

From the editorial advisory board: Bin Laden

Posted:

This week's question: : The surprise U.S. military killing of terrorist Osama bin Laden in Pakistan on Sunday brought a lot of relief to Americans, and even some jubilation. But his death at the hands of U.S. Navy Seals also spurred a lot of controversy, whether it was from the reaction to the killing itself, the location where he was found, and even whether pictures of his corpse should be released? What do you think?

With all the things that could have gone awry, President Obama's decision to send Navy Seals Team Six into Pakistan to capture or kill Osama bin Laden sheds new light on how one president can make an enormous difference. To succeed, you sometimes have to risk failure. The commander-in-chief must fully understand the capabilities and limitations of the soldiers under his command, along with the tactics and equipment at his disposal.

In August of 2010, carefully marshaled intelligence information was pieced together and shared with the President. Slowly, but deliberately, a small group of national security advisors met with him to devise a plan, including fog of war contingencies employable in split-seconds, to exploit the information.

Even in the last few days, after authorizing the action, President Obama ably demonstrated that, as he so aptly expressed it in September of 2008, "a president has to be able to do more than one thing at a time." While this extraordinary mission proceeded, he comforted tornado victims in Alabama, met with Congresswoman Giffords and her husband in Cape Canaveral, and brought down the house at the annual White House Correspondent's dinner with his tongue-in-cheek "live" birth video (from Disney's "Lion King").

When the stakes are high and the going is tough, you want a leader at the helm who so well demonstrates exemplary intelligence, demeanor and tenacity that the entire organization under his command tends to reflect the same qualities. No brag, just fact: we're grateful Team 6 beat the odds. Well done.

Ed Byrne

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Even though a CNN poll indicates that a majority of Americans want to see the Osama bin Laden proof-of-death images, it's a bad idea. This is what terrorist organizations would do, but it is not appropriate behavior for the leading nation of the free world.

We stand to lose far more than we'd gain by releasing grotesque shots of bin Laden with his face blown off. Not only would America's standing be diminished, but the photos would remain seared in our collective memories -- especially our children's. And some of those clamoring to view the images would react with suspicion. Claims of Photoshopping would inevitably ensue, further perpetuating doubts over whether we really got bin Laden. There's no need to stir that controversy -- it will spark discussions and debates we don't need to have.

Advocates of posting photographs say that extremists know bin Laden is dead, and that photos will simply serve as confirmation. They insist no additional terrorist acts will result. But what if they're wrong? Showing such gruesome pictures would assuredly inflame al-Qaeda supporters, triggering new attacks. It's not a risk worth taking. Instead, we should feel relieved that a major security threat has been extinguished.

We must take Obama's word that bin Laden has been taken out. After all, no members of the terrorist's family are denying the news and declaring him alive and well. And al-Qaeda certainly knows that their ringleader is dead and gone. Even better, our Navy Seals have sent a strong message that you can't invade our country without deadly -- albeit delayed -- consequences.

Jimmy Calano,

The barrage of reactions to last Sunday's historic event is predictably causing a lack of focus on what the really important questions are following the death of Osama bin Laden. I guess it's inevitable that something as emotionally powerful as the killing of our country's No. 1 individual enemy is going to result in outlandish claims and crass political posturing. Filtering

out the noise, there are a couple of areas where I'd like to see us take time to learn valuable lessons and make adjustments to how we keep our country safe.

First, I'd like Americans to thoughtfully examine our country's reactions to the attacks of 9/11, 2001. We should be asking difficult question about the wisdom of waging "war" against abstract notions such as terrorism. A lot of bluster and hyperbolic rhetoric was used in justifying the enormous military expenditures of the last decade, and circumstances were exploited to justify the invasion of Iraq. But in the end, it was the targeted intelligence operations that took out al-Qaeda's ring-leader and mastermind of the attack.

Second, I'd like to see people overwhelmingly reject attempts to create a narrative that justifies unethical and immoral practices such as torture of our enemies. It has been painful to watch discredited individuals like Donald Rumsfeld pedaling tenuous links between finding bin Laden and cherry-picked information obtained through torture.

These questions are infinitely more significant than whether the Obama administration is doing the right thing with bin Laden's corpse.

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Osama bin Laden's proclivity to commit mass murder places him into the most extreme category of evil. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Mugabe, and Kim Jong Il are examples of others in that category. Fortunately, upon dying, their ability to inspire mass murder declines. Unfortunately, photos of their bodies can awaken a desire for vengeance in their deranged followers, and not one, such, violent act is worth an iota of voyeuristic satisfaction gained by a minority of viewers.

Nor would bin Laden's death photo mollify those who believe it to be Photoshopped. Such conspiracy theorists are already concocting their own version of the raid. As for those who need a gruesome photo to assuage their grief, may they be forewarned that the image more likely will sear itself into memory as a painful reminder of horrific scenes. Death photos don't bring happiness.

For those who seek goodness in a world unsullied by bin Laden's deadly prophesies, DNA testing, computerized facial matching, and al-Qaeda's official acknowledgement are proof enough that he's deceased. While other evildoers are ready to take his place, American's determination to overcome their negative messages assures that goodness will prevail.

It was humanity's misfortune that bin Laden became so powerful. He voluntarily chose to join that evil category; his death was no one's fault but his own. Some will say it was premature, others will say it was overdue, but the only thing that matters now is that his ability to inspire evil is greatly diminished.

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"Bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy," was how bin Laden described his goals. In a blog post titled "Osama Won," Reason magazine editor Radley Balko notes that bin Laden succeeded in his related goals: "to draw the U.S. and the West into a prolonged war -- an actual war in Afghanistan, and a broader global war with Islam." Reuters reports that "the war expense topped \$1 trillion in December 2009," and CostOfWar.com keeps a running tally.

But have costly wars, a large troop presence, and nation building helped capture terrorists? The operation to apprehend bin Laden involved about two dozen Navy Seals and years of surveillance and intelligence gathering. "A scalpel, not a sledgehammer, should be our primary counterterrorism tool," notes Cato Institute policy analyst David Rittgers, a former Special Forces officer in Afghanistan.

The combination of intelligence and precisely targeted force was also behind capturing 9/11 plotters Khalid Sheik Mohammed and Ramzi Binalshibh. "Most effective counterterrorism techniques do not rely on tens of thousands of troops stationed indefinitely in distant lands," notes Christopher Preble, author of "The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free."

Recent calls for pulling troops out of Afghanistan sound reasonable. The number of al-Qaeda members there is "at most ... 50 to 100, maybe less," said CIA director Leon Panetta last summer. Indiana Senator Richard Lugar argues that this does not justify "100,000 American troops and a \$100 billion per year cost."

Brian T. Schwartz

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