

Delaying - Seven Entries from Delaying

Monday, May 2nd, 2011

Overcast. Nearly empty streets as I rode downtown. BMWs and Mercedes have become the dominant high-end cars on Manhattan streets. Parked or moving, these European models have replaced Lincolns and Cadillacs—hard to say what caused the shift.

As I flipped on the power in my SoHo studio, the president's voice spilled from the radio: "The United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden."

During the next twenty minutes of radio, the story emerged:

- A courier had been identified nearly four years earlier and followed exhaustively.
- The mission had been authorized three days ago.
- An American team landed a helicopter; after "light resistance and a firefight," Osama bin Laden was killed.
- The Americans "took custody of his body." He was later buried at sea.
- Three other men were killed; two were said to be close aides to bin Laden, and one may have been one of his adult sons.
- A woman, used as "a human shield" by one of the men, was also killed.
- American casualties or deaths were not mentioned.
- Bin Laden's residence was apparently unknown to the Pakistani government, and they were not informed of the carefully planned US strike.

"Jubilant crowds" gathered before dawn this morning at Times Square, Ground Zero, and the White House to celebrate bin Laden's death—as though a hometown sports trophy had been recaptured.

The celebrations are about the death of one person, "the pampered son of a Saudi billionaire." Bin Laden was born two years after me, in 1957. Instead of being the second of three kids like me, he was the 17th of 52 or 54 children.

The president announced this kill late last night. Shortly thereafter, the State Department issued very broad travel warnings for Americans. Even in victory, we must not let go of fear.

Apparently, this milestone does not make us safer; revenge looms. Fear creates a more pliable populace.

As the morning unfolded, more details were released:

- The US knew about this “mansion,” also referred to as a “fortified compound,” since last September. It was in Abbottabad, a city of one million, near the capital Islamabad.
- The operation, conducted by US Special Forces, took 40 minutes.
- Bin Laden resisted and was shot. DNA samples were taken to confirm his identity.
- There were no US casualties.

More than nine years have been spent hunting this trophy, one that any president would want to brag about. “Special coverage” of the death of Osama bin Laden has taken over; suddenly, there is no other news, nothing else to report on.

How could US helicopters fly into an area so close to an important military training facility without alerting the Pakistani government? It sounds like bin Laden has been there for more than six years. It’s assumed the place was “purpose built” for him.

Bin Laden was last seen in the White Mountains of Afghanistan a few months after 9/11. The US relentlessly bombed Tora Bora, the Black Cave, trying to flush out or kill bin Laden. Our expensive “daisy cutter” / “bunker buster” bombs did not penetrate the older defensive technology—the extensive underground fortress was built by the Mujahideen (with CIA money) when the US was fighting the Russians in the 1980s.

By 8:30 AM, more information trickled into the newscasts:

- The mission was to kill, not capture, bin Laden.
- His home was a 3,000 square-foot compound with barbed wire-topped walls.
- The New York Port Authority said there have been no specific threats to the New York region.

During the years that the US Government has been hunting Mr. bin Laden, the delivery of news and information in this country has changed considerably. The public’s involvement in reporting and creating news expanded as the number of journalists dwindled after 9/11.

In New York and other East Coast radio markets, many daytime music shows were replaced with talk radio. Those morning or afternoon interludes of music provided an opportunity for reflection, a chance for the mind to relax, to wander, to head off in unexpected directions. The constant talk, talk, talk tends to promote reaction. Listening to talk radio is oddly addictive.

Reflection and reaction are not opposites, though they frequently engender different emotions. Kindness may follow reflection, while anger and revenge seem to flow from reaction.

The electronic version of The New York Times put out a call to readers: “Send pictures. How is your community reacting?” Then, “How is your community celebrating?” I wonder how many New York Times readers are mourning instead of celebrating bin Laden’s death? On the afternoon of 9/11 I remember hearing reports about people celebrating just across the Hudson River in Jersey City; it has one of the most diverse populations in the United States.

In 1991, I was traveling in India when the US launched the First Gulf War. The primary US enemy at the time was Saddam Hussein—a villain in the US, but in every Indian market I walked through, his picture (nearly always the same headshot) was featured on tee-shirts, backpacks, jackets, flags, and caps. Certainly, millions of people outside of North America are mourning the death of Osama bin Laden, though local media awareness of that appears to be zero.

How can we expect, or even hope for, a fuller understanding (of anything) if we continue to hear only one side of a story? Overtly selective information is divisive. Most history is written by the victors, but valuable and relevant history must include more than one point of view. Multiple inputs create complexity, and many Americans find complexity cumbersome.

And me? I feel sort of empty.

The news cycle has no soul, no heart. What, if anything, is so important about the top secret attack working perfectly? The public expenditure has not been mentioned, and the deaths would have had a different flavor if an American had been killed.

