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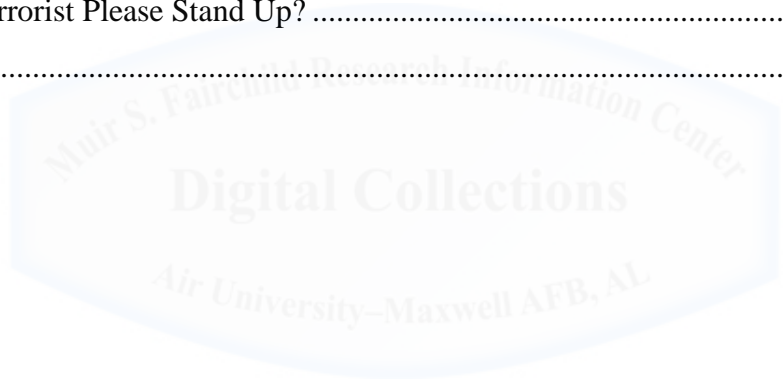
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### **Abstract**

By killing Anwar al-Awlaki, a highly influential radical cleric, in 2011 the United States hoped to deal a blow to weaken terrorist forces by decapitating al-Qaeda's inspirational recruitment influence. However, a thorough assessment of al-Awlaki's activities, reputation, and the archive of his messages and US messages in this battle reveals the negative strategic consequences of the decision to kill him. Since the United States did nothing to discredit him, or his messages, killing him only made him a martyr in his audience's eyes, which validated and strengthened his narrative. Additionally, systemic US confusion about who al-Awlaki was and when he radicalized led to strategic blunders in dealing with him and his message. The United States must learn from this case study to more effectively fight this strategic war of ideas and to better delineate friend from foe in the future.



## **Decapitation**

On September 30th, 2011, a Hellfire missile strike from an MQ-1 Predator killed Islamic cleric and US citizen Anwar al-Awlaki.<sup>1</sup> His death in a remote province of Yemen, wrought by US Special Operations Forces (SOF) acting under the direction of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), vaulted his training and recruitment messages to greater credibility and fame. By killing this highly influential radical cleric, the United States hoped to deal a blow to weaken terrorist forces by decapitating al-Qaeda's inspirational paragon. However, a thorough assessment of the strategic consequences of the decision to kill al-Awlaki requires consideration of the full context of his activities, reputation, and the archive of his work that remains available for aspiring terrorists. Did this action, and handling of his case in general, improve or damage US efforts against violent Islamist extremism? The United States should have handled his case differently to communicate more effectively to al-Awlaki's Muslim audience and reduce his influence. By killing him, the United States validated his narrative and made him a martyr in the eyes of his audience. Instead, the United States should have aggressively discredited him to render his vast library of messages impotent. Additionally, the United States must work in the future to better delineate Muslim friend and foe to avoid embarrassing and damaging repercussions.

## **The Language of Terrorism**

Terror organizations use terrorism as a form of strategic communication, to leverage public and political responses, to achieve their strategic objectives. Jonathan Matusitz argues that terrorism constitutes a form of strategic communication process in which terrorists use fear to change the behavior and beliefs of their audiences.<sup>2</sup> Matusitz builds upon Laswell's foundational theory of communication, which defines communication succinctly as "who says what, in which

channel, to whom, and with what effect.” In other words, the communication process includes five main components: the sender, the message, the medium, the receiver, and the purpose.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, terrorism as communication takes place within the context of communication writ large. As a form of communication, terrorism seeks attention within the clamor of all communication, which includes all forms of individual and group messaging. For example, an audience can interpret the meaning of an address by the President of the United States as the message of an individual person, as the leader of a political party, as the commander in chief of the US military forces, or as the chief executive of the government of the United States, among many other identities. Thus a receiver’s perception of the sender greatly influences their perception of the message, medium and purpose. This illustrates how all five components of Laswell’s model interact and influence with one another to affect the outcome of the communication process.

