

The Revival of the Umayyads

the banu umayya were one of the clans of the quraysh in makkah. As noted before, they were the traditional enemies of the Banu Hashim – another clan of the Quraysh. When Muhammad, a member of the clan of Banu Hashim – declared that he was the Apostle of God, and called upon the Arabs to abandon their idolatry, and to believe in One God, the Umayyads opposed him, and they fought against him for twenty years.

But they failed. Their long and bitter struggle against Muhammad and Islam came to a humiliating end in A.D. 630 when he conquered Makkah. They had to concede defeat, and they “accepted” Islam.

The victory of Islam, however, kindled new fires of hatred in the hearts of the Banu Umayya against its guardians – Muhammad and Ali, as noted in an earlier chapter. They were discreet enough to conceal their hatred of Muhammad but they made no attempt to conceal their hatred of Ali. It was Ali who had destroyed not only the visible emblems of the religion of the Umayyads but also had struck the death blow to their privileges. But they soon showed that they might be down but they were not out.

They, therefore, marked time for thirty years – until A.D. 661 – when they were, at last, able to capture the long-sought prize – the caliphate of the Muslims. The Banu Umayya were the most rabid of all the enemies of Islam. Their success in capturing the caliphate of the Muslims, therefore, has evoked much surprise among historians. Following are the observations of some of them on this paradox in the history of the Muslims.

Edward Gibbon

The persecutors of Mohammed usurped the inheritance of his children; and the champions of idolatry became the supreme heads of his religion and empire. The opposition of Abu Sophian had been fierce and obstinate; his conversion was tardy and reluctant; his new faith was fortified by necessity and interest; he served, he fought, perhaps he believed; and the sins of the time of ignorance were expiated by the recent merits of the family of Ommayyah.

Muawiya, the son of Abu Sophian, and of the cruel Hinda, was dignified in his early youth with the office or title of the secretary of the Prophet; the judgment of Omar entrusted him with the government of Syria; and he administered that province above forty years, either in a subordinate or supreme rank. The sacred duty of pursuing the assassins of Othman was the engine and pretense of his ambition. (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

E. A. Freeman

The caliphate might conceivably be allotted to the worthiest of the faithful; it might conceivably be hereditary in the family of the apostle; but Mohammed could never have imagined that it would become hereditary in the family of his bitterest enemies. (*History of the Saracens*)

R. A. Nicholson

When the Meccan aristocrats accepted Islam, they only yielded to the inevitable. They were now to have an opportunity to revenging themselves. Uthman b. Affan, who succeeded Umar as Caliph, belonged to a distinguished Meccan family, the Umayyads or descendants of Umayya, which had always taken a leading part in the opposition to Mohammed, though Uthman himself was among the Prophet's first disciples. He was a pious, well-meaning old man – an easy tool in the hands of his ambitious kinsfolk.

They soon climbed into all the most lucrative and important offices and lived on the fat of the land, while too often their ungodly behavior gave point to the question whether these converts of the eleventh hour were not still heathens at heart. Other causes contributed to excite a general discontent. The rapid growth of luxury and immorality in the Holy Cities as well as in the new settlements was an eyesore to the devout Moslems.

The true Islamic aristocracy, the Companions of the Prophet, headed by Ali, Talha and Zubayr, strove to undermine the rival nobility which threatened them with destruction. The factious soldiery were ripe for revolt against Umayyad arrogance and greed. Rebellion broke out, and finally, the aged caliph, after enduring a siege of seven weeks, was murdered in his own house. (*A Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 190, 1969)

Nicholson has erred in stating that Ali, Talha and Zubayr strove to undermine the Umayyads who threatened them with destruction. Ali did not strive to undermine the Umayyads though Talha and Zubayr strove to undermine Uthman, and they were successful in their efforts. On their part, the Umayyads threatened Ali – but they did not threaten Talha and Zubayr – with destruction. In fact, Talha, Zubayr and Ayesha fought the battle of Basra (the battle of the Camel) against Ali, with the support of the Umayyads.

Philip K. Hitti

Of the eight (Umayyad) caliphs in the period (715–750) two only were worthy of the heritage generated

by Muawiya and enriched by Abd-al-Malik and al-Walid. The remaining six, three of whom were sons of slave mothers, were incompetent, some dissolute if not degenerate.

The brother-successor of al-Walid was more interested in drinking, hunting, and listening to song and music than in conducting state affairs. His son excelled the father. He spent more time in his pleasure houses in the desert, where their ruins are still visible, than in the capital. He is said to have indulged himself in swimming in a pool of wine and gulping enough of it to lower its surface. More than an incorrigible libertine, this caliph once committed an act of unusual sacrilege; making a target of Koran copy for the arrows of his bow.

Clearly, the sudden increase of wealth, the super-abundance of slaves and concubines, the multiplied facilities for indulgence in luxury, and other characteristic vices of an affluent urban civilization – against which sons of the desert had developed no measure of immunity – were beginning to sap Arab vitality.

(Capital Cities of Arab Islam, pp. 78–79, 1973)

Arnold J. Toynbee

One of the greatest ironies of all history is the fate of the house that Mohammed built. Mohammed had a great fall. The unsuccessful prophet succumbed to the temptation to succeed as a statesman and a strategist.

