13 of 17 DOCUMENTS

McClatchy Washington Bureau

May 2, 2011 Monday

A world without bin Laden already a world long gone

BYLINE: Scott Canon and Rick Montgomery; McClatchy Newspapers

LENGTH: 1393 words

Without him, there would likely be no Department of Homeland Security, no Patriot Act, no Quran-burning pastors.

Had Osama bin Laden never been born, there would surely be fewer gold star mothers and fathers, less need for prosthetic limbs for young troops, an American public still largely ignorant to the Muslim concept of martyrdom.

Our military probably would still be more interested in tanks and aircraft carriers, less wary of roadside bombs and suicide belts. The development of killer robot planes might not have come so far. The need to deal with asymmetric threats -- battling an army not of battalions but of insurgents -- would not be so pressing.

And America would certainly be a country with far fewer long-fading yellow ribbons.

The man who came to symbolize a bloody rejection of all things U.S. left a legacy among those he hated, and those he inspired to hate them. Little wonder that his demise brought so little sympathy.

"In the past few years, (bin Laden's) main military triumphs have been against such targets as Afghan schoolgirls, Shiite Muslim civilians, and defenseless synagogues in Tunisia and Turkey," wrote pundit Christopher Hitchens on news of bin Laden's death and dumping at sea. "Has there ever been a more contemptible leader from behind, or a commander who authorized more blanket death sentences on bystanders?"

In ways small and monumental, bin Laden's two decades on the world stage had a profound impact on the nation he so loathed.

It was after he mobilized al Qaida against the U.S., after all, that Washington set up the legal purgatory of Guantanamo for foreign fighters. Since then, the country tormented itself over whether waterboarding is torture and whether torture is always a bad idea. It shipped suspected terrorists to other countries to sidestep the issue.

The fact that the vanquishing of bin Laden came in part because of those same tactics won't settle the issue. It was, in a way, the nature of bin Laden's tactics that prompted America to bend its own ways.

Bin Laden no more invented the suicide bomber than Henry Ford invented the automobile. He just made more of them than anyone had before.

Under his leadership, al Qaida shifted the rationalization behind suicide bombings. No longer did a man with an explosive vest need to aim for Israeli soldiers or some other combatants. Under bin Laden's reasoning, truck bombs could target civilians as long as the victims could be painted as sympathetic to Islam's supposed enemies.

"They built this narrative that Muslims are being besieged and humiliated and targeted by the West in wars and occupation," said Mohammed M. Hafez, an associate professor at the Naval Post Graduate School who has researched suicide bombers. "They elevated martyrdom in online documents and videos. ... They've really taken the art of martyrdom veneration to a new level."

His more lethal brand of terrorism changed, too, the dynamics of American politics.

George W. Bush arguably would have had a harder time at re-election in 2004 were he not, as he put it, "a war president." Barack Obama's re-election prospects -- had he ever made it to the White House -- might be even bleaker had troops on his watch not slain the face of terrorism.

Carolyn Marvin, a professor at the Annenberg School for Communications for the University of Pennsylvania, attributed part of the nation's polarized political climate to U.S. actions undertaken in pursuit of al Qaida and other terrorist groups -- "in some cases, with war after war, creating a worse situation" for national security than before 9/11.

People such as Tim Lynch of the libertarian Cato Institute believe the country went too far in allowing more leeway for warrantless wiretaps and the use of military tribunals to avoid the defendant protections of criminal courts.

"Countries always tend to expand government power in wartime. Then they retract them when the conflict is over. But governments never give it all back," said Lynch, the director of Cato's project on criminal justice.

"The problem with the war on terror, is it's never over," he said. "Not even now that bin Laden's dead."

The transformation of law enforcement, though, also wiped out legal and logistical prohibitions that stopped agencies from sharing information. Today, investigators of both terrorism and organized crime laud the changes as a fundamental improvement in the ability not to just connect dots, but to do so before something blows up.

For American Muslims, the bin Laden effect has been entirely negative. Harris Zafar, a spokesman for the country's oldest Muslim organization, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community USA, said it had seemed in the 1990s that Americans were becoming more trusting of minority religions. That ended quickly for Muslims.

"We were stuck in the middle between these people who were perverting the message of Islam for violence and people who no longer trusted us," Zafar said. "We get it from both sides."

There's no questioning that the military changed to meet the threat of bin Laden and his ilk. Before 9/11, the Pentagon invested heavily in the high-tech materiel that seemed to perform so well in the first Gulf War.

But chasing the terrorist bands who answered bin Laden's call to jihad felt like drawing water from damp sand. So the military, especially the Army, redesigned what it did. Tanks and artillery units lost prestige to commanders who could insinuate their troops among locals and turn civilians into collaborators.

"Because of bin Laden we are now truly full-spectrum forces. We are as capable of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism as we are at conventional combat," said John Nagl, who updated the Army's counter-insurgency manual before retiring in 2008 and joining the Center for a New American Security.

Other analysts worry that the war on terror, and bin Laden's place in it, came at the cost of conventional military readiness.

"We've structured it all for everything but combat," said Douglas MacGregor, a retired Army colonel who now writes for the Committee for the Republic. "All the tactics and the strategy we used were a windfall for bin Laden. It fulfilled his prophecies about us wanting to invade these Muslim countries and take the oil."

The effects were more personal, of course, for the men and women who inspired so many ribbons on so many cars and trucks.

Mike Davis of Lee's Summit, Mo., took a face full of shrapnel one day in Baghdad in 2004. He's medically retired now, working through the affects of traumatic brain injury that jumbles his memory and can short circuit his ability to stick with a thought, or a sentence. He feels the legacy of bin Laden every day.

"Now that (bin Laden) is dead, me and my Afghanistan brethren and buddies feel justified for our injuries, and for our fallen comrades," said the 42-year-old former Army sergeant.

Before bin Laden sponsored the 9/11 attacks, Phil Foster was a fleet manager in Charlotte, N.C. Now he's preparing for his third tour of Afghanistan, a colonel with the 475th Quartermaster Group. His wife tells him, sympathetically but unhappily, that he's changed. The local Veterans Administration hospital tells him he suffers from post traumatic stress disorder.

"There were so many bombs. I'm jumpy now," Foster said. "But it made me remember why I wear this uniform: To defend America."

It's worth remembering that bin Laden truly burst into the American consciousness when airline passengers were allowed to carry knives with blade no longer than four inches. Now we worry about bombs in shoes and underwear and surrender our bottled water at security checkpoints. Dangerous items confiscated by U.S. Transportation Security Administration screeners include lighters, pepper spray, ski poles and tens of thousands of box cutters.

Mark Linzille, a University of Missouri-Kansas City senior who edits the independent student newspaper, cannot recall living without slow lines at airport gates and bags being rifled through at sporting events.

"I never really felt unsafe growing up... (but) it is kind of a relief to know we finally got (bin Laden)," he said.

(Canon and Montgomery report for The Kansas City Star.)

MORE FROM MCCLATCHY

Bin Laden raid years in the making, minutes in execution

Osama bin Laden: Born into privilege, died the face of evil

Across from the White House, a time-capsule moment

Follow McClatchy on Twitter .

McClatchy Newspapers 2011

LOAD-DATE: May 2, 2011

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper