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Where is Osama bin Laden?

BY JACK DEVINE

There is no doubt that Osama bin Laden is foremost on the minds of the courageous CIA and Special Forces officers in Afghanistan who are looking for him. Where he hasn't appeared lately is in the debates about what the United States is trying to achieve in Afghanistan and whether our emphasis should be on counterinsurgency and nation-building or on counterterrorism.

It has been nine long years since bin Laden and his disciples attacked the United States, bringing about the catastrophic loss of American lives on Sept. 11, 2001, and more in the military battles that followed.

The debate about where we are headed in Afghanistan must include finding bin Laden. This should be our top priority as we wind down our presence there. We have entered into two problematic wars and have expended a great deal of blood and treasure since Sept. 11. What was it all about, if not capturing bin Laden?

It is amazing that bin Laden has disappeared not only physically but also from our Afghanistan lexicon. It is troubling to listen to media personalities and government officials talk about the war in Afghanistan without mentioning bin Laden. I can't remember the last time I heard him discussed as a centerpiece or even a component of our Afghanistan strategy. It is almost as though there is a conspiracy to play down his importance, even in the context of the latest terrorist threat in Europe.

The cognoscenti in the intelligence world have for some time felt that bin Laden isn't important because he is only a symbol for al-Qaeda. Moreover, they believe that the real threat is elsewhere and that bin Laden has only indirect influence over the groups his message spawned. Only history will tell conclusively if he really is this benign. I don't believe it, and I would not like to be the one who has to explain this judgment if bin Laden or his close allies were able to engineer another major attack.

Even if one accepts that bin Laden is less relevant today and only a figurehead without organizational muscle, this judgment greatly underestimates the impact of removing him from the center of the radical terrorist movement. On the run, he is a symbol that terrorism can prevail and that its leader can survive despite our massive military power. If we end this myth, we stand a good chance of triggering a trend away from radical Islamic terrorism.

The fall of a charismatic leader traditionally deflates a movement's followers, and these leaders are seldom replaced with individuals of even remotely similar presence and charisma. In the 1960s and '70s, for example, when terrorism and insurgency were rampant in Latin America, the Cuban-inspired ideological movement rippling through South America lost much of its luster with Che Guevara's demise in the mountains of Bolivia in 1967.

No one questions that the Afghan terrain is challenging and that many tribal considerations need to be confronted in traversing the region. But the United States and its allies have a 100,000-strong army there, and we are spending about \$100 billion a year on the war effort. We certainly have in place the resources needed to complete the task.



Osama bin Laden in a video broadcast in 2001.

Equally challenging is working around Pakistan's national security politics. A few years ago, in a discussion with a senior leader of the U.S. intelligence community, I asked why we hadn't captured bin Laden. The response boiled down to "it's complicated." The implication was that elements within the Pakistani government were an impediment to his capture. If that is still the case, we should forget about nation-building in Afghanistan and, like Sherman marching across Georgia during the Civil War, march our army across eastern Afghanistan, pressing forward even into Pakistan's Northwest Frontier, and continue the march until we capture him.

We should advise the Pakistani government of our intention in no uncertain terms. While Pakistani officials would surely fuss, as they have done over a recent uptick in Predator drone attacks, it's a pretty good bet that we would have bin Laden's head on a platter before we got anywhere near the Pakistani border. This is not traditionally how we deal with important allies, and it is not a formula for routine diplomatic discourse. But in certain exceptional circumstances, hardball is called for. I also suspect the fallout would be far less damaging and more ephemeral than many might suggest.

It is hard to imagine an acceptable exit from Afghanistan without bin Laden's demise. Putting him to rest would provide a truly meaningful rationale for leaving. The most recent publicly available intelligence reports show that there are few al-Qaeda terrorists remaining in the region; many have moved elsewhere, including to Yemen.

We need to move bin Laden back to center stage in our Afghanistan strategy. However the administration's coming policy review turns out, let's hope we won't still be looking for Osama bin Laden on Sept. 11, 2011.

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