Yet, in seeking and winning worldly success in Medina, Mohammed was unwittingly working for his adversaries in Mecca. When it came to a competition in Realpolitik, the merchant princes of Mecca were more than a match for their queer fellow-townsman, and far more than a match for Mohammed's gallant but incompetent cousin and son-in-law, Ali. After Mohammed had successfully cut Mecca's trade route to Syria, the Meccans capitulated on the easy terms that the sentimental Meccan exile offered them; but in outwardly submitting to Mohammed and to Islam, the Beni Umayya had their tongues in their cheeks. They had no intention of being permanently deposed from power.

Now that they had failed first to suppress Islam and then to repel it, their only alternative was to run away with it after capturing it by the stratagem of a nominal conversion. They bided their time till in Ali they found their victim and in Muawiya their man of destiny.

Muawiya was one of the greatest masters, known to history, of the artful, patient type of statesmanship. He ranks with Augustus, Philip of Macedon, Liu Pang, and Cavour. Poor Ali was utterly outmaneuvered by him. Within twenty-nine years of Mohammed's death, the state that Mohammed had founded, and that his successors had swiftly expanded into a vast empire, became the undisputed spoil of Muawiya the son of Hind: that redoubtable Meccan merchant-princess who had been Mohammed's bitterest enemy. Unlike Mohammed, Muawiya founded a dynasty – the House of Umayyah – which lasted for 90 years and ruled the world from Multan and Tashqand to Aden, and from Aden to Gibraltar and Narbonne.

Muawiya and his successors, being, unrepentant pagans in all but name (save only for one sincere Muslim, the Caliph Umar II), they went to the limits of discretion in flouting Islam by indulging in the worst abominations of civilization. They were wine-bibbers, and they decorated their palaces with mosaics and paintings in the Hellenistic style that had been endemic in Syria for the last 1000 years.

They reveled in breaking the Islamic taboo on the representation of living forms. They employed Christian artists who were adepts in this line; and they were not content with representation of animals and men. Their favorite orders were for pictures of women – preferably naked, or at least naked down to the waist.

How did the Umayyads manage to get away with this indecency and impiety for as long as 90 years? When Jezebel and Ahab flouted the orthodox worship of Yahwah, retribution was swift. So, how did the Umayyads contrive to fare so much better than the House of Omri? One may not like or admire the Umayyads, but their adroitness does command our reluctant respect, and one cannot help being grateful for the works of art that they have bequeathed to us. (*East to West – A Journey Round the World, 1958. pp. 214-215 – The Shocking Umayyads*)

Toynbee may claim to be a great historian but the claim does not necessarily make his opinions, which he has expressed so pontifically, in the foregoing excerpt, either correct or even intelligent. By affecting to sneer at Muhammad and Ali, he is only betraying his own astigmatism, so characteristic of the 19th century British missionaries in the colonies. His opinions are more in the nature of a diatribe or a polemic, not without the occasional touch of the ridiculous, than any objective and critical analysis of facts.

The preliminary remarks are quite arresting. Toynbee says “one of the greatest ironies of all history is the fate of the house that Mohammed built. Mohammed had a great fall.” The “irony” must have had causes but Toynbee does not say what they were. He is taking into account only the effects.

Toynbee is a product of the modern, Western, materialistic, mechanistic culture, and Muslims may overlook his inability to grasp the ethos of Islam. The success of Islam was very much predicated on the classical idea (the idea of Prophet Abraham) of sacrifice. Muhammad and Ali sacrificed not only their material wealth but also sacrificed many valuable lives to make Islam viable.

When, after their death, Islam called for fresh sacrifices, their children were ready to offer them. The grandchildren of Muhammad and the children of Ali sacrificed their lives in Kerbala for the ideals which both of them had striven to make immortal.

The sacrifices made by Muhammad, Ali and their children, are the triumph and the glory of Islam but Toynbee equates them with “irony.”

Muhammad did not have a “fall” – great or small – even though Toynbee might wish that he had one.

Toynbee called Muhammad an “unsuccessful prophet” who “succumbed to the temptation to succeed as a statesman.” How was he “unsuccessful”? His duty was to deliver God’s last message to mankind, and he delivered it, and it was accepted in all parts of the Arabian peninsula within his lifetime. Nor did he succumb to the temptation to *become* a statesman. He *was* a statesman. His mission was comprehensive, and one of his duties as God’s messenger was to educate the Muslims in the principles of political organization. This he did in Medina.

Muhammad was not in “competition” with the pagans or the crypto-pagans of Makkah. He came to this world to promulgate the laws of the Kingdom of Heaven, and not to “compete” with anyone, least of all with the Makkan usurers and the worshippers of idols. To insinuate that he was competing with the Umayyads, is the most ludicrous of all the opinions of Toynbee.

The idolaters of Makkah were not “more than a match” either for Muhammad or for Ali, and Ali was not “incompetent,” and he was not “outmaneuvered” by Muawiya. Toynbee is incapable of “judging” them from the viewpoint of the ethos of Islam. His “Realpolitik” could have held no interest for Muhammad and Ali. His deductions are inevitably influenced by his culture – the opportunistic, secular culture of the modern West. He is ignorant of the culture of Qur’an, and Qur’an spurns “Realpolitik.”

Muhammad and Ali were demonstrating to the world that in politics no less than in religion, ends do not justify the means. In Islam, the means themselves become the ends. The means which their enemies – the Umayyads – employed to achieve their ends, had built-in guarantees of “success.”

