

Obituaries

Religious fundamentalist. Born: c. 1960

Mullah Mohammed Omar

Co-founder and leader of the Taliban who fought the Soviets before presiding over a brutal Afghan regime

As in birth, it isn't clear when or where Mullah Mohammed Omar died. The founding leader of Afghanistan's Taliban, who presided over a brutal fundamentalist regime and gave sanctuary to the world's most wanted terrorist, was confirmed dead this week. But he may have died as long as two years ago, and we do not know if it was in a Pakistani city or an Afghan village.

The notoriously reclusive leader of a rag-tag army that stormed to power in Kabul in 1996 was born some time between 1959 and 1962. For much of his early life, he was a student who learned the Koran by rote. His father, Maulvi Ghulam Nabi Akhund, was an itinerant teacher who died when Omar was a child.

Omar came under the care of his paternal uncle. In the customs of his region in southern Afghanistan, the women and children of a deceased male relative were kept in the family, and Omar's uncle married his widowed mother. Omar spent the rest of his childhood in mosques learning the Koran. He and his fellow students were known as "taliban" – the Pashto plural for students.

It was the name they chose to keep when, using the southern city of Kandahar as a base, they fought their way to power, overthrowing the weak government there in 1996. To mark the occasion, Omar called for a relic from the days of early Islam that had made its way to Afghanistan: the Prophet Muhammad's cloak.

In one of the few occasions on which he made himself visible to large crowds, Omar waved the cloak in the air and swung it over his shoulder. The symbolism was striking. He saw himself as donning the prophet's mantle, and went on to declare himself "commander of the faithful" – a fanciful title that the leader of Isis, Abu Bakr Baghdadi, now proclaims for himself. The title "gave him badly needed legitimacy and a new mystique," wrote Ahmed Rashid in his book *Taliban*.

Long before the so-called Islamic State, the Taliban became notorious for the kind of brutal punishments that have become Isis's trademark. While they were markedly less ruthless, the Taliban packed Afghans into football stadiums and forced them to watch as punishments were handed out for alleged crimes against morality. There were amputations, stonings, executions.

Omar first came to global prominence with the destruction of the ancient Bamiyan Buddha statues of Afghanistan. It was an act of vandalism that has become depressingly familiar as Isis continues to destroy the vestiges of old civilisations across the Levant. "Allah will ask

me, 'Omar, you have brought a superpower called the Soviet Union to its knees. You could not break two statues. And what would Mullah Omar reply?'" Omar said, according to *Time* magazine.

But there was another reason why Omar had begun to attract hostile attention. Some months before the Taliban took power, Osama bin Laden took sanctuary in Afghanistan. After the 11 September attacks, Mullah Omar refused to hand him over. Prominent emissaries from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, two of the only three countries to have officially recognised the Taliban regime, were turned away empty-handed.

The Taliban leader insisted that tradition forbade him from handing over his guest. Omar maintained that he was a devout adherent of pashtunwali, a code of hospitality dear to the Pashtuns. It would be a violation of that tradition to surrender the al-Qaeda leader, he said. If bin Laden had committed a crime, he told his visitors, then he could be tried in Afghanistan before an Islamic court established by the Taliban.

It isn't clear whether Omar fully grasped the significance of the tragedies that had unfolded in New York and Washington, or the repercussions that were to follow in Afghanistan in a war that continues to this day. The researchers who have assiduously charted his life, spending years in Afghanistan's south and interviewing his companions, say that he was a plain man of little learning with no sophisticated ideas about the world.

