



Finding Bin Laden: Lessons for a New American Way of Intelligence

Erik J. Dahl

February 2018



Overview

- Search for bin Laden one of the greatest intelligence successes of our lifetime
- What worked, and what didn't?
- What does this tell us about the capabilities and limitations of American intelligence?
- Marks a change to the traditional American way of intelligence
- But will it be enough for tomorrow?

Finding Bin Laden

- Argument developed further in article

Summer 2014

PSQ POLITICAL
SCIENCE
QUARTERLY

The Journal of Public and International Affairs

Finding Bin Laden: Lessons for a New American
Way of Intelligence

ERIK J. DAHL

Building National Armies after Civil War: Lessons from
Bosnia, El Salvador, and Lebanon

ZOLTAN BARANY

The Role of Political Science in China: Intellectuals
and Authoritarian Resilience

STEPHEN NOAKES

Papers Please: State-Level Anti-Immigrant Legislation
in the Wake of Arizona's SB 1070

SOPHIA J. WALLACE

Critical Junctures, Catalysts, and Democratic
Consolidation in Turkey

RAMAZAN KILINÇ

Serving or Self-Serving? A Review Essay of Robert
Gates's Memoir

ROBERT JERVIS

Book Reviews

Published since 1886 by the ACADEMY OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

But what if I'm wrong?

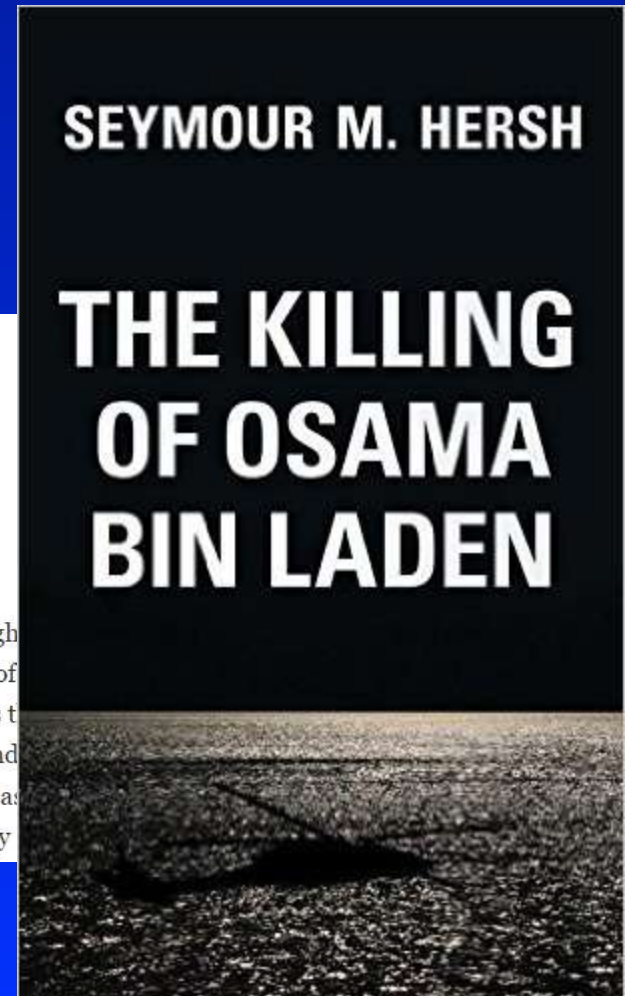
- Seymour Hersh claims it's all false

London Review of Books

The Killing of Osama bin Laden

Seymour M. Hersh

It's been four years since a group of US Navy Seals assassinated Osama bin Laden in a night raid on a high-walled compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The killing was the high point of Obama's first term, and a major factor in his re-election. The White House still maintains that the mission was an all-American affair, and that the senior generals of Pakistan's army and Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI) were not told of the raid in advance. This is false, as are many other elements of the Obama administration's account. The White House's story





But what if I'm wrong? (cont.)

- New York Times examination couldn't answer the question, which story is true?

What Do We Really Know About Osama bin Laden's Death?

The history of Obama's most important foreign-policy victory is still being written.

By JONATHAN MAHLER OCT. 15, 2015

How did we get here?