But Muhammad and Ali did not judge success or failure by the same standards as the Umayyads did or as Toynbee does. To Muhammad and Ali, success was only the winning of the pleasure of God, and failure was only the forfeiting of that pleasure. Judging by this standard, both of them were highly successful. May God bless them and their children forever and forever.

Toynbee further says that the Umayyads had no intention of being permanently deposed from power.

Did the intentions of the Umayyads mean anything in A.D.630 when Muhammad conquered Makkah? He had destroyed their polytheism and economic and political power, and Ali had destroyed their military power. They were prostrate at his feet, and they would have remained prostrate forever if Abu Bakr and Umar had not picked them up, and had not restored economic and political power to them. Suddenly, what had seemed impossible under Muhammad, looked inevitable under Abu Bakr and Umar. It were both of them who made the empire of the Muslims “the undisputed spoil of Muawiya the son of Hind.”

The admiration, respect and gratitude which Toynbee “cannot help” giving to the Umayyads, is perfectly understandable. He is their philosophical ally. Both of them are linked together in their common hostility to Islam and to its guardians, Muhammad and Ali.

Toynbee’s “verdict” on Muhammad and Ali, is a classic of the solemn nonsense that famous scholars are capable of producing.

Both Hitti and Toynbee have drawn a portrait of some of the khalifas – the successors of the Prophet of Islam – that the Banu Umayya produced. The fact that the Muslim *umma* was saddled with such khalifas, is truly “one of the greatest ironies of all history.” But does the irony have an explanation?

It has. This book is an attempt to explain that irony.

The Banu Umayya had enjoyed some local importance in Makkah as guardians of the pantheon of idols and as wealthy usurers. When Muhammad conquered Makkah, he put an end to their idolatry and to their usury, and they went into eclipse.

But the eclipse didn't last long. It lasted only from the conquest of Makkah by Muhammad in February 630 to his death in June 632. Just as the “sun” of Prophethood sank under the horizon, the “star” of the Umayyads rose above it.

It will not be correct to pinpoint the revival of the Banu Umayya from the date Uthman became khalifa nor even from the date Muawiya seized the khilafat but from June 8, 632, the date of the death of Muhammad Mustafa, the Prophet of Islam.

What is the correlation between the death of Muhammad and the revival of the Banu Umayya?

As noted above, Muhammad was responsible for the eclipse of the Banu Umayya. But as soon as he died, they bounced back from their eclipse, though not on their own power. Abu Bakr and Umar, the new rulers of the government Muhammad had founded, lifted the Banu Umayya from their eclipse and obscurity, and planted them as a force on the political landscape of Islam.

The Banu Umayya rose with a grim resolution – to seek retaliation from Muhammad and Ali and/or their children.

The acceptance of Islam by the Banu Umayya, after their failure to destroy it, was only proof of their resiliency. They realized that their frontal attacks on Islam had all failed, and that they had to try something unconventional. They did. Their new strategy was to enter the ranks of the faithful, disguised as Muslims; to watch the events from within, and then to strike at Islam when the opportune moment presented itself, as noted in an earlier chapter.

The opportune moment came after the death of Muhammad.

Notice has already been taken of the offer of Abu Sufyan, the chief of the clan of Banu Umayya, to Ali, to fill the streets of Medina with infantry and cavalry, ready and willing to die at his (Ali's) command, if he would challenge the government of Saqifa.

Abu Sufyan had struck a deadly blow at Islam but he missed once again. He had tried to ingratiate himself with Ali, the Guardian of Islam, but had failed. The latter was alert as ever. But Abu Sufyan was not fazed by his failure. It occurred to him that if he tried to ingratiate himself with the leaders of the

Saqifa government, he might find them more responsive than Ali. He did and they were!

During the caliphate of their patrons, Abu Bakr and Umar, the Banu Umayya quietly consolidated their position. They didn't try to rock the boat and make waves. Time was not ripe yet for them to make an attempt at storming the stage of Islam.

They, therefore, kept a low profile. But when Uthman became khalifa, they felt that the time had come for them to cast off their caution and restraint, and they fell upon the empire like vultures, ready to devour everything. Uthman dismissed all the governors of the provinces who had been appointed by Abu Bakr and Umar, and filled the vacancies with members of his own family and clan. He also gave the Umayyads the most fertile lands and pastures as their estate, and bestowed upon them all the gold and silver in the public treasury.

In 656 Ali took the reins of the government in his hands. He dismissed all the governors who were plundering the country, and he ordered the Umayyads to restore to the State all the lands, fiefs, estates and pastures which they had appropriated illegally.

But the Umayyads had no intention of giving up anything. They made it clear that they would hang on, as long as possible, to their former positions, their perquisites and their privileges, and if Ali still wanted them, he would have to take them by force of arms.

Ali knew it that he would meet massive resistance if he tried to distribute wealth equitably. But he put his duty toward God and the Muslim umma ahead of the wishes or the resentments of the privileged classes in the Dar-ul-Islam. He had no choice in the matter, and he had to destroy the bastions of privilege regardless of consequences. In this matter, there was absolutely no room for compromise.

President Jimmy Carter

This is no job for the faint-hearted. It will be met with violent opposition from those who now enjoy a special privilege, those who prefer to work in the dark, or those whose private fiefdoms are threatened. (*Why Not the Best? p. 148, 1975*)

A showdown was inevitable.

