

## How a Long Island Man Became the ‘Forrest Gump of Jihad’ — and Then Flipped

*What Bryant Neal Viñas can teach us about the lessons from Afghanistan the U.S. still hasn't learned.*

Carla Power

September 5, 2021

In late summer 2008, in an Al Qaeda safe house in Waziristan, Bryant Neal Viñas found himself explaining to a senior commander that a bomb on the Long Island Rail Road could cripple New York City. Viñas was a native of Long Island himself. A recent convert to Islam and a recent recruit in the terror organization, he had already floated other plans—bombing a Walmart, setting up training camps in Peru—but the LIRR plot was the only one to pique his commanders' interest.

Late one night, over dinner with senior commander Younis al-Mauritani, Viñas sketched a map of his native Long Island, explaining the key stations, the most crowded times, and crucially, the way all the trains bound for Manhattan merged into a single tunnel. The best plan of attack for a suicide bomber, he explained, was to blow up the tunnel from a train inside it. Al-Mauritani was intrigued. The importance of a bombing like that lay in not the number of casualties, he told Viñas, but in how it could wreck the economy.

That was enough to interest Al-Mauritani.

The story of how Viñas came to plan to blow up the LIRR can be summed up in one word: blowback. Not that long ago, blowback was a favored buzzword among American foreign policy pundits. Coined by an American CIA analyst in 1954, the year after Washington ousted Iran's democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, in order to protect British oil interests, it refers to the unintended fallout from covert government actions overseas.

Blowback's exhibit A is the Afghan mujahideen, whom the United States armed to fight the Soviets during the 1980s, some of whom then morphed into global jihadis in the following decade. Human rights organizations and military analysts have long argued that America's targeted drone strikes in Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Pakistan and Afghanistan are producing contemporary versions of blowback. In 2002, the Bush administration pioneered the use of predator drones to target overseas terrorists. Their use grew exponentially under the Obama administration, and Trump expanded the acceptable area for their use beyond the battlefield to any “area of active hostilities.”

But human rights organizations, security analysts and military figures—those who’ve watched drone fallout from up close—argue that drone warfare is counterproductive. Strikes that accidentally kill civilians, coupled with the anxiety and fear that drones produce, serve only to alienate populations and stoke militancy. Erik Goepner, a retired U.S. air force colonel and an adjunct scholar at the CATO Institute, found that countries the United States invaded had 143 more terror attacks annually than other countries; those where the United States used drone strikes averaged 395 more terror attacks a year than those with no drone strikes. A former U.S. diplomat in Yemen estimates that for every drone strike there that kills an Al Qaeda operative, Americans create between 40 and 60 new enemies.

Drone strikes “cause enemies for the United States that will last for generations,” warned George W. Bush’s counterterrorism czar Richard Clarke. “All of these innocent people that you kill have brothers and sisters and tribal relations. Many of them were not opposed to the United States prior to some one of their friends or relatives being killed. And then, sometimes, they cross over, not only to being opposed to the United States, but by being willing to pick up arms and become a terrorist against the United States. So you may actually be creating terrorists, rather than eliminating them.” In 2015 four veteran U.S. Air Force drone pilots wrote to President Barack Obama, declaring that “this administration and its predecessors have built a drone program that is one of the most devastating driving forces for terrorism and destabilization around the world.”

The same warnings about blowback continue today amid the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan. Reports that the August 29th U.S. drone strike in Kabul killed ten civilians, eight of them under 18, will doubtless be used as recruiting propaganda for violent extremist groups. What’s more, poverty, factionalism, a weak government and circling foreign interests will only stoke Afghanistan’s potential as an exporter of violent extremism.

Among the people radicalized by drone strikes was Viñas himself. As he tells it, it was an American drone strike that led him, in 2008, to plot to blow up the Long Island Rail Road.

I took that same rail line from Manhattan to Bayside, Queens, to meet him at his lawyer’s office. Walking the avenue lined with pizza joints and cheap nail salons, my LIRR ticket still in my pocket, I wondered how somebody decides to destroy a train line they’d traveled in their youth, with the aim of wounding the economy of the city where they were born. We were meeting at the office of his lawyer in part because he doesn’t have much of a home; he rents a room in a woman’s house in Flushing. He’s not speaking to his family or to any of his childhood friends. “He’s not my son no more,” his mother told the *New York Daily News* after his arrest. “I don’t know him if he’s able to do this. He has no family anymore.”