Similarly, Anwar al-Awlaki held multiple identities: a US citizen, a devout Muslim, an imam (or teacher) of the Muslim faith, an outspoken opponent of US policy and actions, and a leader within one of the most destructive terrorist organizations of modern times. By choosing an identity to ascribe to al-Awlaki, the receiver also determines the lens through which he or she views his messages. The blunders by the US government in its strategic communication battle with him from 2001 to 2011 derive from failing to properly understand this factor. Both the United States and al-Awlaki engaged in years of formal and informal messaging and posturing prior to his death. For 10 years, the United States waged a war of ideas with al-Awlaki. In the eyes of his target audience, he served as a symbol and messenger for the greater radical Islamist movement. This competition over ideas for the destiny of the Muslim world took place primarily in the news media and on the internet. The United States succeeded in killing al-Awlaki, but his

lectures and sermons live on. What messages did both sides send, and what strategic effects did each side gain on the target audience?

### **A Rising Star**

Anwar al-Awlaki was born in 1971 in New Mexico, while his father Nasser al-Awlaki was an agricultural economics student at New Mexico State University. The family moved to Nebraska while Nasser pursued a doctorate at the University of Nebraska, and then Minnesota where Anwar's father taught at the University of Minnesota. The family moved back to their native Yemen in 1978 where Nasser served as Agriculture Minister in the Yemeni government. Anwar moved back to the United States in 1991 to pursue a college degree at Colorado State University, graduating in 1994 with a degree in civil engineering. While at Colorado State, he was president of the Muslim Student Association. He became very active in his local mosque and in campus religious and political dialogue after visiting Afghanistan in 1993. The poor living conditions in the country after the war with Russia, according to his friends at the time, changed his outlook on Muslim affairs. This experience made him much more outspoken about the suffering of Muslims at the hands of non-Muslims all around the world. In 2010, Bruce Finley of *The Denver Post* reported that, while preaching regular sermons at the Denver Islamic Society's al-Noor mosque on Muslim struggles around the world, al-Awlaki encouraged a young Muslim attendee to travel to Bosnia to wage jihad. The young parishioner did just that, and was reportedly killed in Chechnya in 1999.<sup>4</sup> Was this the first sign of al-Awlaki's eventual total radicalization?

During the 1990s the United States was just coming to grips with Islamist terrorism, having suffered the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993. In 1998, al-Qaeda conducted simultaneous bombings of the US Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. In

response to the embassy bombings, President Bill Clinton ordered cruise missile strikes on an al-Qaeda training compound in Afghanistan and drug production facility in Sudan.<sup>5</sup> According to the 9/11 Commission Report, the Clinton administration also heavily pressured the Taliban in Afghanistan to expel al-Qaeda's leader, Osama bin Laden, so that he could be extradited to the United States.<sup>6</sup> Here, the administration sought to communicate that the United States would actively seek and engage terrorists around the world. However, bin Laden had achieved an important victory with the 1993 attack, and the US response was relatively weak. This invigorated his network, which mobilized itself for a terror campaign that would culminate in the 9/11 World Trade Center, Pentagon and United Flight 93 attacks on September 11, 2001. In the 1990s, the FBI and CIA began in earnest to search out, infiltrate and disrupt terrorist networks bent on attacking the United States. However, these activities had little effect on the network and had no effect on the ideological appeal of militancy for young male Muslims throughout the Middle East.<sup>7</sup>

After leaving Denver in 1996, Anwar al-Awlaki continued his post-graduate studies at San Diego State University and George Washington University in Washington DC, but he never finished any graduate degree. While in San Diego he served as imam of the Masjid ar-Ribat al-Islami mosque, preaching to a regular audience of around 300. His sermons reportedly continued to revolve around Muslim struggle against oppression around the world, but notably lacked anti-American or pro-violence sentiment. The FBI believes that two of the 9/11 hijackers, Nawaf al-Hazmi and Khalid al-Mihdhar, met al-Awlaki here and sat under his teaching.<sup>8</sup> FBI records indicate that he met privately with these men, but these records reveal nothing about the content of these conversations. Law enforcement only interviewed al-Awlaki regarding these conversations; obviously, both hijackers are dead.



