



Experts: Operation may help Obama re-election

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Updated: 05/03/2011 06:36:00 AM EDT
BOSTON -- Last week, he found his birth certificate.

Yesterday, he found Osama bin Laden.

When Nov. 6, 2012, arrives, will American voters remember the birth-certificate hysteria, soaring gas prices and a sour economy? Or will they remember that it was President Barack Obama who told the nation, "at my direction, the United States launched a targeted operation against a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan," resulting in the death of the al-Qaida mastermind?

Under Obama's watch, U.S. forces killed the man that eluded former President George W. Bush for more than seven years.

But will that translate into a second term?

University of New Hampshire political-science professor Dante Scala said bin Laden's killing will certainly bolster Obama's approval rating in the short term.

"For voters, it's been a year of nothing worth cheering about," he said yesterday. "But then all of a sudden, there's this. If you take out public enemy number one, you'll get big props from Americans."

Scala said bin Laden's death also silences the conservative talking point that all Obama has done "is apologize for America" and that he "makes America weaker internationally."

The comparisons between Obama and former President Jimmy Carter, Scala said, have disappeared.

"Obama gambled and won," he said.

The opposite happened for Carter during the failed Operation Eagle Claw in 1980, when Carter ordered the military to use force to free 52 U.S.

hostages detained at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, Iran.

On April 24 of that year, a rescue helicopter crashed into an American transport aircraft, killing eight servicemen and one Iranian civilian.

But for Obama, the death of bin Laden "is now part of his legacy, and you cannot take that away," Scala said, adding that when Republicans like former Vice President Dick Cheney and former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani are praising you, "that's big news."

But Scala also stressed that the 2012 election will still be all about the economy.

In Washington, D.C., Ben Friedman, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, identified both Bush senior and junior as presidents who witnessed boosts in approval ratings as a result of high-profile international incidents.

Friedman noted that in 1992, as George H.W. Bush sought a second presidential term, several big-name Democrats sat out the election since they viewed his victory during the first Persian Gulf war as an "unbeatable" feat.

"But a bad economy washed all those approval points away just a year after that victory," Friedman pointed out.

Friedman added that George W. Bush enjoyed a 90 percent approval rating immediately following 9/11.

"But despite his 2004 re-election, his rating fell to a historic low level," Friedman said.

Boston University political-science professor

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Douglas Kriner named another high-profile event that temporarily bolstered Bush's approval rating. In December 2004, U.S. forces captured former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein at a farm near Tikrit.

"The imagery of a captured Saddam getting dragged out of a spider hole didn't play much in the 2004 election," Kriner noted. "I think more people in 2012 will be concerned with whether or not we are still fighting several wars than if one man is dead."

Kriner added that the bulk of election issues will revolve around the economy.

"They may try to focus on foreign affairs, but I don't think that will be successful," he said of the Obama administration. "It's still going to be about jobs and the economy."

During a presidential debate on Oct. 7, 2008, Obama bluntly vowed, "We will kill bin Laden. We will crush al-Qaida. That has to be our biggest national-security priority."

Scala said Obama's fulfillment of that promise will not go unnoticed if Republicans try to browbeat him about national security and perceived indecisiveness on foreign policy.

"Thus far, his claim to fame has been Libya, and that hasn't been pretty," Scala said. "But Sunday's event does take a leg out from under the Republicans."

Now, Kriner said, the political fallout and international policy debate puts the spotlight squarely on Afghanistan.

"President Obama said he wants to withdraw troops this July," he said. "Will he be able to make good on that promise as well?"

Mary Anne Marsh, a Democratic political analyst and principal at the Dewey Square Group, a Boston public-affairs corporation, said Obama's fulfilled promise to bring down bin Laden will resonate with more voters than most pundits expect.

"His campaign will make the case that he deserves a second term to finish his job," she said yesterday. "What better example than finishing off Osama?"

The fact that bin Laden was killed under his presidency, Marsh said, means Obama earned trust points with the American public.

"Every election is about trust," she said. "I can't think of anyone who trusted him when he said he'd be the one who would bring down bin Laden. Two years in, he's hunted him down. Bush couldn't do that.

"Obama can now say that he's the guy who did it. If he can fix that, people will believe he can fix other problems, too."

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