Finding Bin Laden

Operation Room photo

Denis McDonough, Dep NSA

Tom Donilon, NSAdvisor

Bill Daley, White House COS

Tony Blinken, V.P NSAdvisor

Audrey Tomason, NSS CT Director

BG Brad Webb, JSOC





“One of the greatest intelligence operations in history”

--Admiral William McRaven

...but we may not know the full story for decades



The American way of intelligence

- Traditional tools and techniques of intelligence helped the United States win the Cold War
- Focus on one particular threat
- Operations over analysis
- Reliance on expensive, high tech systems
- Mass production mode of intelligence
- **Money, manpower, and technology**



Traditional methods not enough

- Money and manpower could not find bin Laden
- After 9/11, effort to track bin Laden with military forces, human collectors
 - Last located at Tora Bora, December 2001
- \$25 million bounty
- “Operation Cannonball” in 2006
 - Effort to “flood the zone” in Pakistan and Afghanistan
- “Brute force” approach didn’t work

Technology not enough

- Tapping phones of Al Jazeera in Islamabad
 - Surveillance of Pakistani journalists believed to have contact with AQ
- Software to analyze family and AQ networks
 - “Analyst’s Notebook”
 - Palantir
- Retouched photos





Post-9/11 intelligence reforms

- Organizational reforms
 - ODNI, NCTC, etc.
- Efforts to increase the rigor of intelligence analysis
 - New training, development of tradecraft
- Greater use of imagination
 - Use of red teams, thinking outside the box
- Surely all of this must have helped us find bin Laden?



Intelligence reforms not enough

- Organizational reforms
 - New organizations less useful than legacy organizations (CIA, CTC)
- Efforts to increase the rigor of intelligence analysis
 - President was given precise estimates, but little better than guesswork



Imagination wasn't enough

- Analyzing bin Laden's speeches and videos
 - German ornithologist recruited to try to identify a bird chirping in background of one video
- Flooding Peshawar with traceable video recorders
 - If this were a TV show, that would have worked!
- **A low point in the search**
 - **AQ making comeback, morale low at CTC**
 - **Bin Laden moves into house at Abbottabad**



Why was it so difficult?

- Why so hard to find one very recognizable man?
- Rule of thumb in intelligence:
 - To find something, you need to first know what you're looking for, and where to look
 - Use multi-source analysis to narrow down search
- “Big ocean, little boat” theory
 - As with Olympic bomber Eric Rudolph and adventurer Steve Fossett, very hard to find a small target
 - Malaysian airliner



What was the question?

- Lots of “Elvis sightings”
 - Bin Laden reported all around the world
- Probably not living in a cave; but where?
- Rethinking search for “HVT-1”
 - Even AQ leaders didn’t know where he was
 - Yet still got instructions from him
- Question not “where is he?”
 - Rather, “how does he communicate?”



Importance of analysts

- Key role for female analysts
 - Dating back before 9/11
 - “Manson Family” in the ‘90s
- Importance of all-source analysis
 - CIA analyst “John”: his team began reading everything they could about bin Laden
 - One of UBL’s sons said his father kept safe houses in Kabul, thinking Americans wouldn’t bomb a big city
 - Could this mean bin Laden was hiding out in a city?



The courier was the key

- Mohammed al-Qahtani was turned away at Orlando airport in August 2001 (Atta waiting)
 - Later captured at Battle of Tora Bora
 - Interrogated at Guantanamo, identified Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti (an alias) as key AQ figure
- Later, prisoner at CIA secret site said al-Kuwaiti was bin Laden's courier
 - This was bad news, and good news
- Summer 2010: NSA wiretap of cell phone call

Tracking the courier

- August 2010: spotted near Peshawar driving white SUV
 - Pakistani agents working for CIA began tailing him
- Expected to drive to mountains
- Instead, tracked to Abbottabad



Who was living there?

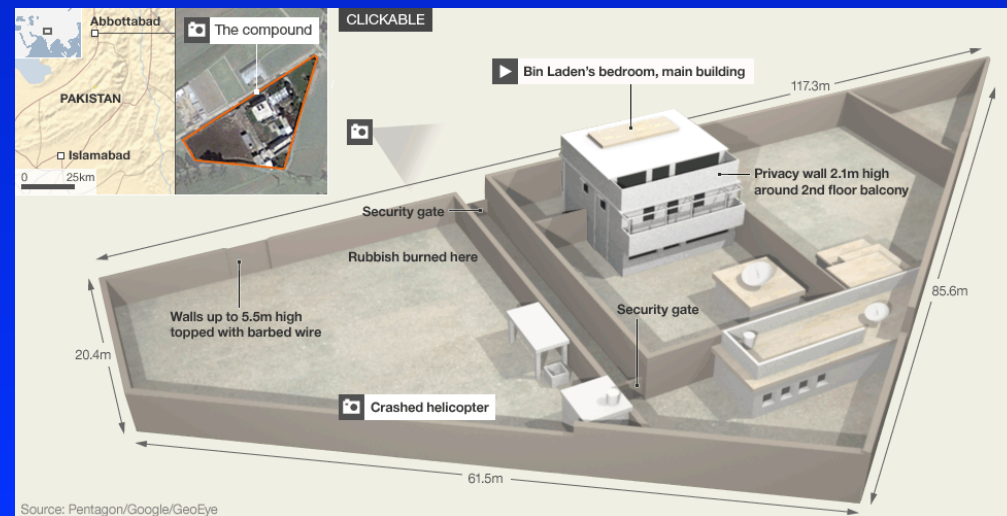
- Agents rented house down the road
- SIGINT was of little use
 - No phone lines or Internet; residents drove 90 minutes away before putting battery in cell phones
- Overhead imagery, stealthy RQ-170 Sentinel