Also during this time, al-Awlaki began recording his lectures and sermons to CDs, establishing a lucrative business while spreading his messages to a much larger Muslim audience both inside and outside the United States.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in 1996 and 1997 law enforcement first discovered and arrested al-Awlaki in San Diego as a regular solicitor of prostitution, a fact that would come back to haunt him years later.<sup>10</sup> From 1998 to 1999, al-Awlaki served as the vice president of the Charitable Society for Social Welfare, which the FBI described later as a front organization for the Muslim Brotherhood to collect and funnel money to Islamist terrorists in the Middle East. In fact, the FBI investigated al-Awlaki from 1999-2000 for his ties to this organization and to Omar Abdel Rahman, also known as the “blind sheikh,” who was partly responsible for the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. But the FBI failed to charge him with a crime related to these events due to insufficient evidence.<sup>11</sup> Al-Awlaki’s rising influence in San Diego as a lecturer, preacher and Islamic activist, as well as his penchant for prostitution, set the stage for events that would ultimately seal his fate in Yemen more than 10 years later.

In January 2001, after leaving San Diego and taking a brief sabbatical abroad, al-Awlaki returned to the United States and took up studies at George Washington University. During this time, he served as imam of the Dar al-Hijrah mosque in Falls Church, Virginia. The FBI believes that 9/11 hijacker Nawaf al-Hazmi followed al-Awlaki from San Diego to Washington DC, where al-Awlaki’s sermons and lectures continued to focus on the downtrodden plight of Muslims around the world and calls to action from his mosque and CD audiences. At this time al-Awlaki was not on public record calling for violent jihad, but he is known to have met privately with al-Hazmi and another al-Qaeda member and 9/11 hijacker, Hani Hanjour, who regularly attended al-Awlaki’s sermons at Dar al-Hijrah in 2001.<sup>12</sup> Again, no records tie these

conversations to terrorism, but al-Awlaki was the only surviving interviewee after 9/11. He also served as the Muslim chaplain at George Washington University.<sup>13</sup>

In early 2001 in Falls Church, the US Muslim community began to recognize al-Awlaki as an up-and-coming prodigy. A growing number of Muslims in the United States and abroad heard and championed his sermons, lectures and ever-expanding online and CD-based library. Up to this time, he primarily focused on theological topics related to marriage, heaven, Jesus Christ, tolerance, and Muslim observance of holy traditions.<sup>14</sup> When his public messages strayed into social, cultural or political waters he was generally pro-US and anti-terrorism. He gave no indications publicly that he believed Muslims could not live freely and happily in the United States. His ability to shift effortlessly between Arabic and English gave him the aura of the “total package” to Muslim and non-Muslim audiences alike; he was a smart, witty and charming, a knowledgeable rising star in the Muslim community.

### **Confusion in the Capitol**

When the terrorist attacks of 9/11 occurred, al-Awlaki was one of Washington DC’s go-to Muslim sources, considered a moderate Islamic voice with positive views of the United States and the West who did not shy away from publicly condemning Islamist terrorism and the 9/11 attacks. As such, the US media gave him a platform which brought him into the very halls of US government and defense. Prominent media outlets such as *National Geographic*, *The New York Times*, National Public Radio, and many others interviewed him after 9/11. He was quoted in *The New York Times* saying: “What we might have tolerated in the past, we don’t tolerate anymore. There were some statements that were inflammatory, and were considered just talk, but now we realize that talk can be taken seriously and acted on in a violent radical way.”<sup>15</sup> He dined at the Pentagon in the months following 9/11, as part of an informal outreach program in which

defense officials sought contact with leading members of the Muslim community. This courting was based on the perception that he was a leading moderate Muslim voice.<sup>16</sup> The Congressional Muslim Staffer Association even made him the first Muslim imam in US congressional history to conduct a prayer service at the US Capitol.<sup>17</sup>

The US government painted an image of al-Awlaki immediately following 9/11 as a friend of America. Unwittingly, they were drawing close to a future adversary, a formidable opponent who would not long prove to be a friend, but would become a strident enemy. The US government entered into a messaging contest with Anwar al-Awlaki unprepared, a contest the United States would ultimately lose. After 9/11, the FBI would launch a fresh investigation into al-Awlaki's ties to the 9/11 hijackers and other terrorist organizations. However, even though this investigation turned up formidable evidence and would result in an arrest warrant, the US government never took al-Awlaki into custody due to a controversial series of events.