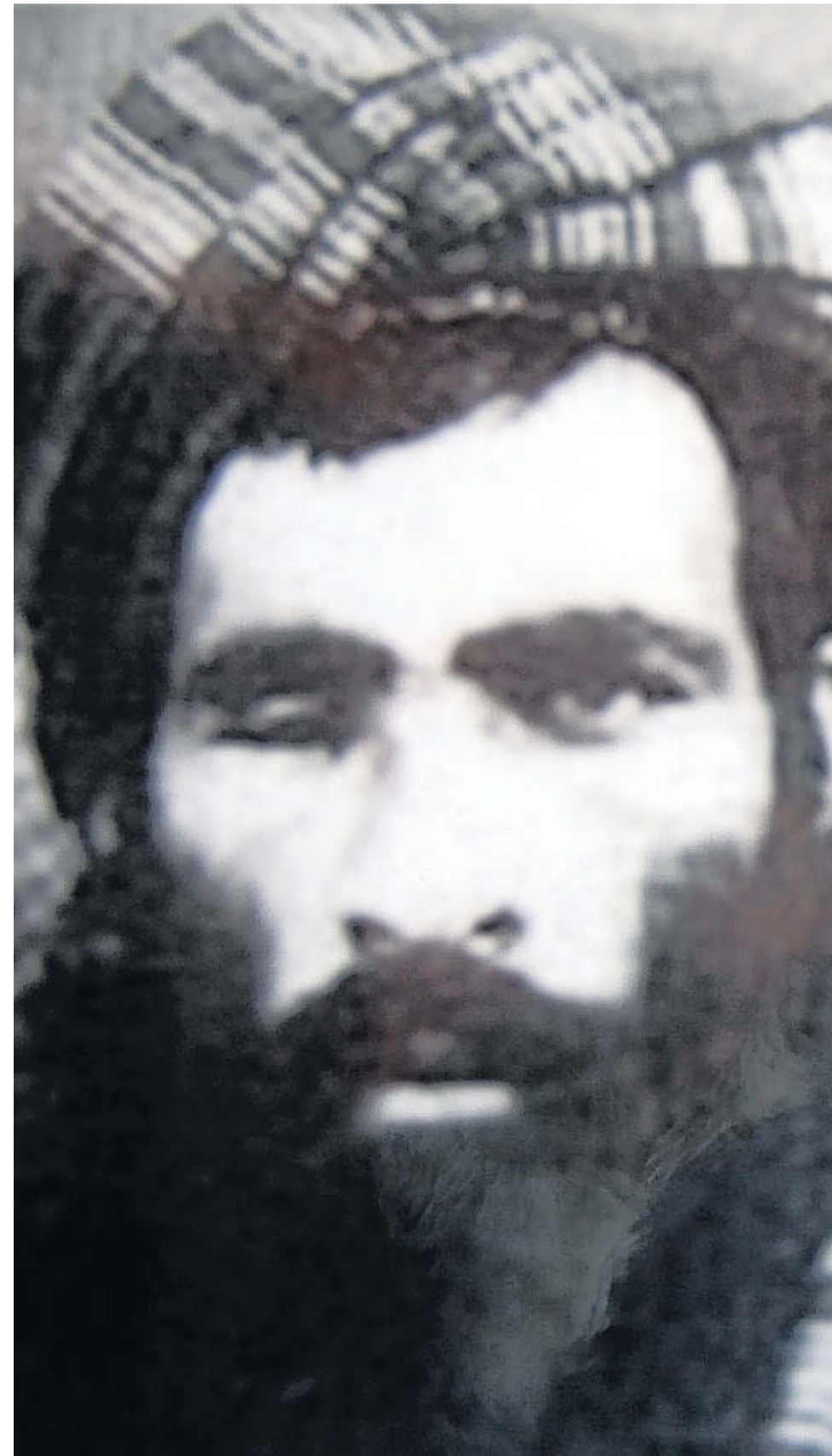
"He would listen to everybody with focus and respect for as long as they needed to talk, and he would never seek to cut them off," wrote Abdul Salam Zaeef, who fought with Omar, in his memoir, *My Life With the Taliban*. "After he had listened he would answer with ordered, coherent thoughts."

Long before he came to prominence, Omar had fought on the same side as the Americans. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 altered his life: the Russians came to try to prop up their communist allies in the ruling People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. It was an event mired in the Cold War, and the Soviet intervention mightily displeased both Washington and its ally, Pakistan, next door in Islamabad.

The Pakistanis would muster a group of armed jihadists. They would rouse tribesmen with claims that they were fighting nobly for Allah's cause. It was a point echoed by the administration of Jimmy Carter: in 1979, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Carter's national security adviser, came to the Pakistan-Afghanistan border to tell them as much.

"That land over there," Brzezinski said, gesturing across the Hindu Kush, "is yours... Your fight will prevail and you will have your homes, your mosques back again. Because your cause is right and God is on your side." It was a sentiment that Mullah Omar decided to live by, even

When he took power he donned a relic said to be the Prophet's cloak and declared himself to be 'commander of the faithful'



Omar: he received his eye injury from shrapnel when he was fighting the Soviet invaders REX

Writer. Born: 1943

James Tate

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet celebrated for his ability to mix the frivolous and humorous with the dark and serious

James Tate planned to be a petrol station attendant but changed course in college when he discovered that he could write poetry. He went on to write more than 20 collections of verse, including his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Selected Poems* (1991). On learning that he had been chosen for the Pulitzer, he asked the person on the other end of the line, "Will you please double-check that?"

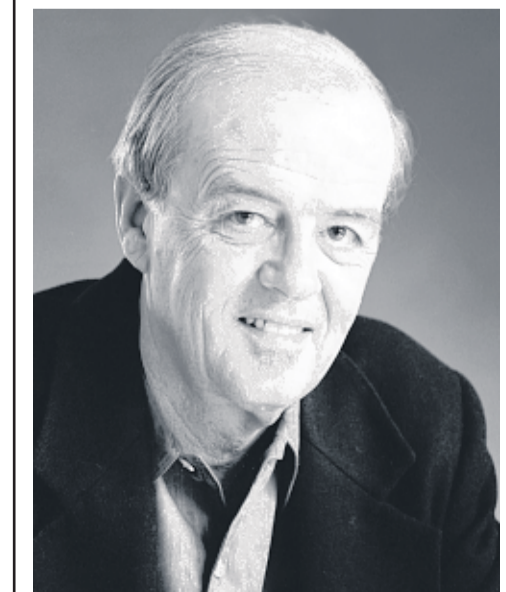
Poetry, he wrote, was "a rare species of bird / that refuses to be categorized", and his own work defied easy labels. Many critics described it as absurdist, while others readers found him plain-spoken. A consensus among admirers was that he had an unusual ability to merge the extraordinary and the ordinary, the dark and the humorous.