I wonder about this “burial at sea.” Was he dropped out of a helicopter? Was he swung by his outstretched arms and legs the way we used to throw friends or family into a swimming pool? Or was the body, lying limp near the cargo door, nudged over the edge with the toes of government-issued boots? Such details do not make the news. Did they salute? Certainly, bin Laden was a commander of significant brilliance. Did they cheer?

I decided to listen to the BBC Newshour for a few minutes at 9:00, curious as to how they might cover this story. In a short time, they presented more information about the first major attack on the USA mainland than what NPR provided in an hour.

Details reported by the BBC included:

- The operation took place at a “luxury mansion,” a “three-story villa in a leafy lush part of the city” less than 100 yards from the military academy.
- Four helicopters were involved – no mention of how many landed.
- Bin Laden was not armed, but “he did resist.” He was shot in the head.
- His body was taken to Bagram Air Base, north of Kabul, for positive identification.
- His wife was shot in the leg.

Was shooting his wife – causing pain and immobility, without threatening her life – part of the elaborate plan?

Radio off; time to get to work.

Wednesday, May 4th, 2011

2 days after the killing

Bin Laden’s death, or reported death, continues to fill the news. A photograph has not been released. “Shot in the head” likely does not make a pretty picture, but how can we know for sure that he’s dead?

Bin Laden was never observed at this location; it was reported that there had only been a 50/50 chance he would be present on the day of the attack. Did he never go outside, even in his high walled compound? Did he know or imagine 24/7 satellite surveillance? Sounds like a sad way to live. Evading the entirety of US intelligence for a decade certainly requires significant lifestyle adjustments – surely more than most of us could ever imagine.

An American surveillance team rented a place with a clear view of his secret home in order to train an invisible laser on the windows. By measuring vibrations of the glass, they could distinguish each individual voice. They determined that one additional male, beyond the ones they could visually account for, was present.

How many other buildings in other cities and other countries were they watching as closely? What did this prize cost?

Tomorrow, President Obama will come to New York City to give a speech at Ground Zero.

By the end of the day, he decided that “the photo” of bin Laden would not be released. He also decided not to give a speech but to simply lay a wreath at Ground Zero. Things change; perhaps his pollsters made the call – the modern way to decide.

Thursday, May 5th, 2011

3 days after the killing

I went for a run in the overcast post-dawn light. The upper scaffolding of the Freedom Tower has reached fifty-two stories, the exact height of World Trade Center 7 (the first building to be rebuilt at the site, in 2006). Heading back home, I noticed dozens of cop cars and groups of officers congregating at the western end of Canal Street. What were they expecting before 7:00? Seeing police near a tunnel entrance still sends my mind to terrorist attacks. Why else would they all be there, just waiting?

A StoryCorps interview on the radio captured my attention. A woman described talking to her husband who was on the 102nd floor of one of the towers on 9/11. He had given up finding a way out; he could see that was not possible. The smoke was getting thicker. She asked if it hurt to breathe. He paused and said, “No.” They spoke of the good times they had; they were both 50 and had met when they were 16. After a while, she heard a crack and then a rush of air. She said she kept calling his name into the phone.

My eyes welled up. Again and again, personal stories reach us—or at least me. Reports of the death of a dozen people or a countrywide famine do not hold the power of one death that you can feel, almost taste.

Tuesday, May 10th, 2011

8 days after the killing

The strike—the targeted killing of bin Laden—continues to inspire a nearly continual outpouring of coverage. Almost every radio show, even those which typically ignore current events, have

been sucked into the tsunami of news. President Obama's ratings have gone up, although I haven't heard actual numbers.

The New Yorker chose a color drawing of bin Laden's head and torso for this week's cover. Their depiction isn't overly sinister; a neat white cloth covers his head. A plain white shirt is visible under his battle-ready camouflage jacket—no golden shirt like he wore in some of his video addresses. Osama Bin Laden's face is partially erased, though his identity remains clear. The idea of erasure is overtly emphasized with the precise rendering of a subtly oversized pink eraser. The well-used eraser with very rounded corners is perched on the drawing next to bin Laden's chin, as though the artist got up to stretch and never returned. The lowest part of his unkempt beard was still crisply rendered.

Yesterday, I noticed that Newsweek also featured bin Laden's head. The head, rendered in blood red, filled the cover save for the huge blocky letters that read: MISSION ACCOMPLISHED. Could that be a reference to George W. Bush's mis-statement about the end of the Iraq War in May 2003? Under that possibly positive statement, in a smaller bold font and all caps, Newsweek added: BUT ARE WE ANY SAFER?

Newsweek's imagery was more tabloid-like than The New Yorker's, yet they expressed the same idea. Newsweek presented a similar white head covering, but instead of reducing bin Laden's features, they painted an uneven white swath—a single stroke, as though done with a mini-paint roller—over his eyes, eyebrows, and ears. Only his broad red forehead, lower nose, lips (almost in a scowl), and, of course, facial hair remained.

