



In Danny Pearl Book, Lévy Says Next 9/11 Brewing in Pakistan

by Ron Rosenbaum

"I had the feeling," Bernard-Henri Lévy says, "that the 21st century really began with the collapse of the Twin Towers and the murder of this single man, Daniel Pearl." Both are deeply symbolic killings. What's more, he contends, the same forces behind both crimes are now planning something far worse.

Looking for more?

For recent columns by Ron Rosenbaum, click [HERE](#)

Mr. Lévy paints a portrait of Mr. Pearl as a Galahad piercing the secret of terrorism's Unholy Grail.

"It will make 9/11 look prehistoric," Mr. Lévy says. What he learned in investigating the death of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Pearl, he contends, brought him face to face with the specter of the *next* 9/11. From the year he spent studying the jihadist alliance in Pakistan that killed Pearl, he has a theory about the nature of "the next 9/11": He believes it is likely to take the shape of a terrorist nuclear attack.

I have a theory about Bernard-Henri Lévy and his book about the death of Daniel Pearl. It's a theory about Mr. Lévy's theory about Mr. Pearl's theory, you might say. Mr. Lévy describes his book as "an investigation of the investigation": his investigation of Daniel Pearl's investigation—and of the official investigation of Mr. Pearl's death. My theory results, you might say, from an investigation of Mr. Lévy's investigation of what Daniel Pearl was investigating at the time of his kidnap and murder. The investigation, Mr. Lévy believes, that got Daniel Pearl killed because he learned too much to be allowed to live.

It was a theory I developed after many hours studying and annotating Mr. Lévy's book, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, followed by several hours I ended up talking with Mr. Lévy over the course of a couple days last week. There was a three-hour-long dinner at the Carlyle, where he was staying, and then an hour or so interviewing him for C-Span 2's Book TV (scheduled to be broadcast on Sunday, Sept. 14, at 9:30 a.m. and 8 p.m., if you're interested).

There is much to admire about Mr. Lévy's book. It chronicles a remarkable

endeavor: Here's someone who's already long ago proved his mettle as a war correspondent, as far back as the Indian-Pakistan war over Bangladesh (when he championed the cause of India and Bangladesh's breakaway from Pakistan). Here's someone who has achieved a comfortable eminence in Parisian society as a media-friendly philosopher and activist who took an early and prescient turn against Marxist tyrannies, and became a supporter of Great Causes such as the persecuted Muslims of Bosnia (when they were threatened with "ethnic cleansing" by Serbs).

Here's someone who was 53 in February 2002, when he learned—while visiting Hamid Karzai, the new postwar president of Afghanistan, as an emissary of French President Jacques Chirac—about the death of a young American reporter he didn't know, a *Wall Street Journal* correspondent named Daniel Pearl. At which point, Mr. Lévy proceeded to fly to Pakistan and begin a yearlong, multi-continent odyssey retracing the steps of Daniel Pearl and his killers, a year in which he found himself walking into some of the most dangerous places in the world for a Westerner and a Jew.

There is much to admire as well in the kind of painstakingly patient, unglamorous shoe-leather reporting Mr. Lévy engages in, the hours in obscure archives in small-town libraries in the backwaters of Pakistan, seeking out brief but telling clippings from local Urdu-language newspapers. The patient pursuit of obscure jihadist figures in Bosnia, where Pearl's killer Omar may or may not have begun his career.

So we admire the impulse behind the investigation, the fortitude and persistence it took; we admire Mr. Lévy's obvious affection and respect for Daniel Pearl. We admire the attention he has drawn to a case with still too many loose threads, too many unresolved questions, too many figures who have escaped justice.

But what about his conclusions? So much of the attention Mr. Lévy and his book have been getting has been about his luxuriant hair (think "Werewolves of London") and his trademark open-to-the-chest, white-shirt look, his glamorous friends (Richard Avedon came to the C-Span taping at the Overseas Press Club), his beautiful French actress wife, their "palace in Morocco"—all that, rather than his actual thesis, his contention about the reason Daniel Pearl was murdered and not just kidnapped.

To some extent, his literary style invites distraction from his reportorial conclusions—his combination of hard-core investigation and soft-core conjecture, even his most audacious gesture: re-imagining the final hours and minutes of Daniel Pearl's life through the dead man's eyes, in effect. All this is, to some extent, a red herring, a distraction from the question: Has he got the goods?

