



## MORE FPRI PERSPECTIVES ON BIN LADEN'S DEMISE

*In the immediate aftermath of bin Laden's demise, FPRI published essays by FPRI Senior Fellows Barak Mendelsohn and Lawrence Husick. We then held a public briefing featuring nine FPRI scholars and two guest scholars, summarized in a published report by Tally Helfont. We now offer two new perspectives by FPRI Fellows – Stephen Gale, Gregory Montanaro, and David Danelo. The relevant texts and audiofiles are posted on [www.fpri.org](http://www.fpri.org).*

## BIN LADEN'S DEATH AND THE MORAL LEVEL OF WAR

By David Danelo

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On May 1, 2011, at Citizens Bank Park in Philadelphia, a sold-out crowd of American baseball fans erupted with cheers entirely unrelated to the play of their hometown Phillies. The athletes themselves, unable to indulge in stadium smart-phone chatter, were puzzled to hear boisterous chants of “U-S-A! U-S-A!” cascading into the infield, until word of Osama bin Laden's death finally spread to the dugouts.

In war, as Napoleon tells us, the moral is to the physical as three is to one. Although the French emperor was speaking of 18<sup>th</sup> century battles, he could just as easily have been discussing 21<sup>st</sup> century policy complexities. Perhaps, upon reflection for the vagaries of democratic constituencies, the Gallic conqueror would have expanded the moral variable in war—particularly, in a democracy—by ten or twenty fold.

Few things in U.S. foreign policy circles are more vexing than gauging the moral fortitude of the American public for an extended and open-ended conflict. As author and FPRI senior fellow Dominic Tierney has observed, the American people have historically demonstrated a double-minded pattern of beginning their wars as crusades before deriding them as quagmires.<sup>1</sup> Generals from Zachary Taylor to David Petraeus have seen the fickleness of the American public thwart tactically sound military battle plans. Occasionally, they are prevented from “finishing the job” by a people whose fierceness U.S. military officers often find perplexingly finite.

The will of the people—that ubiquitous Holy Grail of both the warfighter and policy maker—cannot be easily calculated as a linear variable. During World War II, Lieutenant Colonel James Doolittle did not bomb Tokyo because the action was militarily significant. President Franklin Roosevelt ordered the operation because showing the American people Japan could be bloodied was necessary to bolster their will to fight.

Similarly, the three survivors of Iwo Jima, representing the six men who had been memorialized in Joe Rosenthal's epic photograph, were not returned from the Pacific theater and paraded across the country simply for their own health and welfare. The will of the people—a spiritual impetus that took important corporeal form in the purchase of war bonds—was increased with the physical evidence of success. Alone, these acts were insignificant, but they did increase the resolve of Americans to sacrifice until achieving victory.

Many commentators have criticized the American people for spontaneously celebrating the successful raid that killed Osama bin Laden. Talking heads have suggested the images would backfire; that development opportunities in Pakistan would be squandered, as though exultation over a mass murderer's destruction is the same as a penalty marker for unsportsmanlike

<sup>1</sup> Tierney, Dominic. *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War*, Little, Brown: 2010.

conduct. These voices fail to acknowledge a central truth: while opinions of allies are certainly important—and, in the complex game of geopolitics, some matter more than others—international alliances alone do not win a nation’s wars, nor can they exclusively shape the policy that begins them. The will of the people forms the backbone of the Republic.

More than any other manufactured or authentic feel-good moment in the past decade—more than the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad, the purple-stained fingers of Iraqis at ballot boxes, or the smiling faces of Afghan girls at school ribbon-cutting ceremonies—the raid that killed Osama bin Laden stands, to date, as the defining moral victory of America’s war on terror. And, like in previous moral victories, the renewed enthusiasm of Americans will result in a period of support for President Obama.