Talha and Zubayr were out of the military equation, and Ali's new confrontation was with the old adversaries – the Umayyads – the ideological saboteurs of Islam. This confrontation was proof of Umar's success in polarizing the Arabs between the many enemies and the few friends of the House of Muhammad, the Messenger of God.

The challenge of the Umayyads to Ali was a manifestation of the reaction of paganism against Islam. For a long time, the hatred of the Banu Umayya against Islam and the Banu Hashim had smoldered like embers but with the accession of Ali to the throne of caliphate, it had turned into roaring flames, threatening to burn down, in the words of Toynbee, “the house that Mohammed built.”

After the battle of Basra (the battle of the Camel), all members of the clan of Banu Umayya had rallied behind Muawiya, the governor of Syria. He was their leader, and he was the leader of the pagan reaction against Islam. In his war against Ali, he was aided and abetted by Amr bin Aas. Amr was a non-Umayyad but an identity of interests prompted his alignment with Muawiya.

Following is a brief introduction to the antecedents of Muawiya and Amr bin Aas. It will acquaint the reader with the mainsprings of their opposition to Ali.

Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan

Muawiya was the son of Hinda and Abu Sufyan. Abu Sufyan was Hinda's third husband. She was one of the bitterest enemies of Islam, its Prophet and his family. In the battle of Badr, her father, Utba, was killed by Hamza. Her eldest son, Hanzala; her brother, Walid; and her uncle, Shaiba; were killed by Ali.

Thereupon, she vowed that she would drink their blood (M. Shibli in *Sirat-un-Nabi*, vol. I, page 370, 4th printing, 1976, Azamgarh, India). In the battle of Uhud, she cut open the abdomen of Hamza, took out his liver, and chewed it up, and ever-since became "famous" in history as "the liver-eater."

If Muawiya was the son of Hinda, the liver-eater of Uhud, he was also the father of Yazid, the butcher of Kerbala, who let loose terror upon and massacred the younger grandson and great-grandchildren of Muhammad. One of the companions of the Prophet who took the oath of allegiance to Yazid, was Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab. He was a "ringside" spectator of that massacre in Kerbala in which the pages of the history of Islam were stained with the most sacrosanct blood in all creation.

Yazid was perky with a long and "distinguished" pedigree of hostility to the Banu Hashim – the Guardians of Islam.

When the Prophet conquered Makkah in 630, Abu Sufyan, Hinda, their sons, Yazid and Muawiya, and other members of the Banu Umayya, accepted Islam. Jalal-ud-Din Suyuti writes on page 135 of his book, *History of the Caliphs*:

"Muawiya accepted Islam with his father, Abu Sufyan on the day Makkah was conquered. They were present in the battle of Hunayn, and they were among the *muallafatul-qulub*."

Some historians say that after the conquest of Makkah, the Prophet appointed Muawiya as one of his scribes. As a scribe, his duty, perhaps, was to write letters of the Prophet.

Both in Makkah and in Medina, the Prophet had made each Muslim a "brother" of another Muslim. He, therefore, gave Muawiya also a "brother."

Muhammad ibn Ishaq

The Apostle established brotherhood between Mu'awiya b. Abu Sufyan and al-Hutat. The Apostle did this between a number of his companions, e.g., between Abu Bakr and Umar; Uthman and Abdur Rahman bin Auf; Talha b. Ubaydullah and Zubayr b. Awwam; Abu Dharr al-Ghiffari and al-Miqdad b. Amr al-Bahrani; and Muawiya b. Abu Sufyan and al-Hutat b. Yazid al-Mujashi'i. Al-Hutat died in the presence of Muawiya during his caliphate and by virtue of his brotherhood, Mu'awiya took what he left as his heir. Al-Farazdaq said to Mu'awiya:

“Your father and my uncle, O Muawiya, left an inheritance,

So that his next of kin might inherit it.

But how come you to devour the estate of al-Hutat

When the solid estate of Harb was melting in your hand?” (*The Life of the Messenger of God*)

As noted before, Abu Bakr had appointed Yazid bin Abu Sufyan, as one of his generals in the Syrian campaign. Syria was conquered after the death of Abu Bakr – in the caliphate of Umar. He appointed Yazid the first governor of Syria. In 639, however, plague broke out in Syria and Palestine, and killed thousands of people, among them Yazid bin Abu Sufyan and Abu Ubaida ibn al-Jarrah. In Yazid's vacancy, Umar appointed his (Yazid's) younger brother, Muawiya, as the new governor.

Sir John Glubb

There was a disastrous famine in the Hijaz in 639. In addition to the famine, the year 639 witnessed an outbreak of bubonic plague in Syria and Palestine. Many Arabs died, until great numbers sought refuge in the desert from the plague-infested cities.

Before this migration to the desert could be completed, however, the commander-in-chief, Abu Ubaida, was himself struck down and died. He was buried in the Jordan valley. Yezeed ibn Abu Sofian, who had played a distinguished part as a column commander throughout the Syrian campaign, was also a victim.

The indefatigable khalif decided himself to visit Syria in order to reorganize the administration after the loss of so many leaders. Indeed so fatal had been the plague among the Arabs, 25,000 of whom are said to have died, that it was feared the Byzantine might seize the opportunity to attempt the re-conquest of Syria.