Do these major magazine cover designs arise from the ether at the same moment, or might they have been prompted by the government? Another way to deliver the message we always want: We won. Good over evil.

Saturday, May 14th, 2011

12 days after the killing

Cool, overcast, spring unfolds. Gas at Lukoil on 10th Avenue costs \$4.21 a gallon.

For the first time in nearly two weeks, a few days passed without my hearing bin Laden's name.

Thursday, August 28th, 2015

More than 4 years after the killing

Yesterday, I heard about the death of “the dust lady” on the radio. She became known when a single photograph of her was published shortly after 9/11. I had never heard of her.

I wondered how her death would be covered and doubted it would include even a mention of any connection to the fouled air she swam through that morning. The New York Times reported that the dust lady, Marcy Borders, died from stomach cancer at age 42 (according to her sister).

There was no mention of air quality.

On September 11th, 2001 Marcy was 28, a rookie legal analyst for Bank of America. Based on a video interview, the Times quotes her as saying she had no idea what was going on that morning. “The way the building was shaking, I couldn’t sit there. Every time I inhaled, my mouth filled up with it, I was choking. I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face. I was just saying to myself and saying out loud that I didn’t want to die.” After fleeing her desk, Ms. Borders spent more than an hour descending 81 floors. At least 160 back and forth flights in a dark, crowded, smoke-filled stairwell of fear. Finally she was out; in the banal open plaza surrounding the World Trade Towers. According to reports she “was swept off her feet” and later helped into the lobby of a nearby building where the famous photo was taken—her whole body covered with an unfamiliar off-white substance.

The “debris cloud” must have started as a powerful ground wind when the first tower fell—an oversized leaden marionette with all its strings suddenly cut, pulverizing on impact into a terrifying cloud expanding outward at hurricane speed. Not a wind that would blow you over, but one that would sweep your feet out from under you. Probably not a wind from the heavens.

The 9/11 death toll continues to rise. The number of people who have died from breathing that air filled with a fine powder of steel, flesh, plastic, and a long list of toxins will soon surpass the number of people killed on that cloudless September morning in 2001.

The Times also reported that Borders struggled with “depression and drug addiction and was having trouble paying her medical bills.” They quoted *The Guardian*:

She never recovered from the trauma of the attack. She was frightened of tall buildings and planes. Depression led to a break-up with her partner, the loss of custody of

her children, and an addiction to alcohol and drugs. In April 2011 she checked herself into a rehab center. A week later, the news broke about the death of Osama bin Laden, and she said that key event aided her in returning to sobriety as she felt able to move on from the events of 9/11.

Sounds like killing the perpetrator freed her. Many people need the Hammurabi code—an eye for an eye—to feel whole, even though the cycle of an eye and then another eye never ends.

Amazingly, there are also those who can forgive a person who murdered their only child. Such a response requires groundedness and an expansive open heart. How much of the revenge we enact, see or hear about is primarily reactive? Forgiveness has a different root and follows an alternate path through our bodies. I doubt that sitting still and being quiet can precipitate hatred.

Monday, September 6th, 2021

More than 10 years after the killing

Sunny. As usual, stories come out as the anniversary gets closer. Today, I learned that not long after 9/11, the New York City Police Department determined that the city remained a significant terrorist target and that the federal government could not be counted on for information or protection. In response, the NYPD expanded its ranks to include global intelligence and counter-terrorism units. A CIA agent was brought in to run parts of these new divisions. They stationed officers around the world, all veiled in secrecy.

Another story I heard was about the CIA's Hepatitis B vaccine program in Pakistan. I don't know how widespread it was, but eventually the kids from the Bin Laden household in Abbottabad went for vaccines. The long arm of the US government checked the DNA on the needles and identified it as Bin Laden's. American beneficence.

Yesterday, in the mid-afternoon, I stood still to try to take in what I call a "leaf drop"—an extended moment during which an unusually large number of leaves descend at the same time, for no apparent reason. I was in the rear yard of a 95-year-old Capuchin monastery in Garrison, New York.

At least one hundred black walnut leaves tumbled and floated erratically over a low boxwood labyrinth which was planted a dozen years ago. The tall 1930's stuccoed garden wall

provided a uniform background for the leaves' last pli   or pirouette in their erratic dance. Such seemingly spontaneous outbursts from the natural world are rare, especially with such a gentle demeanor. No one has ever been able to explain the phenomenon of leaf drops to me. I feel lucky to witness them now and then, sometimes at what feels like a poignant moment.

Standing still, watching the last leaves, the color of the sky slowly revealed itself to be the blue that only appears at this time of year—a color I likely never would have understood if it were not for those two planes entering those two towers with that cloudless blue background.

James Boorstein

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Box 3 Productions