As one of the first here in the U.S. to report on the general outlines of Mr. Lévy's thesis before the book appeared (see *The Observer*, June 9, 2003), I felt a responsibility to examine it carefully at the 450-page length in which it was

elaborated upon in the just-published Melville House English-language edition. Which resulted in what I would call my ambivalent response to Mr. Lévy's theory—a response I'll try to lay out here.

But first I want to say a word about the *other* Daniel Pearl book, the one by his widow, Mariane Pearl (co-written with Sarah Crichton), the one coming out at the end of this month, the one called *A Mighty Heart*. Having read both now in galley, what I want to say is that these aren't competing books. As Melville House publisher Dennis Johnson generously phrased it, "They complement each other."

One, Mr. Lévy's, is a look from the outside in on the terrible week when Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and then murdered, which expands into an examination of the sinister constellation of forces that surrounded Pearl in his place of captivity. The other, Ms. Pearl's, is a look from the inside out, from the circle of investigators and friends who surrounded her and how they fought to save Daniel Pearl from his fate.

There are strengths and virtues in both books, but I didn't expect to find myself as moved as I was by the Mariane Pearl account. It isn't at all what you might expect: not the grieving wife passively waiting for fate to take its course. Instead, it's the story of a tough-minded reporter (Ms. Pearl is a French documentary-maker and TV reporter who worked alongside her husband on many of his foreign-correspondent assignments) and how she made her residence in Karachi the operational center of her own active investigation of the crime, all the while in the midst of her pregnancy (she later gave birth to a child, Adam). Her dedication did much to give cohesion to the work of the few brave Pakistani officials who took on the murky network of terrorist groups and caught at least some of the actual kidnapers.

I found myself frequently choked up with admiration for her courage and determination, her intrepid role in handling a devastating situation in an utterly alien and often hostile realm—and for the simple and direct way she conveys her feelings.

In Mr. Lévy's book, he looks beyond the kidnapers who held Pearl captive and eventually slit his throat to the higher-ups, the figures in the background who inspired the kidnap and murder. And what he believes are the larger reasons why—why the kidnap turned to murder, for one thing.

His investigation of the kidnapping's organizer, Omar Sheikh, who is currently facing a death sentence in Pakistan (although Mr. Lévy quotes Omar making the chilling boast that the authorities who put him in jail will die before he does), and of Omar's connections to Pakistani intelligence and Al Qaeda figures—even possibly to 9/11—is the heart of the book. In this respect, it reminded me of one of the brilliant and gripping pre-World War II political thrillers by Eric Ambler, *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, which retraces the steps of a fascist assassin. Especially that line in *Dimitrios* in which Ambler remarks that in most political assassinations, the

important thing is "not who fired the shot, but who paid for the bullet."

In this case, it's not just "who paid for the bullet," but who decided to turn a kidnapping into a killing—and why. Mr. Lévy advances the story up to that climactic moment in a number of crucial ways, particularly in his portrait of English-born Muslim, Omar, the Dimitrios of the case—a figure who compresses within himself the violently contending forces of his era. He demonstrates persuasively that Omar had ties to factions within Pakistani intelligence (the I.S.I.) that may date back to his student days in the U.K., where he seemed on the outside to be a perfectly assimilated Englishman. More than that, he paints a disturbing portrait of Omar as a divided soul, a "laboratory" for the "clash of civilizations," between tolerance and religious fanaticism.

Mr. Lévy captures this divide in his book when he reports that Omar "played chess and read *Mein Kampf*." At one point during the C-Span interview, I asked him about Omar and *Mein Kampf*: "There are those who say 'Hitler is dead,' but among people like Omar—terrorists, jihadists like him—Hitler is spoken of with affection, right?"

True, Mr. Lévy said: According to the testimony of one of the men he kidnapped in India, Omar "was able to recite entire pages of *Mein Kampf* by heart." Mr. Lévy gave a world-weary, Gallic shrug: "Everybody has the poetry he deserves." And he went on to add that Omar was not alone in seeking to finish what Hitler started: "You have today, in Damascus, in Syria, in Libya, some people who think that the anti-Semitic message of the Nazis was a *good* message—and has to be completed."

Despite this, Mr. Lévy maintains that Daniel Pearl was not killed as a Jew, but as a journalist who knew too much. And crucial to this account is what Mr. Lévy describes as a change of plan in the midst of Pearl's captivity: the moment when the decision was made no longer to hold him for ransom, or prisoner exchange, or any other of the varying demands e-mailed from the chillingly kitsch address "kidnapperguy@hotmail.com."