In March 2002, FBI agents swept through the offices, mosques and homes of Islamic leaders in the Washington DC area searching for ties to terrorism. The agents detained clerics, staffers, and their families for hours while conducting the raids, and left many of the search sites in shambles when they left.<sup>18</sup> The Muslim community saw these raids as unwarranted intrusions, irrevocably breaking the budding constructive relationships between the US government and the Muslim population in and around the capital. Al-Awlaki found the raids particularly disturbing. He viewed them as an abrogation of the rights of those searched and a public denigration and demeaning of the Muslim community.<sup>19</sup> He railed against the US government in a sermon on March 22, 2002 and, for the very first time publicly, characterized the US war on terrorism as a veiled war on all Muslims.<sup>20</sup> Only a few days later, al-Awlaki flew to London for a speaking engagement and, to the surprise of his parishioners and the US government alike, did not return

to the United States again except for a brief final visit in October 2002.<sup>21</sup> Publicly, the Dar al-Hijrah leadership attributed al-Awlaki's departure to "a climate of fear and intimidation" fostered by the FBI and US government actions.<sup>22</sup>

Notably, the federal agents arrested al-Awlaki when he returned to the United States in October 2002 under a warrant issued as a result of their investigation of his ties to terrorism. However, the arrest warrant was rescinded by a federal judge in Denver the very day that al-Awlaki arrived at JFK Airport in New York City on October 21<sup>st</sup> and was arrested. This forced his release, to the great frustration of the federal investigators assigned to his case.<sup>23</sup> American law enforcement would never again have the opportunity to arrest him. He would live out the remaining years of his life in London and Yemen.

Did the Virginia raids and his brief arrest in New York constitute turning points for al-Awlaki that radicalized him and sent him abroad as an enemy of the United States? Or were they simply events that coincidental to an already radical imam's progression toward action? In other words, was Anwar al-Awlaki in 2002 a moderate who was driven to extremism by actions of the US government, or was he a covert radical and influencer of terrorism who systematically duped the nation and narrowly escaped capture?

### **An Expatriate's Wrath**

After he left the United States in March 2002, al-Awlaki's overt public messaging took a decidedly anti-American tack. While in London shortly after leaving the United States, al-Awlaki reached hundreds of listeners through sermons with messages such as "...never, ever trust a kufr (non-Muslim). Do not trust them! They are plotting to kill this religion. They're plotting night and day."<sup>24</sup> He whipped up anti-American sentiment and dreams of paradise for martyrs among a primarily young, male Muslim audience in the UK through speaking

engagements at the London Masjid al-Tawhid mosque, the Federation of Student Islamic Societies, the Muslim Association of Britain, and the Islamic Forum Europe.<sup>25</sup> Notably, in 2003, a member of the British Parliament argued that the Muslim Association of Britain was a front organization for the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization which some observers accuse of support for terrorism. This association maintained connections to the Charitable Society for Social Welfare in San Diego, in which al-Awlaki had served as an official in 1999.<sup>26</sup>

In 2004, al-Awlaki left the UK and moved back to his ancestral home country of Yemen. Though banned from entering the UK in 2006 for his terror ties, al-Awlaki delivered a series of video-linked lectures to mosques within Britain from 2007 to 2009 advocating jihad against the West and advancing Islamist political and ideological themes.<sup>27</sup> A significant number of perpetrators of terrorism after 9/11 directly communicated with al-Awlaki or referenced him as an influence. He directly influenced Fort Hood shooter Nidal Malik Hassan, the attempted “underwear bomber” Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, would-be Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad, and British stabbing perpetrator Roshonara Choudry. He took part in planning the attempted bombings of cargo planes bound from Yemen to Chicago in 2010. Perpetrators of the 2005 London bombings, the 2007 Fort Dix terrorism plot, the 2006 Toronto terrorism plot, and the 2011 shooting at a Little Rock, Arkansas military recruiting office also credited his influence. He was also credited as an inspiration by Americans Mohamed Alesha and Carlos Almonte, who attempted to travel to Somalia in June 2010 to join al-Qaeda affiliate al-Shabaab. Zachary Chesser and Paul Rockwood exchanged emails with al-Awlaki, and later provided support to al-Shabaab and plotted to attack multiple US targets for desecrating Islam.<sup>28</sup> Al-Awlaki rarely influenced these actual or would-be terrorists through direct communication. Most commonly, his enduring internet and CD library carried his message and inspired these men.

