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

ERIK J. DAHL

MUCH OF THE DISCUSSION ABOUT THE HUNT FOR and killing of Osama bin Laden has focused on the remarkable abilities of the U.S. Special Operations Forces who carried out the raid. Accounts by journalists and others revealed more than was previously known about the Navy SEALs who were involved, and sparked complaints by critics that the Barack Obama administration had leaked sensitive information in order to portray its own actions in a positive light.<sup>1</sup> Terrorism experts have debated whether the killing would weaken al Qaeda, and what it would mean for the future of international terrorism.<sup>2</sup> And other scholars and analysts have considered what the story of bin Laden's death reveals about American national security and foreign policy decision making. Graham Allison, for example, writes that "this case demonstrates that the U.S.

<sup>1</sup>According to a report by the Congressional Research Service, the U.S. Navy SEALs who carried out the bin Laden raid "reportedly belonged to an elite unit known unofficially as Seal Team 6 and officially as the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU)." Ronald O'Rourke, "Navy Irregular Warfare and Counterterrorism Operations: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, 27 March 2013, 5. See also Marc Ambinder, "The Secret Team That Killed bin Laden," 3 May 2011, accessed at <http://www.nationaljournal.com/whitehouse/the-secret-team-that-killed-bin-laden-20110502>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>2</sup>See for example, Philip Mudd, "The Death of Usama bin Ladin: Threat Implications for the U.S. Homeland," *CTC Sentinel* 4 (June 2011): 1-4; Bryan C. Price, "Targeting Top Terrorists: How Leadership Decapitation Contributes to Counterterrorism," *International Security* 36 (Spring 2012): 9-46.

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government is capable of extraordinary performance in extraordinary circumstances.”<sup>3</sup>

Most of this attention has centered on the bin Laden raid itself and the immediate decision making surrounding it. But an equally fascinating story, and one with even more important lessons for the future of American intelligence and security, is about how the American intelligence and counterterrorism communities found bin Laden in the first place. Intelligence insiders have praised the work done by American intelligence agencies, with Director of National Intelligence James Clapper stating, “In my nearly 50 years in intelligence, never have I seen a more remarkable example of focused integration, seamless collaboration and sheer professional magnificence.”<sup>4</sup> But how did that integration and collaboration come about, and what does it mean for the future of American intelligence?

The nearly decade-long search for bin Laden reveals a great deal about both the capabilities and the limitations of the American intelligence community. In much the same way that the attacks of September 11 and the failures of intelligence to correctly assess Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program have shaped our understanding of American intelligence,<sup>5</sup> the hunt for Osama bin Laden is likely to be remembered as a critical case in which American intelligence operations have been exposed for public discussion. But unlike those previous intelligence failures, this case is one of intelligence success, and for that reason its lessons may be even more useful for the future.

The successful hunt for Osama bin Laden is part of a broader narrative about how American intelligence is changing today. The successful use of intelligence, and the unusually close coordination among the different elements of the intelligence and national security communities, suggest that American intelligence may have finally found its footing two decades after the end of the Cold War shook the intelligence community out of the procedures and assumptions that had long guided it.<sup>6</sup> This case indicates that we may be seeing the first signs of a new American approach toward intelligence, with a reduced reliance on the expensive, high-technology

<sup>3</sup>Graham Allison, “How It Went Down,” *Time*, 7 May 2012.

<sup>4</sup>Ken Dilanian, “In Finding Osama Bin Laden, CIA Soars From Distress to Success,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 May 2011.

<sup>5</sup>Amy B. Zegart, *Spying Blind: The CIA, the FBI, and the Origins of 9/11* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons From the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>Fred Burton makes this argument in “The Bin Laden Operation: Tapping Human Intelligence,” 26 May 2011, accessed at [http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110525-bin-laden-operation-tapping-human-intelligence?0=ip\\_login\\_no\\_cache%3D1e6a46134f3d199fd6fa776de3a08504](http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20110525-bin-laden-operation-tapping-human-intelligence?0=ip_login_no_cache%3D1e6a46134f3d199fd6fa776de3a08504), 16 June 2013.

intelligence systems of the past and a greater emphasis on human intelligence and broad-based intelligence fusion and analysis.