The decision to murder Daniel Pearl, Mr. Lévy says, was one that grew out of certain circumstances that transpired *during* the course of his captivity.

Let's review the course of events that led to that terrible dénouement. In the months after Sept. 11, 2001, Daniel Pearl, *The Wall Street Journal*'s South Asian bureau chief based in Bombay, begins to dig into the jihadist culture that gave rise to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda, particularly in Pakistan. Prompted by the arrest of the British-born alleged "shoe-bomber" Richard Reid, Pearl and his wife Mariane set up housekeeping in Karachi, where he begins to seek out a shadowy figure known as Sheikh Gilani, who has been described as Richard Reid's "spiritual adviser."

Through a series of intermediaries, he finds himself meeting, in a shady place called the Hotel Akbar in Rawalpindi, with Omar, the jihadist who has links to many of the radical Islamist forces in Pakistani intelligence who are seeking to undermine the fragile Musharraf government, to end Pakistan's alliance with the U.S. in favor of a pro-Al Qaeda "Islamist" foreign policy, and most of all to place control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons—the so-called "Islamic bomb"—at the disposal of the worldwide Islamic crusade against the infidels of the West.

One of the turning points in Mr. Lévy's book is his decision to spend a night at the Hotel Akbar. To spend it in the same room, or at least on the same floor (the room was "occupied"), as the one in which Danny Pearl met his kidnapper and killer-to-be, Omar. It is that experience, that stay, and the sense he got from his observation of the other inhabitants of the hotel, that convinces him that he—and Danny before him—has stumbled onto a safe house for jihadists maintained by Pakistani intelligence. Which leads him to conclude that the Pearl kidnapping operation was itself masterminded—or at least supervised—by elements within Pakistani intelligence. That it was what he calls "a crime of state."

There are assumptions here which are not completely substantiated by anything more than impression and conjecture—the conjecture of an experienced reporter and observer of this world, yes, but still not necessarily proof of official involvement in the crime. There *is* other evidence of that, but let's set that aside for a moment.

By the time they meet at the Akbar, Omar has already, some evidence suggests, selected Danny for kidnapping. There is some testimony that he's boasted to a fellow jihadist about the prize catch he's found—a reporter, an American and a Jew. And Omar is experienced at political kidnappings: Back in 1994, he kidnapped four foreigners in India, and in 1999, after being convicted and locked up in an Indian prison for terrorist offenses, his allies among the jihadists (with the complicity of the I.S.I., according to Mr. Lévy) executed a plane hijacking that resulted in the exchange of the hijacked passengers for the release of Omar, who returned to Pakistan a free man and a hero to some.

So in January of 2002, Omar set about setting up Daniel Pearl. He manipulates Pearl's eagerness to get to Sheikh Gilani—an eagerness not misplaced, Mr. Lévy persuades us, revealing that Gilani's connections range from Osama bin Laden to D.C. sniper John Allen Muhammad (who spent time in one of Gilani's network of Muslim communities in America).

A rendezvous is set up in which Omar promises to take Pearl to Gilani. Pearl meets an escort outside a restaurant in Karachi. He's taken to a place on the outskirts of the city, and there, according to one of the participants, he is told there is no interview with Gilani, that he's been kidnapped.

It is the interrupted trajectory of the kidnapping during the next week that is the source of much dispute—and of Mr. Lévy's theory of the case. At first the kidnapers e-mail their demands out to the world from Internet cafés, along with photos of Danny Pearl with a gun to his head. At first they say they'll release him if conditions of the Al Qaeda prisoners in Guantánamo are improved, if Pakistan gets a long-promised shipment of F-16 jets from the U.S.—a confusing *mélange* of demands.

But then something happens. It's all a matter of speculation over when and why, but at a certain point, the kidnapers decide to drop the dance of demands and negotiation and just murder their captive. They do so in the most barbaric fashion—slitting his throat, half-severing his head. And then, according to trial testimony and a Lévy source, when there's a technical glitch in taping the kill, they reposition the head on the body and re-enact the throat-slitting. Later they parade before the camera with the severed head. There's something particularly repugnant about the mind-set capable of this demonic instant replay. But once they have the shot they want, they proceed to make a snuff video in which they intercut the throat-slitting with previously shot footage of Daniel Pearl intoning for the camera—it's not clear whether he's reading from a script or volunteering the information—"I come from ... a family of Zionists. My father's Jewish. My mother's Jewish. I'm Jewish." Cue the throat-slitting. And then they make the video available to the world. According to Mr. Lévy, one can buy it from vendors in front of certain mosques in Pakistan.

