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"My first reaction was a cringe," Washington Post reporter Petula Dvorak wrote about Sunday night's "macabre jubilee," as D.C. residents of all stripes partied in the downtown streets, celebrating Osama bin Laden's death.

"Almost vulgar," she pronounced the scene.

There's no accounting for taste, but it seems to me that, if ever there was a death worth celebrating, it's this one.

That's so not simply because bin Laden, murderer of thousands of innocents, richly deserved a bullet to the face, but also because his death gives us the opportunity to end what once threatened to become an era of permanent emergency and perpetual war.

Sept, 11, 2001, should have concentrated the mind wonderfully as to the nature of our enemy: a stateless network of militants whose greatest hope lay in getting America to damage itself. Instead, we played into al Qaeda's hands with two bloody and costly foreign occupations, only one of which, in Afghanistan, had any relevance to the al Qaeda threat.

In Kabul in the fall of 2001, Wall Street Journal reporter Alan Cullison lucked into buying Ayman al-Zawahiri's abandoned laptop, lifted from al Qaeda's central office. What Cullison found provided insight into the jihadists' strategy:

"Like the early Russian anarchists who wrote some of the most persuasive tracts on the uses of terror, al Qaeda understood that its attacks would not lead to a quick collapse of the great powers."

Rather, "its aim was to tempt the powers to strike back" in a manner that would, in bin Laden's words, "bleed America to the point of bankruptcy," and enhance terrorist recruitment. "One wonders," Cullison wrote, "if the United States is indeed playing the role written for it on the computer."

As bin Laden famously said in 2004, "All that we have to do is to send two mujahedeen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al Qaeda, in order to make generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses."

Bin Laden didn't "bleed America to the point of bankruptcy." But we've lost nearly 6,000 soldiers, sailors, airmen and contractors, and spent more than \$1 trillion on the thankless task of creating democracy at gunpoint.

For a decade now, U.S. troops have been forced to play the role of armed "community organizers." To what end? There was always something odd about conservatives jumping from "they hate us because we're free" to "if we make them free, then they won't hate us."

If you think expanded suffrage "drains the swamp" of terrorist hate, consider the reaction of democratically elected Hamas, which mourned bin Laden's death.

On Monday, neoconservative Max Boot wrote, somewhat nervously, "Don't assume that with bin Laden gone, the rationale for the war effort in Afghanistan also disappears."

Boot's right that having a presence in Afghanistan helped us carry out the operation that killed bin Laden. But how deep a "footprint" do we need? We now have nearly 100,000 troops in-country chasing what President Obama's CIA director admits are "50 to 100" al Qaeda operatives, "maybe less."

We certainly don't need to continue funding what George Will has called "New Deal 2.0" in Afghanistan, complete with agricultural subsidies to discourage opium growing, a 900,000-square-foot police training center for the country's illiterate and corrupt security forces, and USAID-sponsored pro-democracy "kite festivals."

Is bin Laden's death "merely symbolic"? Perhaps, but "merely" ignores the importance of symbols in a fight that has a large ideological component. And the symbolism involved in giving the one-time iconic figure a thug's death allows us to put an end to an era of tragically wrongheaded strategy. We should declare victory, and come home.

Examiner Columnist Gene Healy is a vice president at the Cato Institute and author of "The Cult of the Presidency."

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