This article first reviews the sources of information available about the search for bin Laden, and considers whether enough is known to be able to accurately derive any lessons learned in the absence of an official study or after-action report. The subsequent two sections describe the search itself, beginning with the long effort that led to identifying the Abbottabad compound, and then the intense push to try to determine whether bin Laden was living there. Next is a discussion of what lessons this case provides us about the capabilities and limitations of American intelligence. The final sections review what scholars have described as the traditional American approach toward intelligence, and how that approach has been shaken by a series of what might be called “sea changes” since the end of the Cold War. The article concludes by arguing that the lengthy—but ultimately successful—search for bin Laden represents what might be called a “new American way of intelligence.”

## HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW?

To date, there has been no official, publicly available investigation or analysis of the intelligence effort involved in the finding and killing of Osama bin Laden. The lack of such a report may be attributed to the fact that the intelligence effort was successful; official studies and post-mortem investigations are most often seen in cases of intelligence failure, such as September 11 or the Iraq WMD assessment.<sup>7</sup> Most of the information we do have about the search for bin Laden comes from journalists and authors such as Peter Bergen, Seth Jones, and Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker.<sup>8</sup> Considerably less useful—especially for understanding the

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<sup>7</sup>On intelligence post-mortem investigations more generally, see Max Holland, “The Politics of Intelligence Postmortems: Cuba 1962–1963,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 20 (May 2007): 415–452, and John Hollister Hedley, “Learning from Intelligence Failures,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 18 (October 2005): 435–450.

<sup>8</sup>Some of the most-useful sources for this article were: Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt: The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012); Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, *Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America's Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda* (New York: Times Books, 2011); David E. Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012); and Seth G. Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of Al Qaeda Since 9/11* (New York: Norton, 2012). Particularly useful articles include Graham Allison, “How It Went Down,” *Time*, 7 May 2012; Mark Bowden, “The Hunt for ‘Geronimo,’” *Vanity Fair*, November 2012; and Nicholas Schmidle, “Getting Bin Laden,” *The New Yorker*, 8 August 2011. Questions have been raised about Schmidle’s article; see C. Christine Fair, “The Schmidle Muddle of the Osama Bin Laden Take Down,” accessed at <http://registan.net/2011/08/04/the-schmidle-muddle-of-the-osama-bin-laden-take-down/>, 16 June 2013.

long-term intelligence effort—are first-person accounts or other narratives that focus on the bin Laden raid itself.<sup>9</sup>

It is likely that major elements of the search for bin Laden have not been made public. One of the people best placed to know the truth about the operation has said, in fact, that we are not likely to know the full story for some time. Admiral William McRaven, the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command and the overall military commander of the bin Laden raid, had said that “I think when the history is finally written and outlined and exposed on how the CIA determined that bin Laden was there, it will be one of the great intelligence operations in the history of intelligence organizations.”<sup>10</sup> But he added that the full story of what led to the raid may not be made public for decades.<sup>11</sup>

With McRaven’s comment in mind, is it appropriate to attempt at this early point to examine the lessons learned by American intelligence from the search for bin Laden, and to draw broader conclusions about the future of intelligence and national security? This article argues that it is important to begin such an examination now, rather than wait for an official, declassified account to appear, because the new American approach toward intelligence has important implications for a wide range of American political and foreign policy objectives. It is also unnecessary to wait: the accounts we have today appear quite comprehensive, and in many cases rely on interviews (often anonymous) from Obama administration and intelligence community insiders. Those sources can certainly be expected to portray events in the most flattering light possible, but the outlines of the search for bin Laden appear to have been confirmed by enough official sources to suggest that the account we have available is generally accurate.<sup>12</sup>

## THE SEARCH FROM SEPTEMBER 11 TO ABBOTTABAD

Although the actions of the U.S. Special Operations Forces personnel who carried out the raid at Abbottabad demonstrated remarkable skill, that operation may actually not have been particularly unusual. Admiral

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<sup>9</sup>The most-prominent such account is the book by Mark Owen, a pseudonym for a former member of the SEAL team that conducted the raid, *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission That Killed Osama Bin Laden* (New York: Dutton, 2012).