In place of Abu Ubaida and Yezeed ibn Abu Sofian, Muawiya ibn Abu Sofian, was appointed governor of Syria. (*The Great Arab Conquests, p. 214, 1967*)

Muawiya was Umar's governor in Syria during the rest of his caliphate. When Uthman succeeded Umar as khalifa, he too confirmed him (Muawiya) as his governor. Muawiya adopted a policy of religious

tolerance vis-à-vis the Christians in Syria, and he carefully and skillfully cultivated the Syrians so that he became very popular with them.

Francesco Gabrieli

The son of Abu Sufyan had already been put by Omar in the government of Syria, the conquest of which he had participated in under the orders of his older brother, Yazid. Twenty years of sapient rule had won him the attachment of the Arab element stationed there. (*The Arabs, A Compact History*, p. 74, 1963)

Muawiya made Syria impregnable, and he made himself invulnerable during the caliphate of his patrons, Umar and Uthman.

E. A. Belyaev

While he was still only viceroy of Syria, Muawiya created a strong material base for himself, his kin and his military following, becoming a very big landlord by large-scale seizure of land. The Umayyad Caliph Muawiya rested on far stronger economic foundations and possessed more trustworthy armed forces than his political opponents.

He had become the all-powerful permanent viceroy of the rich and civilized Syria as early as the days of Omar, and having spent more than twenty years in this important post, became the recognized leader of Arab tribal aristocracy in Syria. (*Arabs, Islam and the Arab Caliphate in the Early Middle Ages*, 1969)

It was in this manner that Muawiya, the political phoenix of the Arabs, rose from the ashes of a failed effort to restore a pagan past, to become, first the arch-rival of Ali ibn Abi Talib, the successor of the Prophet, and then to become the successor himself!

Muawiya was a man of many innovations. He changed khilafat into monarchy, and openly boasted: "I am the first of the Arab kings." Monarchy, of course, has to be hereditary, and it had to be hereditary in his family. He, therefore, made Yazid, his son, his successor. Even those Muslims who either condoned or connived at his crimes, winced when he struck this blow for his family.

The designation by Muawiya of his son, Yazid, as khalifa, was a flagrant breach of the pledge he had given to Hasan ibn Ali not to appoint his own successor. But Muawiya was not the man to be inhibited by any pledge or code of ethics. Ethics in his hands became the first casualty.

Muawiya, however, was aware that Muslims would not willingly accept Yazid as their khalifa. He, therefore, silenced opposition with gold and silver or with bluff and threats. But if these weapons failed, then he employed a subtle, secret and fail-safe weapon – poison. He was a "pioneer" in Muslim history in the art of silencing his critics and opponents forever through poison. Anticipating opposition from Hasan to Yazid's succession, he engineered his death. The historian, Masoodi, writes:

"Muawiya sent word to Jo'dah bint Ash'ath, the wife of Hasan, that if she would kill her husband, he

would pay her 100,000 dirhems, and would marry his son, Yazid, to her.”

Muawiya awakened in Jo'dah the ambition to become a queen, and when he sent the poison to her, as it was arranged between them, she administered it to her husband, and he died from it. Muawiya rewarded her by paying 100,000 dirhems, but backed out of his promise to marry her to Yazid by saying: “I love my son.”

Abdur Rahman bin Khalid bin al-Walid, an ex-governor of Hims (Emessa) was also liquidated in a similar manner. Once Muawiya paid a visit to Hims; he went into the mosque, and addressing the congregation, said:

“I have become too old now and am not far from death.

I, therefore, wish to appoint someone as your ruler.”

Muawiya was secretly hoping that to please him, the people of Hims would suggest the name of Yazid as the next khalifa. But no one wanted the depraved Yazid as khalifa. On the other hand, the people adored Abdur Rahman bin Khalid bin al-Walid, and proposed his name to be the future khalifa of the Muslims. Muawiya dissembled his disappointment and returned to Damascus. The popularity of Abdur Rahman frightened him, and he began to look at him as a potential rival for the throne. He, therefore, made up his mind to do something to make the throne “safe” for his son, Yazid.

Sometime later, Abdur Rahman fell ill, and became bedridden. Muawiya persuaded Abdur Rahman's physician to mix poison in his medicine and to administer it to him. In the event of his success, he promised to pay him (the physician), as his reward, the revenues of Hims for one full year. The physician agreed, and gave Abdur Rahman the “medicine” he had concocted. It did its work and killed him. (*Isti'aab*, vol. II, page 401) After the death of Uthman, most of the Muslims acknowledged Ali as the new head of the empire of the Muslims. But there were many others who did not, and Muawiya, of course, was one of them.

Ahmad ibn Daud Dinawari, the Arab historian, writes:

“The Muslim world acknowledged Ali as the supreme ruler of Islam but Muawiya and the rest of the Banu Umayya, who had made Syria their base, did not.”

Ali sent an emissary to Muawiya demanding his allegiance. But instead of answering him, Muawiya detained the emissary at his court, and invited Amr bin Aas from Palestine for “consultation.” He intended to enlist his (Amr's) support.

[Amr bin Aas](#)

Amr bin Aas was living in Palestine at this time, and was watching the political scene. He was thrilled to

receive the invitation from Muawiya, and leapt to grab the opportunity. But his support, he told Muawiya, had a price, and it was Egypt.