Why the change? For all the brave and intrepid reporting Mr. Lévy does, the most spectacular and frightening of his book's conclusions are about the reasons for the decision to end the kidnap and begin the kill. His theory is that Pearl's kidnapers either learned that Danny knew too much, or they revealed too much to him in the course of his captivity to allow him to live.

Revealed what, though? Here is where Mr. Lévy's account of his investigation, his very language, takes a peculiar turn. While there has been speculation and conjecture before, scrupulously identified as such, there has usually been *some* corroboration to back it up. Suddenly there is a wild swerve into the conditional, the subjunctive, the wishful supposition, uncorroborated speculation.

Consider some of the sentences in which Mr. Lévy seeks to convince us that Pearl was on the trail of the nexus that he, Lévy, discovered in *his* investigation of the crime: the nexus between Pakistani intelligence, Al Qaeda, Pakistani nuclear scientists and rogue states such as North Korea that portends the sum of all fears: a handover of the Islamic bomb—or, at the very least, lethal nuclear materials—to Al Qaeda terrorists. The genesis of the next 9/11. Mr. Lévy not only believes this was the subject of Pearl's investigation, the reason he sought the ill-fated interview with Sheikh Gilani that led to his kidnapping, but that *in the course of his captivity* he learned even more from his captors, learned too much to be allowed to live.

As I said, consider the structure of some of the sentences in that chapter:

—"One can *suppose* that Danny found out more about this 'ongoing process'" of nuclear transfer. (my italics)

—"One can *imagine* that he was establishing the list of ISI superior officers who ... were willing to close their eyes to a technology transfer to terrorist groups." (my italics)

—"Was Pearl getting ready to give exact locations for the warheads and launchers of the Islamabad arsenal—and thus to provide the proof that the information was within the reach of the first terrorist to come along?" (No evidence is presented that he was close to anything as specific as "exact locations.")

—"Did he have information that disproved the reassuring declarations that Musharraf [had] complete control over the nuclear chain of command ... ?" (Again, no evidence he did.)

—"Had he seen in Peshawar one of those MK 47 nuclear suitcases ... ?" (No evidence is presented that he had.)

—"One *can imagine*, too, that [he found other dark nuclear secrets] ... *wouldn't* Danny have been ... on the verge of presenting ... an account of the secret agreements" between Pakistan and North Korea? (my italics)

—"I can't see him *not* getting interested ... " (my italics)

—"In other words, *I bet* on a Daniel Pearl busy gathering proof of Pakistan's collusion between the leading rogue states and terrorist networks of the world ... on Pakistan's duplicitous game " (my italics)

—"I assert that what is taking form there, between Islamabad and Karachi, is a black hole compared to which Saddam Hussein's Baghdad was an obsolete weapons dump.

"The stench of apocalypse hangs over those cities; I am convinced that Danny smelled that stench."

The "stench of apocalypse." The religious language is not insignificant: Earlier, he spoke somewhat incongruously of Daniel Pearl's final moments of captivity as his "Golgotha," his "Calvary," virtually making him a Christ figure. Now, Mr. Lévy is painting a portrait of Danny Pearl as the Galahad who pierced the secret hiding place of terrorism's Unholy Grail. All of Mr. Lévy's speculations may be true, but that doesn't mean they were Danny Pearl's.

Not everyone buys his theory. Daniel Pearl's father, Judea Pearl, for instance, is said to believe in a more simple and direct explanation: His son was killed as an Al Qaeda retaliation for the recent U.S. rout of their Taliban protectors in Afghanistan. He was killed because he was an American and a Jew. And, in effect, they intended to kill him from the start. To make an example of him. Because they wanted to make that hideous snuff video as a weapon in their war to terrorize the West and the Jews.

Nor does *The Wall Street Journal*, for which Danny Pearl was reporting as he headed for his rendezvous with his killers, endorse Mr. Lévy's theory.