<sup>10</sup>William McRaven interview with CNN’s Wolf Blitzer at the Aspen Security Forum in Aspen, Colorado, on CNN, 28 July 2012, transcript accessed at <http://archives.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/1207/28/sitroom.01.html>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>11</sup>Curtis Wackerle, “Admiral McRaven: Public Still in the Dark About Interesting Aspects of bin Laden Raid,” *Aspen Daily News*, 26 July 2012.

<sup>12</sup>For example, a speech at Harvard Law School by the General Counsel of the CIA on 10 April 2012, which has been published as Stephen W. Preston, “CIA and the Rule of Law,” *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 6 (August 2012), accessed at <http://jnslp.com/2012/08/13/cia-and-the-rule-of-law/>, 16 June 2013.

McRaven told CNN's Wolf Blitzer that U.S. forces conducted some 11 other raids that same evening; while he acknowledged that the bin Laden raid was "a little bit more sporting," he said it was the kind of mission that they had been training for and conducting over the past 10 years.<sup>13</sup> What appears to have been more remarkable is the decade-long interagency intelligence effort to track down the al Qaeda leader. In the words of former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) official Bruce Riedel, the search "was more the work of Hercule Poirot than Bond," as it was marked more by the hard work of analysts than the derring-do of secret agents with guns.<sup>14</sup>

The search for Osama bin Laden began shortly after the U.S. intelligence community lost track of him following the battle of Tora Bora, in eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border, in December 2001.<sup>15</sup> During the next few years, the intelligence community, led by the CIA, applied money, technology, and ingenuity to the problem, but could not track him down. Intelligence officials were sent in large numbers to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the Counterterrorism Center at the CIA grew from 340 people to 1,500.<sup>16</sup> Computer software was used to map out bin Laden's family ties and terrorist networks, a \$25 million bounty was offered, and retouched photos were distributed showing what bin Laden might look like without his beard and in a Western-style suit. Analysts examined the background of each video that bin Laden released, hoping to find a clue to his location, and a German ornithologist was even reportedly called in to try to identify a bird heard chirping in the background of one video.<sup>17</sup> But although the CIA received a lot of what were known as "Elvis sightings"—leads that went nowhere but still had to be tracked down—it got no closer to locating the man who was considered High Value Target 1, or HVT-1.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>McRaven interview with Wolf Blitzer.

<sup>14</sup>Bruce Riedel, "Peter Bergen's Manhunt: The Decade-Long Hunt for Osama bin Laden," 29 April 2012, accessed at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/04/29/peter-bergen-s-manhunt-the-decade-long-hunt-for-osama-bin-laden.html>, 16 June 2013. Peter Bergen makes a similar comment; see his "Finding bin Laden—More Agatha Christie than '24,'" CNN.com, 11 May 2012, accessed at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/11/opinion/bergen-finding-bin-laden/index.html>, 3 February 2013.

<sup>15</sup>Some sources report that bin Laden was located from time to time after Tora Bora; Matthew Aid, for example, writes that the last hard information on his whereabouts came from an NSA communications intercept in the tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan in 2004. Matthew M. Aid, *Intel Wars: The Secret History of the Fight Against Terror* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2012), 103. But most accounts confirm the assessment of former National Counterterrorism Center chief Michael Leiter, who is quoted by David Sanger as saying "our last decent sense of his whereabouts was Tora Bora, 2001." Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 68.