## **Marked for Death**

During this time, the US government's messaging turned as well. Publicly, Anwar al-Awlaki went from being a sought-after "moderate" voice shortly after 9/11 to an enemy of the United States after leaving in 2002. The change in the government's labeling of al-Awlaki pre-2002 and post-2002 hints at systemic confusion. American officials felt betrayed by al-Awlaki's increasingly anti-American and Islamist rhetoric after publicly championing him as a moderate Muslim paragon. In June 2006, the US government petitioned Yemen to detain al-Awlaki for ties to Islamist terrorism. Yemen did imprison him for 18 months, but then freed him as part of a larger release program for al-Qaeda affiliated prisoners.<sup>29</sup> At this point, US messaging clearly indicated that they considered al-Awlaki to be an enemy of the United States. In April 2010, US Congresswoman Jane Harman of California, chairwoman of the House Homeland Security Subcommittee, stated publicly that al-Awlaki was "probably the person, the terrorist, who would be terrorist No. 1 in terms of threat against us."<sup>30</sup> After a legal review and recommendation provided by the Department of Justice, President Barack Obama assigned al-Awlaki to the US's Specially Designated Global Terrorist list, or "kill list."<sup>31</sup> The Department of Justice made this recommendation within the context of a broader Department of Justice initiative to validate the policy of lethal strikes against US citizens abroad that have been deemed enemies of the state.<sup>32</sup>

Through this series of public messages, the US government had come full-circle to label al-Awlaki a terrorist, marked for death. Unfortunately for the United States, this labeling and designation only validated al-Awlaki's rhetoric in his audience's eyes, that the United States was waging a war against Islam to kill Muslims. In fact, to Muslims, this designation must have smacked of the holy-war desperation that al-Awlaki ascribed to US policy, because they spun the

administration's intent to kill a US citizen without a trial as a desire to "kill Muslims at any cost," even if it required subverting the US Constitution. The battle of messaging nearly culminated in May 2011, when al-Awlaki survived a US drone strike in Yemen.<sup>33</sup> Shortly after, on September 30, the CIA finally succeeded in making good on its intent to kill al-Awlaki in a remote province of Yemen.<sup>34</sup> Following the successful strike, the Obama administration touted the killing as a crucial victory over al-Awlaki and al-Qaeda. Unfortunately, the strike did nothing to diminish the vast internet and CD archive of his teaching. In fact, it essentially validated his message in the eyes of his target audience.

### **The Administration Changes It's Tone**

Later, President Obama would concede the inability of military force to defeat terrorism in a speech at the Pentagon in July 2015, when he stated "Ultimately, in order for us to defeat terrorist groups like ISIL and al-Qaeda, it's going to also require us to discredit their ideology — the twisted thinking that draws vulnerable people into their ranks. Ideologies are not defeated with guns; they're defeated by better ideas."<sup>35</sup> An outside observer might well conclude that ultimately Anwar al-Awlaki won his battle of messages, and in turn advanced Islamist efforts in the greater war of ideas, because killing him did not destroy his actual means of influence, namely his vast catalogue of written and recorded messages. His lectures continue to influence Muslim extremists all around the world, and his perceived martyrdom fans the flames that his messages ignite. The United States in essence achieved a "tactical" victory in the fatal strike, but incurred a "strategic" loss by validating al-Awlaki's message, making him a martyr and a continuing touchstone for Islamist recruitment.

