

The Death of Bin Laden a Definite Game Changer Maybe

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Posted: 05/ 3/11 01:45 PM ET

The phrase "game changer" quickly became a cliché during the 2008 campaign, but at first glance that term clearly applies to the killing of Osama bin Laden by U.S. forces. Bin Laden's death may, in fact, change the course of the U.S. struggle against Jihadist terror and foreign policy more generally, or it may have little effect. Similarly, bin Laden's death is a victory for the U.S. in the sense that a long-standing bipartisan American goal has been achieved and that the man who was behind the September 11 attacks paid a price for his actions -- but it is not necessarily a major victory against terrorism.

Bin Laden was not the sole leader of the global Islamist fight against the west. He was the head of one of several organizations dedicated to committing acts of terrorist violence against the U.S. and our allies. With bin Laden dead, al Qaeda will be leaderless and weakened, for a while, but the global movement won't go away. Bin Laden, after all, survived almost a decade after the September 11 attacks, but during all those years al Qaeda never made another major attack on American soil, suggesting that al Qaeda has been weakened since September 11. The attacks for which it was responsible in recent years did not approach the scale of the destruction of the World Trade Center.

Keeping America safe from Jihadist terror remains a complex task, which may be slightly easier, particularly in the short term, without Osama bin Laden. It still requires a delicate combination of domestic security, some use of force, sincere efforts to win hearts and minds, good intelligence work and an awareness of how US actions are perceived by many outside of our country. The killing of bin Laden, while a positive development to be sure, addresses none of these things, but more significantly provides a moment for our leaders to pause, recognize this important victory and determine what direction to take the fight against terrorism.

While the killing of bin Laden is an American victory planned and executed by countless dedicated Americans, some of whom risked their lives, against a terrorist who attacked our country, it occurred on President Barack Obama's watch and, therefore, may become the defining foreign policy moment of Obama's presidency. President Obama has already been the beneficiary of this victory, as a lot fewer people are discussing Donald Trump or Obama's place of birth today than a week ago. The killing of bin Laden makes Obama seem like a president who can accomplish things, which stands in contrast to his predecessor, who treated tough talk and bluster as a surrogate for actual results. The contrast between the killing of bin Laden and Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech, which occurred exactly eight years before Bin Laden was killed, nicely captures the difference between the two presidents in this regard.

Obama, of course, has to be careful with how he uses this accomplishment as it is so obviously not his alone, but it can help create an image of Obama as somebody who keeps his word, can keep America safe and is tougher than he looks. Obviously, this will help the president in his

reelection bid, but that race is still far enough away that other factors could become more important over the next 18 months. The more interesting question is what the administration will do in Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere now that bin Laden is dead.

The administration could argue that now that the U.S. has demonstrated its ability to persevere and get things done by killing bin Laden, we must recommit to our effort in Afghanistan, and remain in Iraq, because we are closer than ever to victory and have the enemy on the run. According to this argument, the world saw what happens when America is determined and never gives up so we need to remain determined and not give up in our struggle against al Qaeda and terror.

The administration could also take an entirely different tack and use the killing of bin Laden as a way to declare victory and begin to wind down the war in Afghanistan. Obama could assert that we have made good on our promise to bring bin Laden to justice and have little reason to still be in Afghanistan. Before bin Laden was killed, one of the reasons why Obama was hesitant to wind down the war in Afghanistan was almost certainly because he was afraid of being viewed as being weak by domestic and foreign critics. That accusation resonates a lot less now that bin Laden has been shot and thrown into the sea.

The killing of bin Laden could lead to a reevaluation of the struggle against terrorism that takes a serious look at the cost of the last 10 years relative to the successes or as a rationale for continuing these policies based on the successful manhunt for bin Laden. These events could be a game changer, not just for Obama's presidency but for U.S. foreign policy as well, or they could become another excuse to keep doing the same thing. Accordingly, how Obama moves forward from this historic moment will be just as significant as the moment itself.