<sup>16</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 65.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

Analysts then tried to step back from the problem, and think about other ways to locate their target. Interrogation of al Qaeda operatives indicated that even though senior al Qaeda leaders did not know where bin Laden was, they were still able to get instructions from him. And the terrorist leader continued to be able to send out video tapes and pronouncements. All this suggested that the best approach might be to focus on his contacts with the outside world. In 2005, a CIA analyst (to whom Peter Bergen gives the pseudonym of Rebecca) wrote a memo titled “Inroads” that set out four pillars on which the search needed to be built: his courier network, his family members, his communications, and his outreach to the media.<sup>19</sup> In a nutshell, the key question was no longer, “where is bin Laden?” but rather “how does he communicate?”<sup>20</sup>

Intelligence officials tried a number of different approaches toward solving the puzzle of how bin Laden was communicating. Some of these efforts appear to have been somewhat traditional, such as reportedly tapping the phones of the Islamabad bureau of the Al Jazeera television network to try to learn how they received videotapes of bin Laden’s speeches, and conducting surveillance of Pakistani journalists who were believed to have contact with al Qaeda.<sup>21</sup> A more creative idea, described by David Sanger of *The New York Times*, came from scientists at the federal government’s national laboratories. They devised a plan to flood Pakistan with new digital video recorders, each of which transmitted a signal that could be tracked, in hopes that eventually one of these would come into the hands of an al Qaeda member who would use it to film bin Laden’s next video. Sanger writes that “Within months, new cameras seeped into the distribution chain in Peshawar, where everyone in the tribal regions comes to shop. It was a pretty brilliant strategy.”<sup>22</sup> But as brilliant as it was, it still did not work.

### *Operation Cannonball*

By 2005 and 2006, the search had stalled. In June 2005, CIA director Porter Goss said publicly that he had an “excellent idea” where bin Laden was, but according to Peter Bergen, “In fact, no one at the Agency had a clue where he was, though most assumed that he was in the Pakistani tribal

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 90.

<sup>20</sup>Peter Finn, Ian Shapira, and Marc Fisher, “A Victory Built on Lessons Learned From the Enemy,” *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2011.

<sup>21</sup>Aid, *Intel Wars*, 2.

<sup>22</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 70. Sanger writes that this program remains highly classified, and that he withheld some details at the request of government officials.

region.”<sup>23</sup> The CIA’s focus was mostly on the war in Iraq, and George W. Bush administration officials were becoming discouraged by the effort to find America’s number one enemy.<sup>24</sup> The administration began publicly downplaying bin Laden’s importance, and in 2006, the CIA even disbanded Alec Station, the unit that had been set up to track him.<sup>25</sup> Juan Zarate, Deputy National Security Adviser for counterterrorism under President George W. Bush, said this was “a very dark period.”<sup>26</sup>

Despite the lack of results (and according to some reports, in response to public pressure for results), in 2006, the CIA launched what was called Operation Cannonball, an effort to “flood the zone” in Pakistan and Afghanistan with case officers in order to find clues about bin Laden’s whereabouts.<sup>27</sup> According to one report, this operation succeeded in getting the family name of the man who was later revealed to be bin Laden’s courier, but most accounts agree that this all-out effort to use traditional methods of intelligence and spy craft was not successful.<sup>28</sup> It was during this time that construction of the house in Abbottabad was being completed, and bin Laden is believed to have moved into the compound by 2006.<sup>29</sup>

A theme that comes through in a number of accounts of the search for bin Laden is the importance of intelligence analysts at the CIA and elsewhere. These analysts worked behind the scenes, attempting to put together the clues obtained by case officers in the field or by technical collection systems managed by any of a number of intelligence organizations. The analyst who has received the most attention is a CIA terrorism specialist who has been described by the Associated Press as “John.”<sup>30</sup> John had reportedly been originally brought into the CIA as a Russian and Balkan analyst, and he had joined the Counterterrorism Center in 2003. Because the CIA prefers to move its people around regularly, John would ordinarily have left the Counterterrorism Center (CTC) for another position within several years. But he wanted to stay, and he rose to a more senior position within the CTC. He and the analysts working for him were

<sup>23</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 70.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 71; and Finn, Shapira, and Fisher, “A Victory Built on Lessons Learned.”