Viñas arrived at our meeting late, full of apologies: He’d been kept overtime at his job scrubbing pots at an Italian restaurant. His baby face, his gray T-shirt, and the baseball cap perched over the do-rag on his head made him look more like a teenager than a 35-year-old man. He has a round face, slightly hooded eyes, and a subdued, studiously polite air. Nothing in Viñas’ upbringing predisposed him to join Al Qaeda, let alone explained the fact that in just seven months with the group, he managed to get access to top commanders. American counterterrorism officials called him “the Forrest Gump of jihad” for his uncanny ability to show up at key Al Qaeda meetings. Here was a guy with a high school education, who’d headed out from Long Island with few contacts and no Arabic, Pashto, or Dari, yet was determined to die as a martyr.

Born in 1982, Viñas had been raised Catholic in Medford, Long Island, by his father, an engineer from Peru, and his mother, from Argentina. When he was 14, his father left his mother, who a few years later renounced custody of him. Moving in with his father and his stepmother only created more tensions, and for a time, he lived in his car and bunked with a neighborhood family. He started taking some courses at a technical college but didn't finish them. Six months after 9/11, gripped by fervent patriotism, he enlisted in the U.S. Army as a petroleum supply specialist, but left after three weeks. He received a chapter 11 discharge, which meant he'd failed to adapt to life in the military.

Bouncing between jobs as a truck driver, a forklift operator and a car wash attendant, Viñas filled his free time with boxing. He first encountered Islam at a Long Island mall, after flirting with a girl working at a T-shirt kiosk. When he asked her out, she said she couldn't, because her family said that Muslims shouldn't date. Viñas started asking around about Islam; a Pakistani friend gave him a child's primer about it. Attracted by the discipline of regular prayers, the avoidance of pork and alcohol, and the emphasis on keeping your body strong, he toyed with the idea of converting. He even fasted during Ramadan in solidarity with Muslims. One day he stopped by a mosque to make a Ramadan donation. Standing at the entrance with his checkbook, he was invited in by a group of guys, and before he knew it, they had him reciting the *shahada*, the phrase whose recitation makes one a Muslim. "Now, you're Muslim," said the man. Viñas wanted to convert but was not ready yet. "I still had a lot of sinful stuff I wanted to do," he told me. For the first time in the half hour we'd been talking, he flashed the most fleeting of smiles.

In the years following his conversion, his outrage at American actions in Muslim countries grew. He watched the influential YouTube talks by the New Mexico-born extremist Anwar al-Awlaki, who denounced the evils of nonbelievers and American oppression in idiomatic English from his base in Yemen. (In 2011 Al-Awlaki was killed, along with his sixteen-year-old son, by an American drone strike.)

The ultimate impetus for Viñas' departure for Pakistan, however, was an email exchange with a friend about the Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. "You're one of those people who just talks," the friend accused him, "and never really does anything about the stuff they see as wrong." The accusation cut deep, and Viñas became convinced it was his duty to defend his fellow Muslims from foreign occupation.

He asked a Pakistani-American friend for contacts in Pakistan, telling him he wanted to study Islam at a madrassa. In fact, he was secretly planning to join a militant group. His hope was to end up dead on an Afghan field, a martyr in a fight against a Western army.

On Sept. 10, 2007, he flew to Lahore, and made his way up to Peshawar. Soon he had a *nom de guerre*, Bashir al-Amriki—Bashir the American—and an introduction to join the Shah-Shab, a group affiliated with both the Taliban and the ISI, Pakistan's intelligence service.

When Viñas joined, Shah-Shab had been tasked with waging attacks in Afghanistan's Kunar province, so that the Afghan government couldn't build a dam stopping the flow of water to Pakistan. Suddenly the religious purity he'd hoped to find among the militants didn't seem so pure. He'd joined the group hoping to expel foreign occupiers; instead, he found himself asked to risk his life for a regional skirmish over resources. Moreover, he found that the group was using him "like a mascot," touting its young American recruit as a talking point to raise funds. "Once I

found out they were ISI, I was like, ‘I gotta get out of here,’” he told me. “I didn’t want to do their dirty work. That wasn’t for me.” He left, hoping to find a group to take him to fight on the flatlands of Helmand, in Afghanistan.

“Why Helmand?” I asked.

“I was a disaster in the mountains,” he said, his vowels New York–long. “The altitude was terrible; I got so sick. I’m from Long Island. I’m used to sea level!” He felt so wretched that he offered to undertake a suicide mission, figuring that martyrdom would be an honorable way to end his misery.

He was turned down. In March 2008, he made his way to North Waziristan, where he was able to join another group. He didn’t know its name until he asked a fellow recruit, a Kuwaiti, who told him. He was shocked. “I was like, ‘This is Al Qaeda? Really? It’s not like the stuff I saw in the videos.’” When he was back on Long Island, he’d thrilled to the Al Qaeda propaganda videos he’d seen on YouTube, with their scenes of men in black crawling under barbed wire and firing AK-47s. But life in the mud-brick house in Waziristan was boring.