New York Times



“The pacer”

- Watchers noticed a man often came out of the house and walked inside the compound
- Was it bin Laden, or a decoy?
- NGA tasked with determining his height
 - Bin Laden about 6’ 4”
 - But agency could only conclude the man was between 5’ 8” and 6’ 8”





Lots of imagination, little results

- Some plans considered, thrown out
 - Throw stink bombs into compound, forcing occupants into the street
 - Have loudspeakers broadcast religious messages commanding them to come out
 - Miniature UAV resembling a bird
 - Analyze local sewage for genetic markers
- Vaccination ruse
 - Pakistani doctor, hepatitis B vaccine



Planning begun

- Fall of 2010, Panetta briefed senior Congressional leaders, obtained special funding
- Secrecy was paramount, and challenging
 - The more work undertaken to confirm bin Laden's presence, the longer it took, and the more likely the secret would be blown
- 40 intelligence reviews through April 2011
- Mission given to special operations
 - But officially under CIA control, Title 50



Last-minute doubts

- Why would bin Laden be hiding there, almost in plain sight? Could it be a ruse?
- Red team assembled to “murder board” the intelligence data
 - Task: make strongest argument he was *not* there
- Then, Wikileaks almost gave it away
 - New York Times published GTMO documents
 - Interrogation of detainee about Abbottabad

The raid itself





What does this tell us?

- A fascinating story
 - Greatest intelligence success in recent years
 - Tells us more than recent failures
- Value of closer ties between military and intelligence community
- Admiral McRaven:
 - “The bin Laden operation would simply not have been possible if CIA and JSOC had not spent a decade in bed together”



What did not work?

- The traditional American way of intelligence
 - Money, manpower, technology
- Post-9/11 intelligence reforms
 - New intelligence organizations
 - Efforts to make analysis more scientific and precise
 - Greater use of imagination



What did work?

- All source fusion of collection and analysis
 - Every “int” played a part
 - Bruce Riedel: “More the work of Hercule Poirot than Bond”
 - Have we learned to “connect the dots” again?
- Receptive policy makers
 - Even in absence of confirmed tactical intel
- Operational security
 - The secret didn’t leak



A new way of intelligence

- Search for bin Laden marks a new American way of intelligence
- Close relationship between IC and military
 - “Intel wars” likely to remain part of American strategy
- Reduced reliance on big, expensive technology
 - Even with increased use of UAVs and “big data”
- Tension between public discussion and secrecy
 - Intelligence is often controversial, but more and more in the open



Intelligence in crisis today?

- U.S. intelligence faces more challenging threats
 - Mysteries, rather than secrets
 - DNI: most challenging in his 50 year career
- Intelligence legitimacy paradox
- A “Kodak moment” for the IC?
- How significant will big data be?
- It took a decade to find bin Laden
 - Can’t afford to spend another decade learning to adapt to these new challenges



Where to from here?

- This story suggests advantages of multi-discipline centers model
 - Cyber intelligence center, CIA reorganization
- Encourage all-source fusion and integration
 - IC still not enough community, too many stove pipes
- Intel must be trusted and understood to be effective
- First step:
 - A better educated national debate over intelligence



Thank you!

Questions? Comments?

ejdahl@nps.edu

For further study

- Peter Bergen, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad*
- Graham Allison, “How it Went Down,” *Time*, May 7, 2012
- Mark Bowden, “The Hunt for ‘Geronimo,’” *Vanity Fair*, November 2012
- Nicholas Schmidle, “Getting Bin Laden,” *The New Yorker*, August 8, 2011