Regardless of politics, there is an open-ended question of how officials responsible for prosecuting the war on terror sustain this narrative of moral victory in the United States. The Obama administration has obtained a dividend of sorts from this successful mission, which must be applied to one of the many existing policy dilemmas. Withdrawal from Afghanistan? Ground troops in Libya? Democracy movements in Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain? How the President chooses to use the policy dividend derived from killing bin Laden—even more so than the terrorist’s death—will be one of the defining foreign policy questions of the 2012 election.

For the time being, however, Americans have the resolution they long sought. Back in Philadelphia, morale at Citizens Bank Park is as high before the games as it is when the home team wins. The Star Spangled Banner is sung with greater vigor, and the volume of applause at the song’s conclusion is higher than it was before bin Laden died. That enthusiasm may not last, but the country—and the President—should enjoy it while it does.

## OSAMA BIN LADEN’S DEATH, OSAMA BIN LADEN’S LEGACY

By Stephen Gale and Gregory Montanaro

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Osama bin Laden (OBL) is dead! Killed by a US Special Operations team near Abbottabad in Pakistan. Even though it took over ten years of often-aborted attempts, it was—and is—truly a milestone in the US “War on Terrorism.” But what does it mean? What should America and Americans be concerned about now that OBL has been taken out of the picture? And what is OBL’s “legacy” and how might it continue to impact the US and the West?

After the almost ten years since OBL became the visible symbol of Islamic terrorism, the US finally managed to gather the critical intelligence needed to plan and execute an action that worked. Throughout those ten years, OBL had been at the top of the US and the world’s “Most Wanted” list, a position earned, in part, as a consequence of what we believe his role to have been in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.

The story of those attacks has, in those ten years, become almost mythic. In Western lore, OBL was alternately: the “mastermind” of the attacks; a coward who might turn into one of the greatest threats in US history; and the leader of a group of Islamic fundamentalists who had declared war on US, Crusaders (read Christendom), and Zionists. For the ummah—the world’s Muslims—OBL was: the archetypical hero, the man who had everything and gave it up to devote his life to defending the faith; OR a heretic who distorted the meaning of the Holy Qur’an to support his dreams of personal glory; OR the face of an anticipated resurgence and re-commitment to the words of the Holy Qur’an and to an Islam in its purest form.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to hear about every possible perspective on the fall-out from the US action: US relations with Pakistan; the Afghanistan exit strategy; the upcoming 2012 elections; the prospects for future terrorist actions; and so on. Each is clearly important. Each will also require careful analysis and re-analysis to achieve the insights required by politicians, the punditry, and media commentators. But while the world tends to focus on the political impacts of OBL’s death, we must remember that it is the consequences for terrorism that are the real concern. Although for years analysts have, for example, used his communiqués to divine the outcome of elections, OBL’s importance is certainly not a function of his political influence. Past, present, and future, OBL’s power derived solely from his position as the leader of al Qaeda and a symbol of the revival of Islam (or, more accurately, his version of Islam) as a major force in the world.

The effects of OBL’s death certainly could have turned out very differently had it not been for his part in signing the “Declaration of War” and his role in planning and executing a series of major terrorist actions. Al Qaeda (and its leader, OBL) would have been of little more consequence than any of the other Muslim fundamentalist groups: perhaps effectual as a voice proclaiming the West’s intention of destroying Islam and calling on the ummah to defend the faith, but with little chance

of having any practical impact.

No, what brought OBL to the top of the “Most Wanted” list was the result of his ability to combine his commitment to Islam (i.e., his version of Islam) with his early training in construction finance and management. These, together with his personal wealth, he helped to create al Qaeda, a group committed to re-establishing the early principles of Islam and defending the faith from the corruption of the West. Of perhaps equal significance, OBL was also able to professionalize al Qaeda by attracting an educated elite as its core.

It was this, the creation of al Qaeda (The Base), that is the foundation of OBL’s Legacy—that and the power of OBL’s message to the ummah: that the US and the West can be defeated by the faithful of Islam, by those who submit to the word of the Qur’an and who are committed to taking whatever steps are necessary to defend the faith from the corrupting influence of the US and the West.

