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## WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT A DEAD TERRORIST?

Review by Paul Lewis

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Jeff Dunham with his "absurdly unthreatening" terrorist puppet.

### JEFF DUNHAM: SPARK OF INSANITY Image Entertainment, 2007

What can we make of a comic video clip that is accessed over 28 million times in four months? Following the broadcast of Jeff Dunham's "Achmed, the Dead Terrorist" on Comedy Central last fall, it was released as part of the "Spark of Insanity" DVD, posted on YouTube, and viewed this many times between September 29, 2007 and the end of January 2008. Not only viewed but commented on by about 39,000 visitors to the site. While it would take a team of critics to read through all the responses, a brief review suggests that most are appreciative: "lol" appears frequently as do favorite quotes from the act.

Achmed's absurdly unthreatening appearance suggests that many viewers recommend the clip because it both amuses and soothes. Little more than a redecorated Halloween skeleton, Achmed is dummy short and decked out with a thin, long beard and turban made out of underpants. His remarkably expressive but also hilarious bug eyes alternate between staring fiercely and darting back and forth to emphasize a shift in his focus. His bushy eyebrows move up and down as he issues his commands. And his arms and legs dangle and shake loosely as his torso moves. Asked early on to say what kind of terrorist he is, the puppet replies, "A terrifying terrorist." But all of his attempts to scare the "infields" fall flat, and his repeated exclamations of "Silence, I kill [keel] you" become more shrill and receive louder laughter from the studio audience with each iteration.

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Insecure enough to ask Dunham whether he is frightened yet, Achmed is, then, a pathetically ineffective image of radical Jihadism. A suicide bomber whose fuse went off in four seconds rather than thirty minutes, he is confused about whether he is dead or alive. "I need some ligaments," he admits as Dunham lifts him up and tries to adjust his rattling bones, but he also says, "I feel fine. It's a flesh wound." Finally convinced that he is dead, Achmed eyes the audience, looking for his seventy-two virgins and complaining that many of them seem to be "ugly ass guys." "If this is paradise," he whines, "I've been screwed."

As the act goes on, Achmed starts to tell jokes, some not particularly PC, about Clay Aiken, Lindsay Lohan, Jews and Catholic priests—all the while laughing along with the audience. "I told a joke," he says triumphantly. After a particularly offensive wisecrack, he exclaims, "I'm killing, so to speak," an expression that highlights his utter harmlessness.

Though it's entertaining a large number of Americans, the act is far from universal in its appeal. As a richly elaborated ethnic joke, Dunham's character could easily offend traditional and fundamentalist Muslims. With his scrawny beard and underpants-turban, Achmed is a clattering caricature. And, as if this weren't enough, in expressing his frustration, the puppet makes irreverent comments like "God damn it. Oh, oh. I mean Allah damn it."

The comic appeal in the United States of this diminutive terrorist whose greatest threat is an offensive joke suggests how much we have relaxed since the period immediately after 9/11. In the aftermath of the attacks, following a week or two in which joking seemed inappropriate to many, song and cartoon parodies directed at Osama bin Laden and the Taliban began to appear online, supplanting the virulent strain of anti-Bush satire in circulation pre-9/11.

The work of Ron Piechota—an amateur musician and songwriter who was inspired by a radio station's call for songs to put on a CD honoring twin tower survivors—is typical. An instant Internet hit, Piechota's "Fifty Ways to Kill Bin Laden" rewrote the Paul Simon classic around violent images of the enemy leader's termination ("Lop off his face, Grace.... Pop open his heart with a dart.... Just rip off his balls, Paul"), while his version of a Christmas song had "Bin Laden's head roasting on an open fire."

The shift from this angry and frightened first wave of dead-terrorist humor to the milder Dunham routine invites two interpretations, each connected to a political stance at the center of the current election cycle. Republicans, whose stock-in-trade has been ginning up fear (think of those pre-Election Day terror alerts), could say that the popularity of the Achmed clip suggests that we are less anxious and militant than we need to be. By reducing the image of the terrorist bomber to that of a limp, leering, almost charming puppet, the act can be seen as appealing to a desire for distraction and denial.

And yet, as the Bush administration has demonstrated, by narrowing options to fight or flight, war or surrender, too much fear can lead to poor decision-making. To the extent that "Achmed, the Dead Terrorist" helps us relax, one could argue, it contributes to exactly what we have long needed: a mood in which a more balanced approach—including an emphasis on international law enforcement, cooperation with allies, domestic security, and global outreach—can gain support. There was a time when a president, unlike the current "decider," insisted that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Perhaps Achmed's popularity and President Bush's low approval ratings are part of the same shift in public opinion.

*Paul Lewis, the author of Cracking Up: American Humor in a Time of Conflict, writes about humor for Tikkun.*

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2342 Shattuck Avenue, #1200  
Berkeley, CA 94704  
510-644-1200  
Fax 510-644-1255