He spent his days waiting, usually in vain, for deployment on a mission, choking down a diet of okra, potatoes, and rice and killing time talking to fellow volunteers. “Most of them were nerds and bookworms, not the vampire killers who drink blood you read about in the media,” he said. Nights, he slept in a flea-infested sleeping bag.

When the house radio could get a signal, the men caught bits of news on the BBC. Viñas heard about Usain Bolt’s victory at the Beijing Olympics, and John McCain and Barack Obama’s bids for the U.S. presidency. The wealthier volunteers, usually from the Gulf States, had money to spend on goats, chickens and specialized combat training. Viñas didn’t, so he had to settle for the three courses required for Al Qaeda volunteers: basic training, projectile weapons theory and explosives theory. To avoid the U.S. drones overhead, classes were conducted inside the house. Viñas learned how to take apart an AK-47 and how to prepare shrapnel for a bomb, sticking glue and ball bearings together “like a sandwich.” By July, his training was complete, and not long afterward he was assigned to a group tasked with launching a mortar attack on a U.S. army base in Afghanistan. But the first time they tried, the radio spotter wasn’t at his post. The second day, the rockets didn’t reach the base, and the mission was aborted.

\*\*\*

**Talking to Viñas** was an exercise in cognitive dissonance. I could discern no trace of an aspiring suicide bomber in this guy from Queens. Nor could I see in him any anger, let alone enough to want to bomb the LIRR. “What made you propose it?” I asked “Was it to impress your commanders? Was it that you hated Americans? New Yorkers?”

Viñas paused, and then spoke in his low, even voice. “When you’re in a war zone,” he said, “you hear about violence all the time.” Its low hum helped to normalize it, he said.

I pressed on, trying to tease out what made him change from someone who would attack Western targets in Pakistan to someone who would attack New York commuters.

Finally he told me: It was the U.S. drones. At first, the Predators and Reapers flying overhead were simply annoying and anxiety-producing. “Sometimes you could hear them,” he said. “On a

clear day, you could see them. There's always that awareness that any day could be your last day."

One day while traveling through Waziristan, he and a few other militants stopped at an orphanage to drink tea. Not long afterward a drone bombed the orphanage. On hearing the news, and imagining the dead children, something hardened in him. His notion of jihad shifted from fighting local battles to targeting American civilians. He wanted to get back at the people who had done it, he explained, his voice steady. "It's not something I'm proud of, but in that environment, it becomes normal."

A beat later he added softly, "War is very ugly."

That ugliness prompted him to broach blowing up the LIRR to the Al-Qaeda commander.

\*\*\*

**The plot never came to fruition**, though in the run-up to Thanksgiving 2008, I remember hearing on the radio that New York City travelers were warned of "plausible but uncorroborated information" that an Al Qaeda plot was planned for the holidays.

That information, I later learned, was not about Viñas. It was *from* Viñas.

If the first part of Viñas' story was a lesson about blowback, the second was about the complexities of his homecoming. He turned out to be what even the U.S. government acknowledged was probably the greatest source of Western intelligence on Al Qaeda during his time there. "To say that the defendant provided substantial assistance to the government is an understatement," wrote U.S. government prosecutors in court documents.

Viñas was arrested in the fall, in Peshawar, where he was waiting until the militants' fighting season started again in spring. One day while he was haggling with a shopkeeper over a rifle scope in a Peshawar bazaar, Pakistani police picked him up. They handed him over to the Americans, who took him to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan and, from there, to the United States. Don Borelli, the FBI supervisor of his case, recalled watching the FBI plane land in Newburgh, New York, and "a skinny, frail-looking kid" disembark.

Nearly immediately after his arrest, Viñas began telling the authorities what he knew. When I pressed him on why he cooperated so quickly, he struggled a bit, hedging that he gave "some info when I first started, but wasn't willing to give them everything."

When you talk to people working to rehabilitate militants, they will stress that it is a slow, multipronged and highly personalized process. Rehabilitation usually takes years, with the individual zigzagging between minor successes and setbacks. The best programs draw on teams of people who are carefully selected for the person's needs. For the guy hung up on radical theology, they will enlist an imam, a social worker and a psychologist. For the neo-Nazi addicted to pills, they will use a drug counselor, as well as a mentor familiar with the local white supremacist scenes.

In his rehabilitation, Viñas had none of these. Indeed, it's difficult to talk about his transition as real disengagement. It seems more like opportunism, that he flipped sides simply to survive.

When I asked him to pinpoint the moment when he started to seriously think about cooperating with U.S. intelligence, he described sitting in his cell in the solitary lockdown section of a

Brooklyn prison, freezing, listening to the screams of other inmates, and thinking back through past disappointments, “all the people that ratted on me, the promises that were made.”

One day two detectives signed him out of the prison, put him in a car and drove him to Nathan’s Famous, where he got a hot dog and some fries. Knowing he was a lifelong Mets fan, they then took him to the stadium where the team’s minor league affiliate, the Brooklyn Cyclones, played. One of the detectives knew the general manager and asked if they could walk around the diamond, explaining the inmate’s situation in the broadest of terms: “Hey! Bryant here just got back from Afghanistan! He was in the mountains up there.” Viñas chuckled as he recalled the scene. “The look on the general manager’s face was like—what?”

With his handcuffs attached to a chain around his waist, Viñas walked around the diamond. The moment gave him a sense of contentment, even joy, “like a kid seeing something that he loves.”

Later, as he was waiting in the parking lot for one detective to get the car to drive him back to prison, the other turned to him. “Do you want to go back to maximum security for the rest of your life?” he asked. “Or”—spreading out his arms, looking around the parking lot—“do you want to have a life again? Not many people get a second chance at life.”

It was at that moment, said Viñas, that “they got me.”

As soon as Viñas began to talk to the FBI, the U.S. Army swung into action. Based on his information, CIA-operated drones bombed the places he’d trained and lived, including the mud-brick safe house in Waziristan. It’s highly likely that the information he shared resulted in the deaths of his former comrades.

Was it painful to think about? I asked him.

“A little bit, but the way I look at it, if I’m going to leave my old life behind, they can’t be my friends anymore.” He shrugged. “It was a little tough, but I figured that this is the way it’s going to be now.”

Viñas wore his allegiances lightly even in retelling his story. Repetition had buffed his story to a sheen; he answered my questions courteously, but without much emotion. The ease with which he had moved from one militant group to another, serving as an informant first for Al Qaeda, then for the Americans, proved that not every jihadi harbors an ideology, let alone unshakable political beliefs.

Viñas’ lawyer, Steve Zissou, insisted his client was not quite as glib as he sounded. “I don’t think he ever felt good about it,” he said. Knowing that you caused some of their deaths is a difficult thing to live with.” There’s no way of knowing how many people died because of what Viñas told the FBI, but given how important the U.S. government deemed his information to be, Zissou inferred that “a lot of people died.”

When I asked Viñas exactly when he truly gave up his former goals as a militant, he shrugged and said: “When you plead guilty, that’s when you renounce your old life.”

“But did your worldview change?” I persisted. “I mean, you’re helping the same army you went out to fight to bomb your former buddies. Did you change how you viewed the injustices that you wanted to fight in the first place?”

He said he still believed it's wrong for Western powers to meddle in Muslim countries, but "now I've seen the other side, and it gives me a better understanding that both sides are wrong."

I remained mystified by how Viñas managed to shift so seamlessly from a would-be suicide bomber to a U.S. intelligence asset. The judge in his case, Nicholas G. Garaufis, implied a similar bewilderment, noting that the man's spectacular volte-face complicated his sentencing: "The juxtaposition of Mr. Viñas's atrocious crimes and his remarkable post-arrest cooperation is what makes the task of sentencing Mr. Viñas so difficult."

Later, when I asked Zissou why he thought his client changed allegiances so quickly and completely, the lawyer exhaled slowly. "Well ... yeah. I'm not sure. It may be as simple as not wanting to spend the rest of his life in prison."

It's not uncommon, the FBI's Borelli told me later, for captured militants to start talking within days, even hours. Many are simply eager to tell their stories. There's often a void within them, the one that was previously filled by joining a group. "When that's taken away, when they're caught, sometimes telling their story may keep it alive for them," he said. "Or it may fill some other void, give them some kind of purpose."

Over the nine years he spent in prison, he participated in 100 interviews, reviewed 1,000 photographs, and helped in more than 30 law enforcement investigations, both in the United States and overseas. "The number of faceless, nameless victims he has saved," Steve said, hitting the desk for emphasis. "Soldiers! Muslims! Non-Muslims! Men, women, children, people who never knew they'd be victims!"

Viñas and Zissou had both expected that his cooperation with the government would earn him a place in a witness protection program. When Zissou learned, a day before Viñas' prison release, that he'd been denied entry into the program, he was incandescent. "Now what the f--- to we do?" he wondered. Without a family, friends, or money, Viñas had nowhere to go.

