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**Was Khalid Shaikh Mohammed Playing to the Jury?**

Experts say the Sept. 11 mastermind's chatty testimony was intended to state his case to the American public

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The most revealing aspect of Khalid Shaikh Mohammed's testimony before a military tribunal may not have been the details about the many Al Qaeda plots he claims to have orchestrated but the insight it offered into the suspected Sept. 11 mastermind.

In an hourlong written and oral presentation to his military captors Saturday, Mohammed showed himself to be ambitious, boastful and, when given the chance, talkative. He was even thoughtful about his cause and his craft.

It was the first public glimpse of the man who has claimed credit for the deadliest terrorist attack in U.S. history, and more than two dozen other plots as well.

But was Mohammed revealing the truth about himself and his deeds, or just playing to the jury?

By framing his life as an underdog militant in terms Americans might understand, and by expressing occasional regret and remorse, Mohammed may have been seizing the opportunity to make his best and most palatable case to the public about why he and Al Qaeda have waged war against the United States, U.S. officials and experts reviewing his testimony suggest.

"It is designed to have an American audience understand that there is another way of looking at the conflict between the West and radical Islam under [Osama] bin Laden's leadership, and that is quite striking," said Dr. Jerrold Post, the former chief personality profiler for the CIA.

Post, the author of a forthcoming book, "The Mind of the Terrorist," described the "performance" by Al Qaeda's former chief of operations as part psychological warfare and part artfully crafted courtroom argument.

"This does not reflect someone who was brainwashed," either by radical Islamic fundamentalists or U.S. interrogators since his capture in Pakistan in March 2003, Post said. "I take it as confirmation of the significance of his position that despite his thuggish appearance, this is a very shrewd and rather precise individual whose attention to detail and careful planning went into his being promoted to such a high position within Al Qaeda."



In the transcript, Mohammed comes across as a different and more complex personality than most Al Qaeda leaders whom the American public has learned about from videotapes, Internet postings and interrogation reports.

His lengthy exposition, for instance — several typewritten pages, single-spaced — wasn't the usual diatribe against the godless enemy. And in his off-the-cuff remarks, he was anything but the typical doctrinaire sermonizer.

Mohammed was far more political, likening himself to an Islamic George Washington, fighting to free his people from the tyranny of an oppressive foreign government. He also sought to place Al Qaeda and the United States on equal footing, in terms of fighting a war in which some innocent lives must be lost.

"Killing, as in the Christianity, Jews and Islam, are prohibited. But there are exception of rule when you are killing people in Iraq," Mohammed told his captors in broken English.

"You said we have to do it. Same language you use, I use."

On some occasions, Mohammed sounded like the ruthless killer that U.S. officials had long portrayed him to be, as when he boasted of beheading "the American Jew, Daniel Pearl," after the Wall Street Journal reporter was kidnapped in Pakistan in 2002.

At other times, he appeared contrite about such killings, and at moments seemed downright folksy.

Asked at one point if he had any questions about the tribunal process, Mohammed, who went to college in the U.S., replied, "OK by me."

Two other high-value Al Qaeda operatives, Ramzi Binalshibh and Abu Faraj Libbi, refused to appear at their scheduled Combatant Status Review Tribunal hearings at the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, despite repeated attempts by U.S. military officials.

Mohammed, in contrast, prepared a lengthy list of at least 28 Al Qaeda attacks for which he said he was responsible, and three more that he said he supported.

Those included plots — some previously undisclosed — to blow up U.S. and Israeli government targets, such as embassies and warships, as well as civilian targets, including nightclubs and commercial airliners.

U.S. intelligence and counterterrorism officials cautioned Thursday that Mohammed was often viewed as a megalomaniac and might have been exaggerating his role in Al Qaeda's operations, in part because he suspected the proceedings at Guantanamo Bay ultimately would be made public.

He did so, they said, either to preserve his place in history or to pull off a counterintelligence



feint designed to divert attention from other Al Qaeda operatives still at large and planning attacks.

As such, they cautioned, everything he said — from the number of attacks he was involved in to the rationale for the assaults — should be taken with a heavy dose of skepticism.

"Clearly he is responsible for some of the attacks. But I believe he is taking credit for things he did not have direct involvement in," said one recently retired senior FBI counterterrorism official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"In my opinion, it's excellent," the former official said of Mohammed's occasionally rambling statement. "It proves the point that these people are not stable or predictable, but that they are lethal."

A U.S. counterterrorism official agreed that Mohammed probably was using the hearing, even though it was held behind closed doors, to exaggerate his role in Al Qaeda plots and attacks.

"Obviously he saw this as a platform to continue the jihad, so there is an element of that," said the counterterrorism official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss Mohammed.

Some of Mohammed's claims in recent years have been doubted by federal authorities, who say the alleged plot against the Library Tower in Los Angeles, for instance, was one of several that never got past the drawing board.

But the counterterrorism official said some of the claims made by Mohammed during interrogations over the last four years had been corroborated after extensive investigation by U.S. authorities.

"He was their operational guy," the official said. "The view [even] before his tribunal was that he was a barbaric killer, a ruthless terrorist, and this is an admission of that in his own volition. He was a killer bent on inflicting as much harm as possible."

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