In the immediate future, the impacts of OBL’s death will undoubtedly be directly related to operational matters—that is, to whatever al Qaeda and other Islamist groups see as necessary in fulfilling whatever OBL’s “Last Will and Testament” contained. In the short run this may be acts of revenge and retribution. In the long run, however, these operations will draw more directly on OBL’s Legacy by using “strategic terrorism” —linked sequences of actions—to undermine and disrupt the infrastructure and vital systems of the US economy.

What was important about OBL in the past will thus continue to drive the power of his legacy. It is, as we now know, a legacy founded far more on his organizational abilities than on his operational expertise. Even more important was his role as spiritual leader, as a reminder of the central role of faith in the struggle, that it is faith that transformed his legacy from that of a simple guide to terrorist operations into one that offered a combined operational and symbolic posture to all of Islam.

It is important to keep in mind that, regardless of our fantasies about his role as a “mastermind,” OBL was only indirectly involved in al Qaeda’s operational planning. Rather, his role was the stuff of high drama: he spoke to the ability of Islam to defeat the US and the West by employing a strategy of warfare based exclusively on the use of sequences of modest, low cost actions—“strategic terrorism.”

But of even greater long-term import is the effect that OBL’s Legacy will have on Islamic terrorism writ large: by all repute, the organizational structure that made al Qaeda a powerful force fifteen years ago is now producing a qualitative shift in the capabilities of Islamist terrorism by turning what were once groups with largely regional objectives into a decentralized worldwide organization focused on the re-creation and revitalization of the caliphate.

What kinds of actions—besides those aimed at revenge and retribution—are likely to be on the drawing boards of the Islamist terrorist network? Will everything go on as they have been for the past ten to fifteen years? Will there simply be a series of sporadic actions for the next couple of months and then a return to business as usual? Or will OBL’s death be transformative—that is, will it bring about a major shift in the behavior of the Islamist terrorist network?

For those elements of the global Islamist network that are committed to the long-run goals of al Qaeda—that is, to the defeat of the US and the West and the re-creation of the caliphate—OBL’s death is most likely to signal the close of the influence of his personal struggle to initiate a spiritual reawakening within Islam and to ensure that the methods used to defend the faith were fully aligned with the Qur’an.

Rather, at this point it appears that this aspect of OBL’s message is “sealed” and that his death will be interpreted as a call to action.

Al Qaeda’s actions thus far are probably best understood as the initial steps in an attempt to transform the faithful from a centuries-long culture of patience to a realization that, to regain a position of strength in the world, Islam must eliminate the outside influences that have corrupted the faith. Even more, to achieve the ultimate goal—the reinstatement of a caliphate throughout dar al Islam that is organized and governed by the Qur’an and the Shari’ah—will require a commitment to the struggle of the Lesser Jihad, a war to defeat the US and the West. But unlike the wars of the past, this Islamist “army” will be organized to employ OBL’s Legacy— “strategic terrorism.”

In addition to the struggle to renew the ummah from the 1990s on, OBL believed that a campaign based on “strategic terrorism,” aimed at the “joints of the US economy,” would produce far more leverage than any standard military operations. The actions on September 11, 2001, for example, resulted in more deaths, more destruction, and more disruption than the Japanese Empire’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Indeed, had the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks been entirely successful and been matched by planned follow-on actions throughout the remainder of 2001 and 2002, Qaeda’s goals may already been achieved.

In the aftermath of the only modestly successful actions on September 11<sup>th</sup>, OBL and al Qaeda needed to develop an extension of “strategic terrorism” that would carry Islam to victory. This meant that, for at least the next decade, OBL’s efforts would

be spent on multiplying the core strengths of al Qaeda into a global Islamist network and in planning for a strategy of action that would vastly improve the likelihood of ultimate success. In the end, OBL's death should thus be regarded not as the beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning: as the point at which al Qaeda turns thought and prayer into action, and where this global Islamist network is now free to carry out the entirety of OBL's legacy.