<sup>25</sup>Mark Mazzetti, “C.I.A. Closes Unit Focused on Capture of bin Laden,” *The New York Times*, 4 July 2006; Dilanian, “In Finding Osama Bin Laden.”

<sup>26</sup>Finn, Shapira, and Fisher, “A Victory Built on Lessons Learned.”

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, and Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo, “The Man Who Hunted Osama Bin Laden,” Associated Press, 5 July 2011. See also Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Penguin Press, 2013), 162–167; Mark Mazzetti and David Rohde, “Amid U.S. Policy Disputes, Qaeda Grows in Pakistan,” *The New York Times*, 30 June 2008.

<sup>28</sup>On the courier’s family name, see Mark Mazzetti, Helene Cooper, and Peter Baker, “Behind the Hunt for Bin Laden,” *The New York Times*, 3 May 2011.

<sup>29</sup>On construction of the Abbottabad compound, see Bergen, *Manhunt*, 3–4.

<sup>30</sup>Goldman and Apuzzo, “The Man Who Hunted Osama Bin Laden.”



to play key roles in the hunt, and when the raid took place, John was there at the White House, just outside the famous photo of the Situation Room.<sup>31</sup>

Analysts such as John read everything they could find about bin Laden, including the sort of unclassified, open-source material that traditionally received less respect from intelligence professionals than secrets gathered by satellites or spies. Biographies of the terrorist leader suggested that he was so devoted to his wives and children that he would probably still be living with them, possibly requiring a sizeable compound. In a book written by a wife and son of bin Laden, “Growing Up Bin Laden,” his son Omar said that his father felt the Americans would not risk killing civilians by bombing a big city, so he maintained safe houses in Kabul, where he thought they would not be attacked. This encouraged analysts to consider that bin Laden might not be hiding out in the remote border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan, as most experts had assumed. His references in the videos he released to current events and movies also made it less likely that he was actually living in a cave, cut off from the rest of the world. What if he was hiding more or less in plain sight, in an urban area?<sup>32</sup>

### *Big Ocean, Little Boat*

It might seem surprising that it could take so many years for the world’s most sophisticated intelligence system to find one very recognizable man. But it is a rule of thumb in the intelligence business that in order to find something, it helps a great deal to know where to look. Without such a clue, agencies and analysts are reduced to conducting the difficult task known as a broad area search; in naval intelligence terms, for example, this means that set against the vastness of the ocean, even a large ship is really a very little boat, and very hard to find.

A frequently cited example of how difficult it can be to find a single individual is that of Eric Rudolph, the 1996 Atlanta Olympics bomber, who remained free until he was found accidentally in North Carolina in 2003. Another example is that of wealthy adventurer Steve Fossett, who was the first person to fly solo nonstop around the world in a balloon. Fossett disappeared in 2007 when the small plane he was flying near the California–Nevada border was lost. Months of searches by authorities and

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<sup>31</sup>On John and the Situation Room photo (the room is actually a small conference room off the main Situation Room), see the National Security Archive, “The Zero Dark Thirty File,” accessed at <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB410/>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>32</sup>Finn, Shapira, and Fisher, “A Victory Built on Lessons Learned,” and Bergen, *Manhunt*, 92.

volunteers could not find the crash site; the site was finally discovered by chance when a hiker came across it 13 months after Fossett had disappeared.<sup>33</sup>

Intelligence officials studied past successful manhunts in hopes of finding lessons that could be applied to the search for bin Laden. Cases examined included that of Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann, whom Israeli authorities tracked down in Argentina, and the CIA operation that found and led to the killing of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar. Even more to the point appeared to be the search for Mir Aimal Kansi, the Pakistani man who killed two CIA employees outside the agency's main gate in 1993. CIA officers spoke with Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) special agent Brad Garrett, a former Marine who played a central role in tracking down Kansi in Pakistan four years after the killings.<sup>34</sup>