## **A Strategic Mistake**

In its preoccupation with preventing the next terrorist attack, the US committed a strategic blunder that could precipitate attacks for many years to come. The Obama administration cited a ruling by US Department of Justice officials that al-Awlaki had engaged in war with the United States, and therefore represented a lawful military target. However, instead of killing al-Awlaki, the US should have either worked to decisively diminish his influence, or to capture and bring him to justice in the United States.

Diminishing al-Awlaki's influence on his Muslim audience could have been accomplished through a very public and very detailed release of all of the evidence and information pertaining to his affinity for prostitutes. This could have effectively discredited him to such an extent that his vast library of messages would become toothless. At that point, killing him would have been all but pointless. Al-Qaeda would have surely counter-messaged this information as a lie, but with consistent broadband repeating of the evidence, the US government would have surely undermined al-Awlaki's reputation to a significant degree.

Capturing and bringing al-Awlaki to justice could have been accomplished with a covert raid similar to the one against Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. The administration in Yemen would quite possibly have allowed and even assisted such a mission, which would have given the operation a much higher probability of success than the bin Laden raid into uncooperative Pakistan. A mission like this would by no means be guaranteed success, but US Special Forces routinely conduct more difficult missions like the bin Laden raid successfully. After capture, al-Awlaki's reputation and inspirational effectiveness in the eyes of his audience could have been destroyed through the public release of his prostitution problem.



Whether the US government sought to discredit, or to capture and prosecute al-Awlaki, they should have avoided above all else validating his message in this war of ideas. Instead, al-Awlaki is dead and his message lives on, ever strengthened in the hearts of his audience by his martyrdom. After his death, pro-US Muslim commentators publicly lamented the strategic effects that it would have in the Muslim world. One of them is Mohamed Elibiary, a Texas security consultant who has interviewed dozens of Americans charged with terrorism for the federal public defender's office. Referencing al-Awlaki, Elibiary stated "it was very clear, at least to me, that if you're trying to fight a martyrdom culture, you don't go make martyrs. I'm sorry to say, I think I was right. In that world, to the last person, you find that they're convinced that Anwar al-Awlaki is a good guy and a martyr. What seals the deal for them is that he was killed by the United States."<sup>36</sup>

### **Will the Real Terrorist Please Stand Up?**

Anwar al-Awlaki's life, death, and the messaging battle he fought with the United States have spawned a number of theories after his death that seek to interpret these messages to determine who he really was, why he left the United States, and why he became a key leader within al-Qaeda. In his book *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone*, Scott Shane, a national security reporter with *The New York Times*, grieves the ineffectiveness of the United States trying to kill its way out of terrorism.<sup>37</sup> In it, Shane speculates that al-Awlaki was a genuinely moderate, pro-US Muslim cleric until after his departure from the United States in 2002. He postulates that two primary events "radicalized" al-Awlaki: first was the FBI's discovery of his rampant affinity for prostitution and the potential that they could leak or charge him with this information, and second was the FBI raids of DC-area Muslim facilities and homes in early 2002. Even after al-Awlaki left America, Shane argues, he contacted the FBI to request a

meeting to potentially clear up any lingering suspicions as a prelude to returning.<sup>38</sup> Even up to that point, Shane considers al-Awlaki simply a regular Muslim who was scared that the US government was after him and had some damaging information on him. It wasn't until efforts to smooth things over with the FBI failed that al-Awlaki permanently hardened against the United States.

Shane cites an interview with al-Awlaki's younger brother Ammar to this effect, in which Ammar recounts that Anwar wanted to stay in America forever, but that he was extremely disturbed by an FBI plot to damage and discredit his reputation and might be forced to flee the country.<sup>39</sup> But was he truly only "radicalized" after leaving the United States? If the view of al-Awlaki as moderate and pro-US is accurate, many aspects of his prior messaging and behavior must be addressed, like his encouraging of the young Muslim to go to Bosnia to fight in 1994 and the fiery sermon after the FBI raids in 2002 in which he characterized the US "war on terror" as a cover for a war against all Muslims. He was either moderate and pro-US before he fled, or he wasn't. Rhetoric and behavior such as this cannot be ignored.