So, where does OBL's death leave the US and the West? That is, aside from holding the smoking gun and thus being the likely target for any immediate acts of revenge, what sort of posture do we need to take in order to deal effectively with OBL's legacy?

Assuming, of course, that OBL's death will not mark the end of the threat of Islamist terrorism, OBL's legacy means that, at a minimum, we will need to work much harder at overcoming the "failure of imagination" that was directly responsible for our inability to prevent the attacks on September 11, 2001. That is, aside from our current military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan—most of which are only indirectly related to terrorism—the US will, for example, need to create the kind of functional intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities that can be used to disrupt the operations of the global Islamist terrorist network. Equally important, we will also need to take steps to protect all of those currently highly vulnerable facilities and systems that are essential to the survival of the US and the West. And even more, we must overcome the failures of our crisis-mode responses to natural and man-made disasters such as those that caused many of the disastrous problems resulting from Hurricane Katrina. In a sense, all of these are indicators of the power of the legacy: OBL firmly believed that part of Islam's strength lay in our weaknesses, in a US that was unwilling and unable to make the organizational and institutional changes that are essential to a defense against terrorist actions that are organized as a strategy of warfare.

What we in the US must keep in mind is that, where an enemy is prepared to use terrorist actions as the tactics of choice in warfare—that is, "strategic terrorism"—the best defense is rarely an excellent offense. On the contrary, an effective offense is of little value unless it is built upon on the foundation of a comprehensive defense. From our perspective, OBL's death should thus also be a signal that we must reorganize our programs for counter-terrorism and homeland security, to transform our posture from one based on piecemeal efforts to one in which defensive and offensive strategies are integrated and have finally overcome the tragedy of the "failure of imagination".

Worse still, OBL's death will not be a major transformative factor for the US and the West unless we are prepared to develop an analogue to OBL's legacy: that is, a posture of warfare based on the use of our capabilities as a force directed at OBL's operational legacy rather than as a force organized to chase targets of opportunity. And this strategy should hardly a mystery—particularly where it is directed by something like a "Security Impact Statement" that identifies and prioritizes critical targets and assists in the development of optimal security configurations.

None of this thinking is new. OBL's legacy has been in the making for years, as has the need for the US to transform its counter-terrorism and homeland security capabilities. The objective of this transformation, in fact, requires little more than the use of much the same procedures that were successful in previous wars—for example, directed R & D, improved methods of technology transfer, the institutional changes required to ensure close cooperation between the public and private sectors, and further integration of intelligence gathering and analysis resources. In this sense, it is very similar to the kind of transformation that OBL helped to initiate: the shift from idiosyncratic actions to a strategic force organized for war. For whatever else is characteristic of OBL's legacy, it was clearly rooted in his conviction that the actions must be organized for war rather than as one-off attacks aimed at grabbing the attention of the media. The success of the US War on Terrorism is also dependent on the need for this type of transformation in strategy: from one based largely on response to one that is founded, first, on a comprehensive defense and, second, on offensive actions that target the "supply chain" of the resources used in terrorist operations.

For the US and the West, the question is whether we, too, will be able to learn from the lessons of OBL's legacy and initiate a transformation both in our way of thinking about terrorism—that is, as the tactics employed in a strategy of warfare—and our ways of organizing offensive and defensive campaigns. The needed changes are hardly trivial, but they are certainly no greater or more complex than those that the US made during WWII and the Cold War.

More than anything else, however, the US must avoid the conviction that OBL's legacy will cease to provide the motivation for terrorist actions in the future and that there is no need to reorganize our counter-terrorism and homeland security measures. We have seen the power of his message in the past and there is no reason to believe that it will be diluted by OBL's death. Were this to happen, Americans would once again have been trapped by our past, by our inability to see terrorism as a strategy of warfare. And in the words of that ever-so-prescient philosopher Pogo, were this the case "We would have surely met the enemy—and that enemy would be us!"

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