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THE ENGAGED INTELLECT

France's most famous philosopher turns gunshoe and investigates the murder of a U.S. journalist. His verdict: militant Islam is guilty and must be stopped

By JAMES GRAFF, PARIS

BERNARD-HENRI LEVY, FRANCE'S most irrepressibly public philosopher, says he's always been fighting the same adversary: "the will to purity," whether political or racial. In a long career of public causes, he has seen that ill will on the faces of Nazi sympathizers, the Soviet *nomenklatura*, Pakistani generals fighting against Bangladesh's independence, and Serb paramilitaries bent on ethnic cleansing in Bosnia. Now he sees it in militant Islam—which he believes is perilously close to acquiring nuclear arms.

Lévy's latest book was not prompted by political theory, but brute fact: the murder of kidnapped *Wall Street Journal* reporter

Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in January 2002. Lévy, 54, was in the office of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, on a mission for the French government, when he learned that Pearl was dead, and decided there and then to write about why. He does so with the flamboyant iconoclasm that has long made him a lightning rod in French public life. His new book, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?*, released in France to great fanfare at the end of last month, is his report on a year of remarkable research that took him from the urban wastelands of Karachi to

Malholland Drive in Los Angeles, from London to Dubai and Bosnia, and from fact to a kind of fiction. In retracing Pearl's last steps—the story that got him killed—Lévy concludes that the reporter's kidnapping, decapitation and dismemberment was essentially a "crime of state" that implicates parts of the Pakistani government. And it is in Pakistan, he believes, where al-Qaeda's "madmen of God" mesh with nuclear scientists and intelligence chiefs, that a battle must be joined that will dwarf the controversy over Iraq. "The tyranny of Saddam Hussein belongs to another century," Lévy says. "The debate of the next century will

PEARL WAS A FRIEND OF THE UNCOUNTED,

be over militant Islam."

His guide into this netherworld was Pearl, whom he calls a "posthumous friend" and to whom he ascribes many of his own characteristics: "A Jew of the left, a progressive ... a friend of the uncoun- ted, the universal orphan, the disinherited." Pearl, Lévy says, was a firm believer in the possibility of a moderate Islam, one that Lévy himself sees in a battle to the death with radical believers from al-Qaeda. He follows the journalist as he pursues a shadowy figure named Mubarak Ali Shah Gilani, a former Brooklyn-based imam whom Lévy calls a "guru" of bin Laden's. He meets Pearl's contacts, spends time in the unheated, two-room hovel where Pearl was held and murdered nine days after his kidnapping, "I decided the best way to tell this story was step by step, even if that meant contradictions," he says during an interview in the office of the grand Left Bank apartment he shares with his wife, the actress and singer Arielle Dombasle. Beside his couch sits a large hollow bronze head of Lenin, its hinged temples left open to show nothing inside, as if to demonstrate Lévy's keen distaste for dogma of whatever kind. "In an obscure affair like this one, there is no final truth," he says. "It was important that the author, who was searching and sometime erring, be present."

As an admirer of Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, Lévy blurs the line between fact and fiction, as he did with his 1988 book *The Last Days of Charles Baudelaire*. "Facts when facts are known, or it is possible to know them; imagination when facts are not available," he says of his method. Lévy says he only resorted to pure conjecture two or three times in the book, but it is up to the reader to discern those moments. His harrowing account of Pearl's decapitation by a Yemeni henchman includes unknowable embellishments: "As the Yemeni killer grabs and tears the collar of his shirt, he thinks of other hands. Of caresses. Of games from his boyhood." Lévy also conjures up the thoughts of the admitted and since convicted ringleader, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, on the restless night before he sprung his trap on Pearl. Sheikh, Lévy finds, is a "perfect Englishman" of Pakistani origin, a chess player and champion arm wrestler, a brilliant student at the London School of Economics who embraced radical Islam during a stint in Bosnia in the early 1990s. Lévy knows

from court testimony that Sheikh shaved his beard and bought Gucci shoes, a Breitling watch and Ray-Ban sunglasses to disguise himself before meeting Pearl. But Lévy can only imagine his thoughts about Pearl's face: "rather open for a Jew; rather clever for an American; bizarrely curious."

The fictionalized scenes help the book read like a novel, but Lévy doesn't need them to reach his conclusion: that Pearl's murder was ordered—precisely by whom he admits he doesn't know—because "he knew too much" that linked top Pakistani bombmakers and intelligence chiefs to al-Qaeda. That claim grows out of an accretion of detail that seems plausible but is hardly airtight: he cites an unnamed policeman who contends that Sheikh secretly surrendered to Pakistan's Inter-services Intelligence Agency (ISI) on May 5, 2002,

wrong target." Washington's continued coddling of the Islamabad government should end, he believes; it is to Pakistan that arms inspectors should be dispatched to head off any technological transfer from the government to radical Islamic groups.

Back from his inquiries with a book on the stands, Lévy is once again encoined in unabashed glamour: on the Left Bank. He and Dombasle also own a palace in Marrakech, purchased from the actor Alain Delon. Universally known in France as BHL, he is not shy about putting himself in any available limelight: from *Vanity Fair* and *Paris Match* to the pop-culture talk show *Everybody's Talking About It*. BHL has learned the lessons of Dubya: pile it on from the first day. Huss, of the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné*: "Hit the masses with shock and awe."



> **THE INQUIRER:** Prompted by the murder of Daniel Pearl, right, Lévy traveled widely to expose the role of Islamic militants in Pearl's death. Lévy claims that Pearl—"a refutation of his killers' view of a clash of civilizations"—was murdered before he could reveal links between al-Qaeda and Pakistani intelligence chiefs

Fighting "Purity"

From Bosnia to Afghanistan, Lévy has sought to halt the spread of extremism

< **THE ENVOY:** At the request of French President Jacques Chirac, Lévy traveled to Afghanistan in February 2002 to gauge the needs of the Afghan people and plot France's role in rebuilding the country following the fall of the Taliban

then spent a week in a safe house before allowing himself to be publicly "arrested" by police on May 12. He speculates that one reason Pearl was marked for death was that he had traced the connections of ex-ISI boss Hamid Gul and nuclear scientist Bashiruddin Mahmood to al-Qaeda. Asad Hayauddin, spokesman for the Pakistani embassy in Washington, insists that "there is no complicity between any official department of Pakistan and Pearl's murderers" and that the very idea is "beyond belief." A Pakistani court sentenced Sheikh to death by hanging and three accomplices to 25 years imprisonment in the case last July; those judgments have been appealed.

Given the troubling alliances he has divined in Pakistan, Lévy believes the Western world is arguing about the wrong issues and missing its main adversary. "The war in Iraq was morally justified, but politically inept," he says. "America chose the

Lévy claims he couldn't care less about his image; only the books. He defends French intellectuals for being right when governments were wrong: in the 1930s against fascism, in the 1950s against France's colonial presence in Algeria, in the 1970s against the Soviet Union, in the 1990s against the Serbs in Bosnia. "It's always easier to be a fascist than a democrat," he says. "Daniel Pearl was killed because he was a living refutation of his killers' view of a clash of civilizations: he was a Jew curious about Islamic culture who had moved beyond condemnation. In this Manichaean epoch, some people can't stand such figures and want to eliminate them." Lévy is devoted to keeping Pearl's legacy of understanding alive, but suggests that it won't happen until the West takes a fuller measure of the dangers that killed him.