### *The Courier Was the Key*

It has been widely reported that the key to finding bin Laden turned out to be first identifying his personal courier. The story of how that identification was made began with a man named Mohammed al-Qahtani, who is suspected of having been intended as the 20<sup>th</sup> hijacker on September 11. In August 2001 he had been turned away by U.S. immigration agents in Orlando, Florida, after he had flown in to the United States from Dubai. It was later learned that Mohammed Atta, the operational leader of the September 11 attacks, had been waiting for him at the Orlando airport.<sup>35</sup> Qahtani eventually turned up in U.S. custody at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, after being captured by U.S. forces in the battle of Tora Bora. In 2002, officials realized who he was through his fingerprints, and they reportedly interrogated him for 48 days straight.<sup>36</sup> According to summaries of the interrogations revealed by the WikiLeaks website, he eventually named Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti as a key al Qaeda figure and confidant of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the key planner of the September 11 attacks.<sup>37</sup>

It was not yet known what role al-Kuwaiti—presumably a pseudonym for someone from Kuwait—played in bin Laden's organization. Then, in January 2004, an al Qaeda courier named Hassan Ghul was arrested in

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<sup>33</sup>Jess McKinley and Steve Friess, "Remains Are Found at Site of Fossett Plane Crash," *The New York Times*, 2 October 2008. More recently, the search for Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 in the Indian Ocean—as of this writing still unsuccessful—is another example of how difficult it can be to find a small target in a broad area.

<sup>34</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 84–87.

<sup>35</sup>National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, *The 9/11 Commission Report* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 248. (In the September 11 Report, Qahtani's name is spelled Kahtani.)

<sup>36</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 96–98.

<sup>37</sup>Bergen, "Finding bin Laden—More Agatha Christie than '24.'"

Iraq and was reportedly transferred to a secret CIA prison in Eastern Europe.<sup>38</sup> According to former CIA official Jose Rodriguez, the courier was subjected to enhanced interrogation techniques, and eventually told interrogators that bin Laden no longer communicated by telephone, radio, or Internet.<sup>39</sup> Instead he used a single courier who went by the name Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti. This was bad news, Rodriguez said, because it meant that finding him would be even harder than they thought; but at least the identification of the nom de guerre used by bin Laden's personal courier gave the intelligence community a place to start.

The next step was the discovery by intelligence officials of the real name of bin Laden's courier. It is not clear how this identification was accomplished, and from the point of view of American intelligence officials, it may be a good thing that some elements have remained secret. Rodriguez writes simply that "A couple of years later .... the CIA was able to discover the true name of the courier."<sup>40</sup> According to Peter Bergen, the break came in 2007, when another intelligence service provided the CIA with the courier's real name, Ibrahim Saeed Ahmed.<sup>41</sup>

Although a full discussion of the role played by harsh interrogation measures is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that there is a debate over whether such methods were a key to revealing the identity of bin Laden's courier. Rodriguez argues that such techniques were effective, while Senators Dianne Feinstein and Carl Levin, chairs of the Senate Intelligence and Armed Services Committees, argue that they were not. Feinstein and Levin state that "the CIA learned of the existence of the courier, his true name and location through means unrelated to the CIA detention and interrogation program."<sup>42</sup> More broadly, they argue that:

The roots of the UBL operation stretch back nearly a decade and involve hundreds, perhaps thousands, of intelligence professionals who worked

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Jose A. Rodriguez Jr., "How We Really Got Bin Laden," *The Washington Post*, 1 May 2012. Rodriguez does not identify Ghul by name, but he is clearly describing the same person.

<sup>40</sup>Rodriguez, "How We Really Got Bin Laden." This general outline of events—that the CIA first obtained the pseudonym used by the courier, and then some time later was able to determine his real name—is also provided by the CIA General Counsel; see Preston, "CIA and the Rule of Law."

<sup>41</sup>Bergen, "Finding bin Laden—More Agatha Christie than '24.'" Also Bergen, *Manhunt*, 122 (although in his book Bergen does not specify that the identification was made in 2007). Mazzetti gives the same account, citing Bergen; *The Way of the Knife*, 270. The courier was a Pakistani national who had been born in Kuwait, and his true name has also been reported as Sheikh Abu Ahmed (Aid, *Intel Wars*, 2).

