

Goodbye Osama, and a bit more thought please, President Obama

By David J. Olney, Assoc. Lecturer, School of History & Politics, University of Adelaide

It is now widely known and accepted that Osama bin Laden was killed by U.S. personnel in close proximity to a Pakistani military academy in the town of Abbottabad.



Rather than marking the end of a chapter in the history of global terrorism, Osama's killing has, instead, muddied issues on both a tactical and strategic level.

In the statement that President Obama made immediately after the U.S. operation in Pakistan, the world was informed that Osama had been shot in the head and killed, and in the eyes of the President, justice had been done. However, we need to question – since when does the combination of an extra-judicial summary execution and the

breach of a state's sovereignty add up to justice?

If we broadly define justice as (a) the ideal of fairness and impartiality, and (b) as the judgment and punishment of a party who has allegedly wronged, then it is reasonable to argue that Osama's killing more closely resembles punishment than it does justice.

The Obama administration chose their words very poorly given that (at least to Americans) the U.S.'s rhetoric of justice is supposed to inspire the world through a combination of lofty ideals and transparent judicial processes, neither of which were apparent on *that* Sunday night (May 1st 2011).

Killing Osama may have been a necessity for the United States, but giving such action a less lofty epithet than *justice* would have helped the world to both see and understand the U.S.'s actions in a more reasonable light. The killing of Osama was retribution, pure and simple.

Retribution can be defined as punishment inflicted in the spirit of moral outrage or personal vengeance. This seems to be a far better way to explain what happened in Pakistan rather than calling it justice. Retribution is both visceral and ruthless. It implies that moral outrage is a principle motivation for action. The United States has spent almost ten years cultivating its moral outrage, and it is detrimental to President Obama's position and policies to conflate moral outrage and retribution with justice.

Successfully killing Osama and the method by which his body was removed from a sovereign land is a blunt example of how much power the United States has. The Obama administration should be less gung-ho and more careful to demonstrate that there is more to U.S. policy than acting with impunity. The world has seen the images of the aftermath of SEAL Team 6's operation, which reinforce growing global perceptions of U.S. willingness to disregard any international norms that do not suit its purpose. Could the Obama administration have provided the world with more than proof of carnage? For example, could we also have been shown a censored version of the orders for this mission, indicating 'capture or kill', or be provided with an audio recording of a SEAL yelling "*surrender and you will be arrested without harm*" in Arabic? In short, could the Obama administration have demonstrated a commitment to something resembling justice?

The world has been given no tactical or strategic justification for Osama's killing, which makes the operation look even more like retribution than justice.



If Osama had a terrorist operation ready to go, or was about to disappear again, then the operation might be easier to justify. But no such evidence has been forthcoming. The timing of the operation appears to have been driven by old enmities rather than by a clear sense of what sort of future the U.S. wants to portray, and this is not good enough when a critically important state such as Pakistan is in the middle of American 'moral outrage'.

It is clear from the mixed messages and changing lines of argument that the Obama administration has presented, that they have not been able to stay 'on message' since Osama's killing.



As days passed, the media has continued to ask both reasonable and difficult questions, and the administration's message has been pushed and pulled out of shape. The Obama administration should have thought long and hard about how it wanted to present its message before killing Osama, and waiting a few days to get their message straight would have provided them with an opportunity to choose more appropriate language and to present a consistent message that could have held up to scrutiny.

It took nearly ten years for the United States to get Osama, and at the rate that things are going it will take another ten years to undo the damage to U.S./Pakistan relations. If the Obama administration had stayed quiet after the operation, then there would have been all sorts of speculation about what had happened, including what had happened to the downed stealth helicopter, but none of this would have been as bad as hanging Pakistan out to dry as an untrustworthy ally. Pakistan was given no way to save face on the termination of bin Laden, and now has no clear way to present itself as anything other than inept and/or corrupt. This is not the way to treat any country, and particularly not a country that possesses nuclear weapons, an unstable political environment, and a neighbour who has cost the West a great deal of treasure and blood.

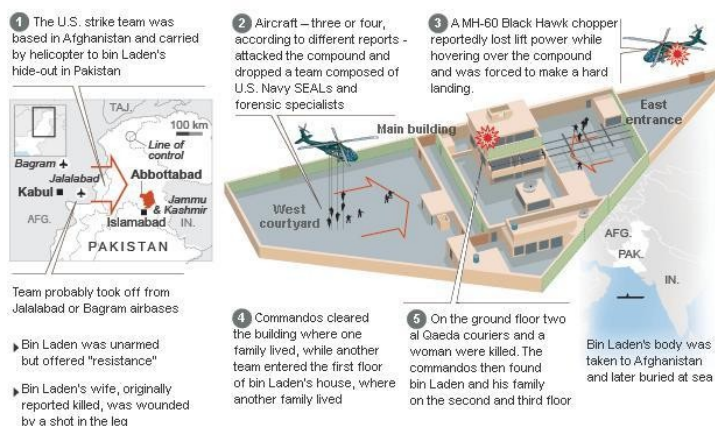
Osama is dead, but the consequences of how he was killed are going to live on in political and terrorist strategies for years to come. Thinking should be easier than killing, but in this case it looks like the killing was easier for the Obama administration than working out what to say next.

Interestingly, in a BBC interview on May 22nd, President Obama made his position clear:

*“America would not hesitate to launch another unilateral military operation on Pakistani soil to flush out other al Qaeda figures if it had information that they were hiding there”.*¹

Bin Laden “kill operation”

A U.S. strike team of about 15 special forces operatives, dropped by helicopter to bin Laden’s hide-out near the Pakistani capital Islamabad under the cover of night, shot the al Qaeda leader to death on Sunday.



Sources: Thomson Reuters, media reports, U.S. officials

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Bin Laden Compound image:

[Google Earth](#)

Bin Laden image:

http://www.feelfree.co/member/photos/art/1701412107editor_Osama Bin Laden controlled al-Qaeda from Abbottabad house.jpg

President Obama image:

http://4.bp.blogspot.com/-ROFqYFW_KIE/Tb9_iVQUWI/AAAAAAAAAES0/sItvecoVHQY/s1600/President-Barack-Obama-announces-the-death-of-Osama-bin-Laden-screen-capture-from-White-House-govt-video-May-1-2011.jpg

Bin Laden ‘kill operation’ image:

<http://img.ibtimes.com/www/data/images/full/2011/05/08/95579.jpg>

(Accessed: 24/05/2011)

¹ Suroor H., *Will repeat action in Pakistan if needed: Obama*, The Hindu, May 22nd 2011