

Some Thoughts on the Assassination of Osama bin Laden



During my first tour in Afghanistan in 2005, I was one of those who still thought that the war was justified and worth fighting. The search for bin Laden was ongoing and America held (or was perceived to hold) the moral high ground after quickly expelling the terrible Taliban and the terrorist network they harbored. The thing about war is that things do not go as planned, and throwing money and manpower into an unconventional fight does not usually work. When I first arrived in 2005, there were no more than 18,000 American military personnel on the ground—an insufficient number for the overly ambitious and under-planned nation-building strategy. Yet things were relatively quiet and there was little “action” to speak of—firefights, IEDs, rockets. A strange thing happened as this war continued and escalated while being grossly mismanaged at a political level—the number of troops increased greatly and so did the number of firefights, IEDs, and rockets, in correspondence with the number of casualties. By the time I finished my second tour in 2008, the situation had worsened to the point that the Taliban were stronger and more influential than any time since they were “overthrown” in 2001, despite a massive increase in American military presence.

Obviously, a huge part of this can be directly attributed the criminal negligence of the Bush administration in invading Iraq, which not only diverted resources and focus from Afghanistan, but also squandered the last bits of that

perceived moral high ground and gave new purpose and life to the extremists we were fighting. So by the end of 2008, Bush left office with two messy and unresolved wars on his hands and the trail for Osama bin Laden ice-cold. The new president, Obama, won the election over Hillary Clinton and John McCain in large part because he had originally opposed the Iraq invasion and was perceived to be a president with the correct judgment to resolve those wars in one way or another. Obama, probably in spite of his own personal inclination, decided to send more troops to Afghanistan in another so-called "surge," but only after a deliberate six-month review and decision-making process.

I was disappointed at the further escalation at that time as I had now become totally pessimistic that much good would come or that a larger fighting force would make much of a difference. In fact, 75% of American casualties in Afghanistan have occurred since 2009 when Obama tripled the number of military personnel to 100,000, with little to show for all this in actual results. As it stands today in 2015, the war in Afghanistan continues as the longest in American history by far and with no immediate end in sight, leading me to think I was unfortunately correct in my prediction. The best case scenario for the "honorable" exit from Afghanistan involves some type of negotiation between the Taliban and the Afghan government in order to maintain some sort of peace. Let's not speak of the failed development and rebuilding of that country, but it involves hundreds of billions of dollars vanishing into thin air.

This brings me back full-circle to the topic at hand—the assassination of Osama bin Laden. When I first saw the news in May, 2011, I was quite overcome with emotions, but not in the way you might think. Far from feeling some sense of satisfaction, closure, or redress, I reflected on the 10 years we Americans had been in Afghanistan at that point, the two years I had personally spent there, and all the violence and

hatred that such meaningless bloodshed brings. I did not celebrate like many Americans must have, but felt sadness at the emptiness of all our struggles. Did bin Laden deserve to die? Many people would say 'yes' without a second thought, but to me that is the wrong question. I would ask if he should have been assassinated without a trial. There is a reason America has basically zero moral authority with large swathes of the globe. A part of that comes from things like invading other countries on false pretenses. And a part of that comes from using unmanned drones and special ops teams to assassinate people in other countries without so much as a trial. Whether they are innocent bystanders or international terrorists, these extrajudicial murders by the government of the United States do little more than create more future terrorists and enemies. We loathed bin Laden, and rightly so, but to hundreds of millions of people he was a hero and a freedom fighter. If America truly wanted to show strength and confidence and export freedom and democracy, it would have sent bin Laden to the International Criminal Court for a trial in front of the whole world. Let due process and the international community together decide his fate.

Obama, who gambled that a successful assassination would instantly make him unassailable with voters in the area of foreign policy and go a long way to his reelection, chose the cynical solution to a problem left by his predecessors (the Clinton, Bush I, and Reagan administrations all have blood on their hands regarding bin Laden as well). If Obama truly wanted his "soaring rhetoric" to still resonate with people in America and around the globe, he would practice what he preached and make the really difficult decision to put bin Laden on trial.

I wanted to say something about the [recent article](#) by Seymour Hersh in the London Review of Books, but I realized that my position does not change whether the government lied about the entire bin Laden story or not. In any case, the fact that

Hersh's controversial article was almost totally dismissed by both the government and the press is not enough to disprove his story. The man who exposed the My Lai massacre and Abu Ghraib has been called a conspiracy theorist and a crackpot, and then the story just faded out of everyone's memory if they ever bothered to consider it in the first place. This is probably due to the fact that most people really don't care how bin Laden was discovered and killed, and most probably just suppose that ultimately he got what was coming to him.

There is one school of thought which says that the government should have the prerogative to lie and keep secrets in the area of foreign policy in the name of national security. I do not follow that school of thought. I think that a democratic and open society relies on transparency and freedom of information. If a government cannot trust the people with the truth, then the people cannot trust the government with security, in my formulation. The official story of bin Laden's killing was always a troubling one whose details seemed not to add up, and there may very well be some truth to parts of Hersh's account—it seems that we will never really know the truth. My point is that the operation was illegal and immoral in either case. Whether the CIA had a walk-in source reveal bin Laden's location or was given the information in cooperation with Pakistan's ISI, as Hersh alleges, makes little real difference in the end. The point of the operation was always covert assassination followed by a cover-up of the details.

We must ask ourselves what this assassination accomplished other than helping in some part to guarantee Obama's reelection. Have terrorism and extremism abated or even slowed down at all since 2011? In place of a fragmented and possibly marginal terrorist group al-Qaeda, we now have an aspiring new "caliphate" of ISIL wreaking havoc across the charred remains of large parts of war-torn Syria and Iraq. Did the killing of bin Laden convince even a single person sympathetic to

extremist or jihadi ideology to change their minds, or rather did it convince people already antipathetic to the United States and “Western culture” to intensify their support for the cause of global jihad?

One thing is for sure, and that is that every killing by the “infidel” Americans only creates more animosity and more future potential terrorists than the ostensibly guilty ones who were killed. That is why this strategy has been derisively called “whack-a-mole” or “the head of the hydra;” in traditional honor cultures such as in many majority Muslim countries, kill one person and then all his family and friends are now your sworn enemies if they were not already. Such cultures predate the modern idea of judicial process and trial by jury, two things which would likely render this blood vengeance relatively superfluous. Some may say that in order to achieve justice with a group that does not share our idea of justice, we have to play by their rules—namely, the honor culture cycle of revenge and vendetta of which bin Laden was just the latest but not the last case in point. Rather than stooping to this archaic and cynical model of violence and deception, America could show its true power by helping to light the way to more modern and enlightened justice and openness.

America cannot simultaneously be both a free and democratic society, and a country which indiscriminately assassinates people in other countries without a trial. It is time for an end to the popular apathy and political expediency which has allowed this downward spiral of unaccountable war and killing in the name of security.