To Muawiya the price appeared to be too high but after some hesitation he agreed to pay it in exchange for Amr's advice and services in the war which he was going to wage against Ali, the successor of the Apostle of God, and the Sovereign of all Muslims.

Muawiya was going to appoint Amr bin Aas his governor in Egypt in the event of the latter's success in taking it from Ali. Amr bin Aas was destined to play an important, if sinister, part in the history of Islam. He was a man of extraordinary ability. His ability is attested by the high positions he held in the caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar. There was a slur on his birth; he was born in the house of a "woman of the flags" in Makkah.

Edward Gibbon

The birth of Amrou was at once base and illustrious; his mother, a notorious prostitute, was unable to decide among the five of the Koreish; but the proof of resemblance adjudged the child to Aasi, the oldest of her lovers. (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

Washington Irving

One of the most redoubtable assailants of Mohammed was a youth named Amr; he was the son of a courtesan of Mecca, who seems to have rivaled in fascination the Phrynes and Aspasia of Greece, and have numbered some of the noblest of the land among her lovers.

When she gave birth to this child, she mentioned several of the tribe of Koreish who had equal claim to the paternity. The infant was declared to have most resemblance to Aas, the oldest of her admirers, whence in addition to his name of Amr, he received the designation of Ibn al-Aas, the son of Aas.

Nature had lavished her choicest gifts upon this natural child, as if to atone for the blemish of his birth. Though young, he was already one of the most popular poets of Arabia. He assailed Mohammed with lampoon and humorous madrigals. (*The Life of Mohammed*)

R.V.C. Bodley

There was Amr ibn al Aas, the son of a beautiful Meccan prostitute. All the better Meccans were her friends, so that anyone, from Abu Sufyan down, might have been Amr's father. As far as anyone could be sure, he might have called himself Amr ibn Abi Lahab or ibn al Abbas or ibn anyone else among the Koreishite upper ten. (*The Messenger, New York, p. 73, 1946*)

Quraysh had once sent Amr as its ambassador to the court of Abyssinia to demand the extradition of the Muslim refugees from Makkah who had found sanctuary there. His mission, incidentally, was a failure.

In 629 Amr accepted Islam. After his conversion, the Apostle also sent him, on a few occasions, as the captain of the expeditions which raided the pagan tribes. The most important expedition that he led in the times of the Apostle, was the raid of Dhat el-Salasil in which he commanded a body of 500 men, among them Abu Bakr, Umar bin al-Khattab and Abu Obaida ibn al-Jarrah. This mission, incidentally, was successful.

Amr was Umar's governor in Egypt. But when Uthman became khalifa, he dismissed him, and he returned to Medina smarting with resentment. He was a consummate "specialist" in hatching conspiracies, in sowing dissension and in spreading disaffection.

He applied these talents against Uthman, and mounted an attack of smear and innuendo against him. He openly boasted that he roused even the shepherds in the mountains to kill him (Uthman), and his boast was no empty twaddle.

Uthman had driven him into political purgatory but he had no intention of languishing in silence forever while he could fancy him (Uthman) mocking at him in Medina, and he could envision his (Uthman's) favorites roistering in Egypt – a province which he (Amr) had added to the empire. He was resolved to act for himself.

The loss of power is one of the most painful experiences that can ever afflict a man. Not only is he deprived of the capacity to shape events but also of the outward symbols and trappings of office.

Talha and Zubayr had never shaped events. They made an attempt to seize the khilafat by force but they failed. The attempt cost them not only their lives but also their reputation. Amr bin Aas, on the other hand, had actually shaped events, and important ones too.

But suddenly, Uthman made him a nonentity. From that moment, he seethed with vindictiveness, and "worked" diligently and indefatigably, to destroy the author of his frustrations – Uthman – the incumbent khalifa.

Soon Medina was ready to explode. Amr had built for himself, in earlier times, a palace in Palestine. Just before the explosion, he slipped out of Medina, and went to live in his palace. He then sat watching how his efforts would bear fruit. When he heard that Uthman was killed, he was thrilled, and he openly gloated over his "success."

Amr's ability and foresight were beyond any question. By leaving Medina at the right moment, and by "rusticating" in Palestine, he saved himself not only from the charge, in his own time, of engineering the assassination of Uthman, but also from the indictment of history.

One thing that Amr knew was that he could not ingratiate himself with Ali. They represented two irreconcilable styles and philosophies. But he knew that an alliance with Muawiya was possible. Both were brilliant opportunists. Both had contributed to the murder of Uthman, one by goading the crowds to

kill him, and the other by willfully withholding all succor from him. Now both were eager to reap the fruits of their success.

Therefore, Amr bin Aas and Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan – the two masters of plot, of intrigue, of ambiguity and paradox, of deceit and deception, of double-talk and single-purpose – forged an alliance, to prop and to buttress each other against Ali ibn Abi Talib. Their alliance rested, not on ideology but on the assessment of mutual interest. When Muawiya offered Amr the key position in his campaign hierarchy as the top political strategist, he (Amr) did not accept it until a more tangible quid pro quo was immediately perceptible to him. The quid pro quo was Egypt.

Taking the cue from the “triumvirate” of Basra, Amr advised Muawiya to launch a campaign of propaganda against Ali charging him with the murder of Uthman. Muawiya forthwith acted upon the advice, and opened the cold war against Ali.