Mr. Lévy is undeterred. In the C-Span Book TV interview, I had the following exchange with Mr. Lévy: "*The Wall Street Journal*," I mentioned, "has said he was not investigating those leads" (into Pakistani-Al Qaeda nuclear links with North Korea).

"*The Wall Street Journal* did not say *exactly* that; it could *not* say exactly that," Mr. Lévy countered, citing a *Journal* story a month before the kidnapping which Pearl had co-written, a story covering concerns about the Pakistani nuclear scientists' connections to terrorist groups.

Here's the passage in *The New York Times* with *The Wall Street Journal's* statement—you decide: "[Mr. Lévy] nonetheless speculates that Mr. Pearl was pursuing evidence that Al Qaeda and North Korea were receiving nuclear secrets from Pakistani scientists with ties to the I.S.I. and fundamentalist groups Paul Steiger, managing editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, said the newspaper had no evidence that Mr. Pearl was investigating any such conspiracy. '*The Wall Street Journal* was not involved in any way in the preparation of this book,' he said in a statement responding to the book. 'However, we urge all the authorities involved in the investigation to review the book to see whether it provides any useful information which could help in the effort to bring Danny's killers to justice.'"

Despite the *Journal's* demurrer about the direction of Danny Pearl's reporting, Mr. Lévy told me he believes Pearl was the kind of reporter who wouldn't have stopped reporting even in captivity, that he *must* have learned something from his captors so explosive that they couldn't allow him to live. Whether his captors would *have* this information, whether they would have *given* it to their captive, is another question. Mr. Lévy does not offer much to substantiate such an interchange, but it can't be ruled out.

What is really going on here in Mr. Lévy's speculations about what Daniel Pearl learned? I believe that, wittingly or unwittingly, he is *reading back* into Daniel Pearl's investigation the results of his *own* later investigation. That he is crediting Pearl—justly or perhaps overgenerously—with his own insights. That he came to admire Daniel Pearl as a reporter, as a human being who believed in what he

believed in—in tolerance, in justice, in the reconciliation rather than the clash of civilizations; that he saw Daniel Pearl, one imagines, as a younger version of himself. That he came to admire Daniel Pearl so much that he gave him what he—at some level, conscious or unconscious—felt was a posthumous *gift*: the gift of his own investigative insights.

It's a lovely gesture, in a way, but is it the truth? I don't know; perhaps no one will ever know. Could there be another, less unselfish agenda behind this "gift"? Mr. Lévy has described himself as a "partisan" of India for three decades in its wars with Pakistan. His theory of Daniel Pearl's investigation paints Pakistan as the most dangerous rogue state in the world, practically calls the state itself guilty of the crime of Daniel Pearl's murder. He calls President Bush guilty of a great "historical miscalculation" in wasting time attacking Iraq while trying to maintain an alliance with evil Pakistan—the source, in Mr. Lévy's phrase, of "the stench of apocalypse." And he is frank about the help he received from Indian intelligence officials in coming to these conclusions.

But I don't think his tribute to Daniel Pearl comes from *that* kind of partisan pro-India, anti-Pakistan agenda. It's something that needs to be mentioned and assessed in any objective investigation of Mr. Lévy's investigation of the investigation. But I don't think it's central. He presents enough hard evidence from other sources to convince me of that.

One could also speculate that Mr. Lévy is using the notoriety of the Pearl death, using his own fame and his own investigation, as an opportunity to issue a heartfelt warning to the West of the apocalyptic developments brewing in Pakistan. He spoke with feeling, with genuine apprehension, during our dinner and on Book TV, of his belief that jihadists there are preparing a nuclear assault—the next 9/11.

But I think at the deepest level, his theories and conjectures about what Daniel Pearl learned and what he was killed for come from a genuine love for the man he describes as his "posthumous friend." A retroactive gift of the fruits of his own investigation to a man he admired as a fellow truth seeker. I don't know whether Mr. Lévy *has* the truth. I don't know whether Daniel Pearl died because he had the truth—because he sought and found the Unholy Grail, as Mr. Lévy contends. But Mr. Lévy's book, like Mariane Pearl's, is certainly a well-intentioned and well-deserved memorial to the seeker and the search.

 [back to top](#)

This column ran on page 1 in the 9/15/2003 edition of The New York Observer.



SUBSCRIBE TO THE NEW YORK OBSERVER



**HOME PAGE OF THE NEW YORK
OBSERVER**

**COPYRIGHT © 2003
THE NEW YORK OBSERVER
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED**