Who is the “Real” John Walker Lindh?

On October 4, 2002, John Walker Lindh, the “American Taliban,” was sentenced to 20 years in prison without possibility of parole in exchange for pleading guilty to two counts of “supplying services to the Taliban.” Lindh, now 21, attended militant training camps in Afghanistan and later joined the Taliban’s fight against the Northern Alliance, America’s ally.

His lawyers and family claimed that Lindh was a lonely young man on a spiritual quest who got in over his head when he went to the Middle East. In his mid-teens he became a Muslim, calling himself Suleyman al-Lindh. He traveled to Yemen, where he became convinced that a proper Muslim should train for a military jihad (holy war) to create a pure Islamic state. Eventually he made his way to Pakistan and then Afghanistan, where he fell in with the Taliban, who knew him as Abdul Hamid. During the U.S. war in Afghanistan following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the Americans captured him. In prison, he remains a faithful Muslim, praying toward Mecca five times a day.

Like the story that opens this chapter—of Kathleen Ann Soliah, who became Sara Jane Olson—the case of John Walker Lindh’s transformation into Abdul Hamid raises many questions about the nature of personality. Did Lindh’s personality change, or just the circumstances of his life?

A psychodynamic theorist would look for unconscious motives in Lindh’s rejection of his family and embrace of a radically different culture. Was his anger at the American way of life a displacement of his anger toward his parents (who had divorced) or toward other authority figures, as Olson’s might have been? Was his attraction to a rigidly all-male environment an unconscious reflection of homosexual feelings? (Time magazine reported that a Pakistani mentor had claimed to have had a sexual relationship with the young man, a claim he later denied making.)

Psychologists taking a biological view of personality would point out that young people in their late teens—the period of Lindh’s restless travels to the Middle East—are as a group the most neurotic (emotionally negative), the least agreeable and conscientious, and the most open to new experience (page 46). However, other traits characterizing this young man, such as the likely one of introversion, probably remained stable over the years.

Psychologists who take a learning perspective would say that when people are in a situation in which aggressive behavior is rewarded—with attention, excitement, comradeship, and feelings of power—they may become political revolutionaries, as Olson did, or religious “warriors,” as Lindh did. For Lindh, who by all accounts felt lonely and alienated from his peers in America, finding a group of welcoming, like-minded peers in the Middle East must have been exhilarating. A social-cognitive learning theorist would add that just as the situation rewarded certain traits and attitudes in Lindh, his own traits and attitudes would have attracted him to that situation to begin with (page 49).

Cultural psychologists might observe that although Lindh tried hard to shed his identity as an American, his behavior in fact reflects a deeply ingrained American cultural value: individualism. Lindh (and his parents) took for granted his right to seek spiritual fulfillment in any way he chose, even when such a quest took him away from his family and meant placing his own goals and wishes above those of his parents.

Finally, humanist psychologists might ask us to see the world through Lindh’s eyes instead of through our own. They would remind us to be cautious about forming impressions based solely on what we hear others say about him. And they might point out that whatever the contributing factors to his personality, ultimately his choices and his actions were governed by his free will.

References