In the main mosque of Damascus, the banner of the Banu Umayya was unfurled everyday after the midday prayer. Suspended to the banner were two other objects. One was a blood-stained shirt which Uthman was alleged to have been wearing when he was killed, and the other was the dissevered fingers of Naila, his wife.

The Syrians walked around this banner, weeping, wailing and cursing Ali, the members of his family, and the Banu Hashim, and swearing that they would wreak vengeance upon the killers of Uthman. Professors Sayed Abdul Qadir and Muhammad Shuja-ud-Din write in their *History of Islam* that this was the beginning of the practice called “tabarree.”

Muawiya and Amr bin Aas whipped up Syria into hysteria, so that every Syrian was raving mad against Ali, and was thirsting for his blood. After three months, Ali's emissary returned to Kufa to report to him the failure of his mission in Damascus.

Muawiya had opted for war against Ali. But Ali did not want war. He was most anxious to eschew war. Nothing was more repugnant to him than to see Muslims killing each other.

Hoping against hope, but not wishing to spare any effort, Ali addressed a letter to Muawiya. In his letter, he didn't try to remind Muawiya that the Apostle of God himself had designated him (Ali) as the sovereign of all Muslims. For Muawiya, he knew, this argument would not be very cogent. Instead, he took up another line of argument which was more likely to “appeal” to him. The purport of his letter was as follows:

“I call upon you to obey God and His Apostle, and to refrain from doing anything against the interests of the Muslims. You know that the same people who gave their pledge of loyalty to Abu Bakr and Umar, have now given me their pledge of loyalty. There is no room for argument in this matter. You know that the Muhajireen and the Ansar have elected the caliphs of the past, and now they have elected me. Other Muslims have also given me their pledge of loyalty.

You too, therefore, should give me your pledge of loyalty. You have spread much mischief and falsehood in the name of vengeance for the blood of Uthman while you know only too well who spilled it. After taking the oath of allegiance to me, you present the case of the murder of Uthman, and I shall judge it in the light of the Book of God and the precedents of His Apostle, so that truth and falsehood would be separated.”

But Muawiya had no desire to relinquish his ambitions. He believed that the one thing that could checkmate him in the realization of his ambitions, was peace. He, therefore, showed himself just as “allergic” to peace as the “triumvirs” of Basra had done before him. He had only one answer to Ali's appeals for peace, and that was war.

From Muawiya's point of view, the cry of vengeance for the murder of Uthman, was an excellent ploy to fight against Ali. He shed many a crocodile tear for the blood of Uthman but by his own conduct, both before and after his (Uthman's) murder, he proved that he did not give him (Uthman) a hoot. He raised an army of 80,000 warriors to fight against Ali but did not send a handful of men to Medina to break the blockade of Uthman's palace, and to save his life!

Uthman might have found it very comforting to know that a day would come when his critics would become his admirers, and his enemies would become his defenders – after his death. He had many critics in Medina, among them Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr but the most vehement of them all, as noted before, was Amr bin Aas.

He might, in fact, have even been the real author of the crime of Uthman's murder. But by a queer twist of fate, he – Amr bin Aas – the confederate of Muawiya – now marched, at the head of the Syrian army, to demand “justice” for Uthman's murder, of all people – from Ali!

Like Talha and Zubayr – his distinguished forerunners in the business of vengeance-seeking – Amr bin Aas is also a fascinating study in character inversion and ironic role reversal. He was a complex, enigmatic and protean figure defying attempts at analysis, classification and character identification.

One of the aims of Muawiya in waging a war of nerves against Ali was to compel him to adopt a policy of brutal repression of all those people who came to Medina from the provinces to see Uthman. Such a policy would have embroiled Ali in endless fighting. But Ali didn't adopt a policy of repression. He adopted a policy of persuasion, to the great disappointment of Muawiya. Muawiya's ploy did not work.

Muawiya demanded from Ali, as the “triumvirs” of Basra had done, the surrender to him of countless men who, he claimed, had taken part, directly or indirectly, in the murder of Uthman. This demand raises some fundamental questions such as:

1. Does the governor of a province of state have the right to demand from the lawfully constituted central government that it should surrender to him, the suspects in a murder case, even though the murder did not occur in his particular province? And does he have the right to threaten the central government that if

it did not comply with his demand, he would wage war against it?

2. Muawiya was neither the heir nor the next-of-kin of Uthman; he was only a distant relative. Is there any example in the history of the judiciary of any country in which, not the next-of-kin, but a distant relative demands from the central government that it should surrender to him hundreds or thousands of those men whom he suspects to be accomplices in a murder?

Can he take law into his own hands? Can the central government of a country allow its citizens to take law into their own hands? If it does, will anything be left of its authority, and will anything be left of law and order?

3. Muawiya had exchanged many letters with Ali. In one he wrote: "We shall hunt the killers of Uthman in every corner of the world, and we shall kill everyone of them. We shall not rest from this labor until, either we kill them all or we perish ourselves." An admirable resolution indeed! But when Muawiya became khalifa, did he implement his own resolution?

After the abdication from caliphate of Hasan ibn Ali in A.D. 661, Muawiya became the head of the empire of the Muslims. All the real or suspected murderers of Uthman were living in his empire. Did he arrest any of them, not to speak of executing any of them? Did he do so much as institute a formal investigation into the murder of Uthman? He did not. His ambition was to seize the caliphate. Once he realized it, he forgot Uthman!

