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Victory in Abbottabad

A measure of justice for the thousands he killed, and a warning to others.



Global View Columnist Bret Stephens and Matthew Kaminski of the editorial board forecast the impact of Osama Bin Laden's death.

The death of Osama bin Laden at the hand of U.S. special forces doesn't end the war against Islamic terror, but it is a crucial and just victory that is rightfully cause for celebration.

Especially so in a war fought against combatants who hide in the world's dark corners, who rarely fight in the open and who attack innocents far from any conventional battlefield. Even if it took nearly 10 years, the skillful tracking and daring attack on al Qaeda's founder shows that democracies can prevail in such a struggle and is as notable as landmark victories of other wars that involved the taking of cities or island-hopping. The battle of Abbottabad is a triumph of intelligence, interrogation and special operations that are by necessity three of the main weapons in what the U.S. military has called this "long war."

Credit goes to the intelligence gatherers, at the Pentagon, CIA or National Security Agency, who developed the leads and pursued them. President Obama also singled out the "extraordinary courage and capability" of the "small team" of special forces who carried out the risky mission deep inside Pakistan. U.S. special forces too rarely get attention for their perilous work because they must operate in secret, but this is a moment of triumph to savor amid all of their sacrifices.

Mr. Obama also deserves credit for ordering a special forces mission rather than settling for another attack with drones or stand-off weapons from afar. Drones have their uses, but a target as valuable as bin Laden was worth

the gamble of a U.S. military raid both to reduce the chances of his escape and to end once and for all the myth that he couldn't be taken. The skill and success of the raid is also a boost to American prestige and pride at a moment of too much national self-doubt.

Yet if the mission had failed, the second-guessers would have asked why Mr. Obama hadn't merely ordered a drone strike. Pakistan's anti-American voices would have exploited the failure, and U.S. soldiers might have been captured or killed. These are nonetheless risks that Presidents must take to achieve larger purposes, and Mr. Obama deserves the praise he is receiving for taking them.

When Bin Laden Struck

[In the days following Sept. 11, 2001, Journal staffers returned to the paper's offices at 200 Liberty Street in Manhattan to recover what they could. They took these photos during their visit.](#)

This is also a moment to salute George W. Bush. After 9/11, Mr. Bush began the counterattack that became the war on terror, developed and expanded the military and intelligence means to fight it, and never flagged in its pursuit even as his political opposition derided him for his determination. The attack even looks to be a vindication of Mr. Bush's interrogation policies, as

U.S. sources say the initial break that led to the operation, concerning a bin Laden courier, came several years ago from Guantanamo detainees.

The most striking fact of Mr. Obama's prosecution of the war on terror is how much it resembles Mr. Bush's, to the consternation of America's anti-antiterror left. This includes the strategy to pursue terrorists in their sanctuaries, keeping them on defense and less able to plot against U.S. targets.

No doubt bin Laden's demise will cause some to declare victory in the war on terror, and to urge that we now negotiate a truce with the Taliban in Afghanistan. This sentiment will be heard loudly in Pakistan, which seems to want America out of its region, as well as among Americans tired of the costs of fighting in faraway places.

But the very fact that the U.S. felt obliged to issue a world travel warning at the moment of bin Laden's death shows that the terror threat remains without him. Al Qaeda has evolved in this decade, with smaller cells, new leaders and other sanctuaries. The branch in Yemen is especially dangerous, having played a role in at least two terror attempts on the U.S. mainland. Now is the time to press the advantage, not assume the threat is past.

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In this context, we should add that the U.S. decision to dispose of bin Laden's body at sea strikes us as a potential mistake. We understand the instinct to respect Islamic rituals and dispose of the body within 24 hours, but al Qaeda and others may now try to dismiss the entire episode as U.S. propaganda.

Notwithstanding White House assertions today of positively identifying bin Laden's DNA, we hope the U.S. took photos of the dead bin Laden and that those will be released in a formal, public briefing on the evidence with dispatch. The U.S. should

not feed the myth that bin Laden was a model of Islamic piety when in fact he perverted Islam's tenets for his own political uses.

We should also add a word about Pakistan and its habit of fighting on both sides of the antiterror war. Abbottabad is not some distant outpost in that country, and it is hard to believe that some in Pakistan did not know of bin Laden's hideout. U.S. officials clearly believed they couldn't trust Pakistani intelligence with what we were learning about bin Laden, a mistrust born of hard experience.

Many Pakistanis will be outraged at the violation of their sovereign territory, but if Pakistan won't behave like a genuine ally then the U.S. must see to its own self-defense. The Pakistan government, and especially its military, would be wise to see the bin Laden operation as proof that the U.S. will act if Pakistan will not. The best security for Pakistan is to defeat the Taliban, not to keep using it as a weapon to bleed America in Afghanistan.

Much as during the decades of the Cold War, the "long war" on terror has made many Americans tire of the fight, especially in the absence of cheering crowds waving U.S. flags in Paris or Palermo. But we cannot forget that this is a war for national survival against enemies who would annihilate our cities if they could. The death of bin Laden is a measure of justice for the thousands he killed. As important, it is a warning to others who would kill Americans that they will meet the same fate, no matter how long it takes or where they try to hide.

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