

Celebrating the Death of Evil

Written by Jack Holland

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JACK HOLLAND, MAY 5 2011

The death of Osama bin Laden is far more important for the United States than it is for Islamic terrorism. While the shooting of Al Qaeda's leader will certainly damage the morale of would-be jihadists around the world, the most significant impact will be at home.

The events of September 11th 2001 were deeply shocking for Americans, unaccustomed to viewing large-scale illegitimate violence on domestic soil. The Bush Administration adeptly incorporated this sense of shock into the narratives that would graft meaning onto what became '9/11'. Politicians and the public agreed that September 11th was the day that changed the world.

Speaking of 9/11 came to operate in a similar manner to speaking of the Holocaust. Saying 'September 11th' invoked deep memories of trauma as well as the correct solution to rectify this loss: fight and kill terrorists. It is necessary to recall this process of constructing and remembering September 11th in order to make sense of the spontaneous scenes of jubilation outside the White House and at Ground Zero.

In late 2001 Bush taught Americans how to think about the 'new' threat of terrorism. His speechwriter David Frum has recalled that bin Laden was deliberately portrayed as literally satanic: a pure embodiment of evil. And this Manichean thinking was wedded seamlessly to the language of the Old Wild West. Bin Laden was wanted 'Dead or Alive'.

In 2002 Bush made light of American desires to see bin Laden killed. On the campaign trail for midterm Congressional elections, jokes about the irrelevance of whether bin Laden was captured or killed resonated with Bush's core voters. Whether America brought her enemies to justice or justice to her enemies, Bush reassured that it did not matter, as justice would be done.

In the ten years that have passed since September 11th, America's inability to capture bin Laden has eaten away at the top brass in the United States. It was one of Bush's principal regrets on leaving office. And Dick Cheney was left to find success in the avoidance of a second 9/11. Since his escape into Pakistan during the Battle of Tora Bora in late 2001, bin Laden has proven infuriatingly elusive for the United States Government, Intelligence Services and Army.

On May 1st 2011, President Obama was finally able to announce that this now mythical enemy had met his death at the hands of American Special Forces. The announcement initiated an outpouring of joy for ordinary Americans, for whom bin Laden's continued existence had become a source of acute discomfort and an affront to American values. Their celebrations reflected the successful resolution of a story that had dragged on far longer than expected. And it was a resolution yearned for across America.

In Britain it is difficult to appreciate the American context. Calls to stop and reflect on the deaths of a million people since September 11th are in marked contrast to American jubilation. And jokes about the sad loss of an Arsenal fan are unthinkable in the United States. In the United States, Osama bin Laden was the face of an evil that has redefined America, restructuring its politics and society over the last ten years. His death marks the partial healing of a national wound.

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For President Obama there is no single event that could have better improved his presidential image, polling figures and re-election prospects. Bin Laden's death is vindication of the re-shaping of American efforts in the 'War on Terror' away from Afghanistan and towards the 'AfPak' region. It is vindication that Iraq was mere distraction: a dumb war. And it is vindication of both his own identity as a patriotic American and a capable Democratic Commander-in-Chief. For President Obama, as we approach the tenth anniversary of 9/11 and American troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the timing could hardly have been better.

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