The poet Charles Simic, also a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, described Tate as "one of our great comic masters." In one poem, called "A Glowworm, a Lemur, and Some Women," Tate described a small creature en route to a philosophy department meeting.

The glowworm tried to philosophize, he wanted an overview, he wanted to see something else, like a ballfield the size of a postage stamp, with the fans asleep at last, and the hotdogs cooing, paradigmatically, in their buns.

"Critics usually deal with him by calling him a surrealist and leaving it at that," Simic wrote. "If he is one, he belongs to that native strain of surrealism to which Buster Keaton and WC Fields also belong."

Tate also delved more directly into the seri-



ous. "I love to take a poem," he told Simic, "that starts with something seemingly frivolous or inconsequential and then grows in gravity until by the end it's something very serious."

The poet John Ashbery, another recipient of the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, wrote that Tate "is the poet of possibilities, of morph, of surprising consequences, lovely or disastrous, and these phenomena exist everywhere. I return to Tate's books more often perhaps than to any others when I want to be reminded afresh of the possibilities of poetry."

He was born James Vincent Appleby in Kansas City in 1943. He never met his father, a B-17 pilot who died in action during the Second World War, and later took the surname of a stepfather. At one point his mother became involved with a man who beat her. Tate recalled once putting a gun to the man's head.

Tate began writing poetry at Kansas State College, whence he graduated in 1965. One of his earliest collections, published when he was 23 and selected for the noted Yale Series of Younger Poets, was called "The Lost Pilot" in honour of his father. Tate wrote in the title poem:

My head cocked toward the sky,
I cannot get off the ground,
and, you, passing over again,
fast, perfect, and unwilling
to tell me that you are doing
well, or that it was mistake
that placed you in that world,
and me in this; or that misfortune
placed these worlds in us.

Tate joined the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1971. His early collections included *The Oblivion Ha-Ha* (1970) and *Viper Jazz* (1976); among his more recent books was *The Eternal Ones of the Dream: Selected Poems 1990-2010* (2012). In addition to his poetry, he wrote the short story collection *Dreams of a Robot Dancing Bee* (2002), the non-fiction collection *The Route as Briefed* (1999) and, with Bill Knott, the novel *Lucky Darryl* (1977).

"I love my funny poems, but I'd rather break your heart," Tate told Simic. "And if I can do both in the same poem, that's the best. If you laughed earlier in the poem, and I bring you close to tears in the end, that's the best." ● EMILY LANGER

James Vincent Appleby (James Tate), poet: born Kansas City, Missouri 8 December 1943; twice married (two stepchildren); died Springfield, Massachusetts 8 July 2015.

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Tate: fellow poet Charles Simic described him as 'a comic master' UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST/ WASHINGTON POST

Birthdays

Dr Fiona Adshead, former Director, Chronic Diseases and Health Promotion, WHO, 53; **Victoria Azarenka**, Olympic tennis champion, 26; **Lynne Reid Banks**, writer, 86; **Steuart Bedford**, conductor, 76; **Bill Berry**, drummer, 57; **Baroness Billingham of Banbury**, politician, 76; **Nick Bollettieri**, tennis coach, 84; **Evonne Cawley**, tennis player, 64; **Will Champion**, drummer, 37; **Ben Chaplin**, actor, 46; **Geraldine Chaplin**, actress, 71; **Jonathan Dimbleby**, broadcaster, journalist and writer, 71; **Andy Duncan**, Chief Executive, Camelot UK Lotteries, 53; **Lord Dyson**, Master of the Rolls and Head of Civil Justice, 72; **Emilia Fox**, actress, 41; **Frank Gardner**, BBC Security Correspondent, 54; **Frank Giles**, former newspaper editor, 96; **Dr Alan Gillespie**, Chairman, Economic and Social Research Council, 65; **Sir Richard Greenbury**, former Chairman, Marks & Spencer, 79; **Fergus Henderson**, chef and restaurateur, 52; Javed Khan, Chief Executive, Barnardo's, 52; **Ralph Koltai**, stage designer, 91; **Andrew Marr**, broadcaster and journalist, 56; **Sir Alan Meale MP**, 66; **Peter Nichols**, playwright, 88; **Cees Noteboom**, writer, 82; **Colin Roberts**, Governor of the Falkland Islands and Commissioner of South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, 56; **JK Rowling**, author, 50; **Lord Selkirk of Douglas**, former government minister, 73; **Wesley Snipes**, actor, 53; **Professor Howard C Thomas**, Professor Emeritus of Medicine, Imperial College Faculty of Medicine, London University, 70; **Mark Thompson**, President and Chief Executive, New York Times Company, 58.



JK Rowling, author, 50 EPA

'I return to Tate's books perhaps more than any others,' said John Ashbery