Zissou got the authorities to agree to pay for him to spend a month in a hotel. Farbod Azad, the FBI agent assigned to his case, visited, bringing him a box of Fruity Pebbles and some milk—then told him the bureau was finished paying for his room. Another government agency paid for a month, and after that he was sent to a three-quarters house for former offenders. He was on his own, needing to look for work. "It was like, 'Goodbye, thanks. Good luck in the homeless shelter,'" Zissou said, still a little bitter one year on. "It's almost like they were trying to get him [to] go back to extremism."

Avuncular and silver-haired, a veteran of numerous terrorism cases, Zissou has been a support for Viñas since his release from prison.

Lacking a way to create a future for themselves, former jihadis "aren't just at risk of committing another crime," he says, "but of committing a crime of insane violence." He believes mentoring ex-militants to be "a moral and professional responsibility."

The lawyer's relationship with Viñas goes well beyond the duly diligent. Over takeout lunch in his office, he and Viñas talked about history and philosophy and tried to puzzle out the future for a guy who had barely graduated from high school, who had no support from family or friends but did have a major felony charge. Zissou calls Viñas "son." "When I haven't heard or seen him in two or three days, I send him a text message: 'What the f--- is wrong with you? Where the f---

are you?’ ” Zissou grins fondly. “He’ll say, ‘Whaddaya mean?’ And I’ll tell him, ‘You don’t go this long without checking in!’ ”

The terms of his probation ban Viñas from owning a computer, so he checks his email at Steve’s law office. He’s a familiar figure there, running out for coffee for the office, photocopying, or helping install wireless routers. “Everybody loves him here,” said Zissou. “There’s nothing he wouldn’t do.” Midway through our conversation, he put his head around the door to Josh Viñas: “Don’t talk about the stuff you want to want to blow up, okay?”

I laughed nervously, but the warmth between them was palpable. More than that, it was clearly crucial to the rickety strategy devised to keep Viñas from sliding back toward extremism.

Zissou hopes that Viñas will eventually transition into counterterrorism work. Initially, he resisted. “All he wanted to do is get into the witsec”—witness protection—“and kind of disappear,” he told me. It took the lawyer weeks to coax his client to accept the potential benefits of living in the open. “I said to him, ‘Listen, you’re 35 years old. Do you really want to live a life of fear? Or do you want to live a life that has some meaning? Do you really want to hide out with a different name? Here’s an opportunity for you to make a difference in your life.’”

Despite his social stigma, and the potential danger of retaliation from Al Qaeda, living out in the open gave Viñas the possibility of doing meaningful work. Mitchell Silber, the NYPD’s former director of intelligence analysis, hired him as a part-time consultant at Parallel Networks, and the two of them have coauthored an article and given talks at D.C. think tanks. There’s also hope that Viñas might eventually make some money from Hollywood: Zissou’s been talking to some people in L.A. about dramatizing his life story.

Until then, the former militant supports himself by working as a lead and asbestos remover for New York City. Asbestos removal is a bizarrely appropriate job, jokes Zissou—just an extension of his work exposing Al Qaeda’s toxicity for U.S. intelligence services.

\*\*\*

**Walking back to the LIRR station,** I reflect that Viñas’ path, powered not by ideology but by survival and opportunism, was profoundly American. That this country essentially abandoned him at the prison gates, after he spent eight and a half years inside, speaks to the lack of a rehabilitation strategy here. More broadly, being cut free so abruptly is simply part of life in a nation where individuals are left very much on their own. He can’t expect help from a welfare state or a government-funded safety net, as he could in Northern Europe. He can’t get support from his tribe or extended family, as he could in many Muslim countries. If you’re from suburban Long Island, you have no village to go home to, no elders to steer you. Except perhaps your lawyer, if you’re lucky.

Viñas’ solo route into—and out of—militancy reflects aspects of his American upbringing. Ours is a culture in which the rootless thrive, and which prizes dynamism and individualism over tradition or kinship. More than any militant I interviewed, he was self-made, propelling himself into Al Qaeda on luck and his wits, then using those wits in prison to become a high-level FBI asset. His story’s third act was quintessentially American, too: he was denied help from the witness protection program, then left to exit prison without family, money or formal rehabilitation.



But then, we can be a careless nation, particularly when it comes to the potential fallout of faraway wars. The United States is a country whose own power is such that it doesn't seem to learn much about blowback, to connect the dots between the fear it rouses overseas and the fear of terrorism many of its citizens feel at home. When we fly our drones out from the base in the Nevada desert to Waziristan, we know they'll fly home again. With our eyes trained on our own political dramas at home, what happens in Waziristan stays in Waziristan.