

Bin Laden, Assassination and Democracy

Written by John Keane

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/07/09/bin-laden-assassination-and-democracy/>

JOHN KEANE, JUL 9 2011

Osama bin Laden is dead, assassinated by bullets sprayed from the guns of special armed forces of the United States. During the wild celebrations that followed, the word “assassination” was never once used by politicians. There were instead euphemisms galore. Bin Laden was said to have been “struck down” or “eliminated”. The New York Times announced his “demise” and “death” as a “symbolic stroke”. American officials spoke of his “targeted killing”. Prime Minister Gillard offered her own version: it was “the appropriate thing to do”, she told reporters in Sydney, “to welcome news that in a firefight he has been killed”.

It appears there was no firefight; and the reference to killing bin Laden underscored the point that nobody dared employ the right word to describe the deed. Yet assassination is what it was and hereon what it should be called.

The true meaning of assassination

Assassination is admittedly a provocative political word. It entered the English language during the sixteenth century, a strange gift from the Arab world, where it was originally the nickname of an Ismaili sect, who reportedly used hashish prior to bumping off their victims. Whether the resinous drug dulled or heightened the attackers' senses goes unrecorded, but subsequently these “hashish eaters” came to be remembered as specialists in the secret art of using sudden violent attacks on prominent public figures to trigger reversals of political fortunes within power situations highly charged with conflict.

During modern times, as parliamentary democracy gained ground in countries such as Britain and the United States, assassinations were typically associated with the work of the devil, or with far-off countries trampled by authoritarian systems of government.

Nineteenth-century Russia was often described in diplomatic circles as despotism tempered by assassinations, single-minded acts of violence propagated by rotten regicides and nasty nihilists like Sergey Nyezhayev, author of the infamous Catechism of a Revolutionary.

Assassination gradually, and rightly, came to be regarded as the antithesis to the spirit and institutions of democracy.

Understanding America

In the American case, the pattern was set by the panicked moral outpourings inspired by the assassinations of Presidents Abraham Lincoln (1865), James Garfield (1881) and William McKinley (1901). Assassination meant cold-blooded, pre-meditated political murder. The assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were seen in this way. They triggered widespread grief and condemnation of acts that were judged barbarous, destructive of the principles of non-violent compromise that lie at the heart of democracy itself.

What was especially interesting about the assassinations of the 1960s is their deep impact upon American foreign policy thinking. Assassinations at home and abroad were roundly condemned, not because they were at odds with principled non-violence (the standard pacifist objection) but because the whole political dirty business of plotting in secret to kill others was seen as poisonously anti-democratic.

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Post-Watergate revelations that the CIA had plotted numerous times to assassinate Fidel Castro reinforced this thinking and prompted moves by President Gerald Ford to issue Executive Order 11905 (1976). It specifically outlawed such undercover operations: "No employee of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, political assassination."

The order has never been repealed, but for several decades now American politicians and government lawyers, claiming that the presidential directive does not apply to wartime, or in self-defence, have in effect shoved it aside.

Bending the law

Ronald Reagan, who narrowly survived an attempt on his life, was the last United States president to acknowledge the moral and political difficulties posed by assassination for democracy. Since then the word itself has been disappeared; conspicuous by its absence in current American air-strike attempts to finish off Muammar el-Gaddafi, assassination now comes wrapped in legal niceties. It is called targeted killing.

The trend is dangerous and ought to be condemned, simply because assassinations of political figures like bin Laden devour the heart and soul of democracy. Why? Most obviously, assassinations are acts of lawlessness. Those who plan them in secret, then carry them out, presume they are above and beyond written laws that apply to all citizens. They act as if they are all-knowing deities, or as bosses entitled to bully and to take lives for ends they know with absolute certainty to be right and just. Their arrogance is toxic, especially when practised by officials of the most powerful democracy on the face of our planet.

Democratic arrogance smacks of hypocrisy. It is self-contradictory. It invites others to follow suit, to act as if ends justify violent means, even to use counter-assassination as a weapon against the spirit and substance of democracy. "American exceptionalism is missionary", writes Henry Kissinger in his new book *On China*. "It holds that the United States has an obligation to spread its values to every part of the world."

Yes, and that's why the assassination of bin Laden has already unleashed bomb blasts in Pakistan, with threats of more terrible vengeance to come, as well as triggered, understandably, the threat of the bin Laden family to pursue a legal case against the United States for its lawless hypocrisy.

The bin Laden within us

There is another reason why the assassination of bin Laden must be condemned. In recent days, Geoffrey Robertson and other liberals have made a strong democratic case for arresting and putting figures like bin Laden on trial. They rightly reject old-fashioned, duplicitous talk of state "sovereignty" and its violation.

Yet what is odd about their defence of rule of law principles is their own indulgence of an assassination mentality that otherwise they find objectionable. Resembling a totem ritual, or an act of "splitting" in Freud's sense, bin Laden is morphed by them into a taboo object. He is portrayed as "evil", a demonic figure "steeped in wickedness", then summarily judged as a "hateful and hate-filled old man", a pathological "enemy" of the civilised world.

The trouble with such Western liberal talk is its ignorance of the bin Laden within us. He fetishised violence, certainly, but then that is what regularly happens in the democratic world, for instance during the recent Star-Spangled Banner celebrations of victory in the unending so-called "war on terror".

Bin Laden fancied state-of-the-art digital media events, just as we do. He opposed police states like Mubarak's Egypt. He thought in terms of defending the oppressed for the sake of justice among humanity. And as a cosmopolitan Muslim he acted globally, just as growing numbers of democrats do.

Bin Laden was no 'mediaeval' throwback. He was a cutting-edge public figure of the twenty-first century, a world citizen of our age, a militant who happened to think, surely with some justification, that the United States has militarily become much too big for its boots. And that's why, figuratively speaking, his assassination is not just a blow against

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the principles and practice of democracy. It is an attempted assassination of our inner democratic spirit.

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