Paul Sperry promotes a vastly different point of view. He asserts that al-Awlaki was an Islamist cleric with radical views who supported violence against the United States from the beginning. Sperry argues that he duped the plodding and slow-witted US government for years before he slipped through the FBI's fingers and fled the country to more actively participate in terror against America.<sup>40</sup> From this perspective, al-Awlaki was simply saying what he needed to say, and telling his confidants and cohorts to do the same, to keep the FBI off his back. And the US government was so desperately searching for moderate Muslim voices to champion post-9/11, that Sperry believes they ignored al-Awlaki's red flags. His numerous contacts with three 9/11 hijackers, his ties to fronts for the Muslim Brotherhood, his meeting with the blind sheikh,

his correspondence with Nidal Malik Hassan and Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, and many other such interactions were not simply coincidental or circumstantial. Sperry argues that these relationships and behaviors indicated a radical imam promoting a covert jihad against America, until the point that FBI pressure forced him to flee. Once in more friendly environs, al-Awlaki finally felt free to preach more overtly against the United States. This theory holds the most weight in light of all of al-Awlaki's heretofore publicly released messaging, rhetoric and actions prior to October 2002. It is difficult to conceive of such a drastic radicalization occurring completely after his self-inflicted exile from America.

Recently, Sperry's theory has been expounded upon in a decidedly conspiratorial way by Andrew McCarthy, in which he claims that al-Awlaki was courted by the FBI as a would-be informant in the years following 9/11. McCarthy posits that, in their desperation to secure inroads into American terror cells, the FBI sought al-Awlaki as an informant and turned a blind eye to his nefarious relationships and messages.<sup>41</sup> This viewpoint hinges upon al-Awlaki's arrest at JFK Airport and his subsequent release from federal custody in October 2002. According to McCarthy, the FBI's release of al-Awlaki was not due to a lack of evidence as is widely believed, but instead the FBI was "acting on the misguided hope of using him as an informant."<sup>42</sup> He cites continued communications between al-Awlaki and the FBI until at least 2004 as a basis for this theory. McCarthy argues that this misguided hope kept the FBI from threatening or disparaging al-Awlaki in any way before or after his expatriation, such as filing prostitution charges in an effort to discredit him. The fact that prosecutors did not file prostitution charges until 2004 would be consistent behavior if the FBI were courting al-Awlaki as an informant. But this would not explain why this information was never made public in later efforts to destroy al-Awlaki's image and recruitment cachet. This theory would also likely taint al-Awlaki's killing,

potentially making it an attempt to cover up the FBI's failed strategy and release from custody. While plausible, this theory hinges on an arrest and release that could have been a shrewdly calculated move by the FBI, but was more likely simply a bungled opportunity caused by a federal judge's misunderstanding.

Al-Awlaki's body of work prior to leaving America gives greatest weight to Paul Sperry's view that he was most likely not ever a moderate or a friend of the United States. It is difficult to imagine him experiencing such a radical transformation only after his hasty flight from the country. But regardless of al-Awlaki's beliefs and true identity during his early years as an imam, without question his later years showed a man fully engaged in a war of ideas with the United States. His message was clear: America is an enemy of Islam and seeks to kill Muslims wherever they may be found, so Muslims everywhere must fight against this oppression. The US government's message was more confused, morphing from touting al-Awlaki as a moderate Muslim ally in the "war on terror," to investigating him for ties to terrorism, to marking him for death as an enemy of the state, and ultimately assassinating him. Anwar al-Awlaki won this battle when the United States validated his message by killing him. This decapitation strategy not only failed to diminish al-Awlaki's influence, it made him a martyr and powerfully validated his message for many Muslims who would go on to participate in terrorism as a result. In the grander war of ideas, al-Awlaki won a crucial battle of messaging for Islamist terrorists that continues to damage the United States.

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<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-15121879>.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Matusitz, *Terrorism & Communication: A Critical Introduction*, (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc., 2013), 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Emerson, "The Awlaki Effect," *Family Security Matters*, 16 November 2010,

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<sup>5</sup> "US Missiles Pound Targets in Afghanistan, Sudan," *CNN*, 20 August 1998,

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