The truth is that Muawiya actually wanted Uthman to be killed. It was his hope that there would be chaos after the murder of Uthman, and he would maneuver in it in his drive to capture power. When he demanded from Ali the surrender to him of the "murderers" of Uthman, he knew that they were scattered in Hijaz, Iraq and Egypt, and that it was impossible to round them up. But assuming that it was possible to apprehend them, it was still not possible to kill them all. But if it were possible to kill them all, it would still not be right to kill all of them for the murder of one individual.

Seeking and getting vengeance for a murder, is the right of the heir(s) of the victim, and it is the duty of the government to administer justice. Muawiya was neither the heir of Uthman nor he was the head of the government of the Muslims. He was no more an heir of Uthman than Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr had been. His and their only interest was in seizing the khilafat.

If Muawiya could not act in time to save the life of Uthman, he still had an opportunity to prove that he was a sincere vengeance-seeker for his murder. When three other vengeance-seekers, viz., Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr, challenged Ali, Muawiya should have gone to their aid. After all, all four of them were inspired by the same aim.

The murder of Uthman had aroused the lust for blood in all of them. The identity of purpose ought to have forged strong links between them. But whatever reasons prevented Muawiya from going to Medina to save the life of Uthman, also prevented him from going to Basra to reinforce his "spiritual" allies.

The claim that Muawiya had no interest in Uthman, living or dead, is further strengthened by his answer to a question posed to him by a daughter of Uthman. When he became khalifa, he paid a visit to Medina. In Medina, he called on the family of Uthman whose daughter, Ayesha, asked him, rather pointedly, if he still remembered anything of his oft-repeated declaration that he was seeking vengeance for the murder of her father.

Muawiya answered her as follows:

“I have succeeded in restoring peace to the country after a great deal of trouble, and you should now be happy that you are called the daughter of one and the niece of another khalifa. But if for your sake, I were to start arresting and killing the murderers of your father, then that peace would vanish once again. If it does, then I may lose the power that I have won after such a hard struggle; and if that happens, then you would be reduced to the status of an ordinary woman.” (*Iqd-ul-Farid*)

Muawiya, the pragmatist, had an infinite and an amazing capacity to equivocate!

For Muawiya, to achieve his ends, all means were fair. There was nothing that he could not do to become the khalifa of the Muslims. He could, in fact, go so far as to become the vassal of a non-Muslim power to fight against the lawful successor of the Apostle of God and the sovereign of all Muslims. In doing so, he was espousing a policy that struck at the very roots of Islam.

Sir John Glubb

In order to be free to confront his rival (Ali), Muawiya had concluded a truce with Byzantium under which he agreed to pay an annual tribute to the Emperor. (*The Great Arab Conquests, p. 338, 1967*)

D. M. Dunlop

Before Muawiya succeeded to the Caliphate, when after Siffin he remained in confrontation with Ali, he secured himself on his northern border by a truce with Byzantium, by the terms of which he agreed to pay what was in effect tribute to the Emperor Constans II, and in 678 towards the end of his Caliphate, after the failure of the great Arab assault on Constantinople in the so-called Seven Years' War and an attack by the Mardaites on his northern frontier, Muawiya again paid tribute to the Emperor, now Constantine IV. At a later date Byzantine armies invaded Syria and retook Antioch and Aleppo. (*Arab Civilization to A.D. 1500, 1971*)

The new “status” that Muawiya won as the vassal of the Byzantine emperor, set him free to wage war against Ali ibn Abi Talib, the successor of Muhammad, the Messenger of God. He fought against the Commander of the Faithful, against the veterans of Badr, against the Companions of the Tree of Fealty, and against the Muhajireen and the Ansar while he was *protected* by the Christians of the Eastern Roman Empire!

But for Muawiya, to be “flexible,” the stakes did not have to be as high as a crown and a throne. He

could be flexible in matters of lesser importance also. He had, for example, a sentimental attachment to money, and he believed that in making it, too much “old-fashioned” rigidity in the application of Islamic principles was not quite necessary.

The important thing for him was to make money. Ibn Ishaq, the biographer of the Prophet, has already been quoted on the subject of the seizure by Muawiya of the property of al-Hutat b. Yazid al-Mujashi'i, his “brother,” at his death. This “brotherhood” worked entirely to his (Muawiya's) advantage. To fill his pockets, he could even sell idols. Muawiya, the successor of Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, and the khalifa of the Muslims, could become a merchant of idols if he hoped that he would make some profit in the transaction.

Sir John Glubb

Sicily was raided more than once by the Arab fleet during the reign of Muawiya. A curious tradition relates that on one occasion the raiders carried off 'idols' of gold and silver, studded with pearls. It is perhaps significant of the change of Arab mentality that the khalif instead of utterly destroying such abominations, sent them on to India, where he thought that their sale would fetch a higher price. (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p. 355, 1967)

The sale of idols by Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan was clearly an atavistic relapse of the Umayyads. His actions were prompted on the basis, not of revealed (Islamic), but of nostalgic (pagan), values which were characteristic of the name and the bloodline of the Umayyads.

He was, it appears, in search, perhaps subconsciously, of the “Lost Ignorance” of his dynasty. He reflected and shaped the post-Islamic Jahiliyya. His challenge to Ali, therefore, was not only or even primarily a physical one; it was a metaphysical one. Islam as a moral force, met the ultimate threat in Muawiya and in the Umayyads.

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