<sup>42</sup>Feinstein, Levin Statement on CIA's Coercive Interrogation Techniques," 30 April 2012, accessed at <http://www.levin.senate.gov/newsroom/press/release/feinstein-levin-statement-on-cias-coercive-interrogation-techniques>, 3 February 2013.

non-stop to connect and analyze many fragments of information, eventually leading the United States to Usama bin Laden's location in Abbottabad, Pakistan. The suggestion that the operation was carried out based on information gained through the harsh treatment of CIA detainees is not only inaccurate, it trivializes the work of individuals across multiple U.S. agencies that led to UBL and the eventual operation.<sup>43</sup>

The Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has conducted a review of the CIA's detention and interrogation program, but as of April 2014, that report had not been made public.<sup>44</sup> If declassified, that report may shed more light on both the debate over the utility of harsh interrogation and on other elements of the search for bin Laden and the identification of his courier.

### *Disaster, Followed by a Big Break*

As President Bush's second term came to an end in 2008, intelligence and national security officials did not appear to have relaxed the effort to find bin Laden. In the summer of 2008, Steve Kappes, the CIA deputy director, and Michael Leiter, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), formed what has been described as a highly secret task force of intelligence experts and people from outside the intelligence community to think of innovative ways to find him.<sup>45</sup> This effort included greatly increasing the number of drone flights over the tribal areas along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, putting more CIA case officers on the ground, and increasing cross-border raids by Special Operations Forces.

When Barack Obama became President in early 2009, he directed that the search for bin Laden be given even greater emphasis. According to Graham Allison, Obama's first order to CIA Director Leon Panetta was to "make the killing or capture of OBL the top priority of the war against al-Qaeda."<sup>46</sup> But then in December 2009, the CIA suffered a major loss that was an outgrowth of the campaign to find bin Laden. A Jordanian triple agent, who claimed to know the whereabouts of bin Laden's deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was invited to a CIA base in Afghanistan to meet a number of agency officials. In an effort to treat him with respect and earn his trust, he

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<sup>43</sup>"Feinstein, Levin Statement."

<sup>44</sup>Scott Shane, "Senate Panel Approves Findings Critical of Detainee Interrogations," *The New York Times*, 14 December 2012.

<sup>45</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 71. Also Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 68, although Sanger says this was in the spring of 2008, not the summer.

<sup>46</sup>Allison, "How It Went Down."

was not searched at the gate; once inside he blew himself up, killing seven CIA officers.<sup>47</sup>

Then, in the summer of 2010, American authorities got a break, when the National Security Agency (NSA) intercepted a cell phone conversation between the courier and a friend. The friend asked the courier, “What’s going on in your life? And what are you doing now?” The courier answered, “I’m back with the people I was with before.”<sup>48</sup> The NSA had reportedly gotten lucky, because it had been monitoring the friend; but that call was enough to give them the courier’s cell phone number and to track him to northwestern Pakistan.<sup>49</sup> In August, Pakistani agents working for the CIA spotted the courier driving near Peshawar in a distinctive white Suzuki SUV with the image of a white rhino on the spare tire cover.<sup>50</sup> He was followed as he drove out of the city—but not toward the remote territory where many analysts still thought he would most likely be hiding. Instead, the courier drove to the compound in Abbottabad near Islamabad, where watchers quickly concluded he was living together with his brother and their families.<sup>51</sup>

Although there was no evidence at this point that bin Laden might be in that house, the CIA analyst named John and others on his team thought he might be there. In August—apparently before the courier was tracked to Abbottabad—a female analyst working for John had written a memo, “Closing in on Bin Laden Courier,” arguing that he was somewhere on the outskirts of Islamabad.<sup>52</sup> That memo was updated and sent out by John the next month under the title, “Anatomy of a Lead.”<sup>53</sup>

In late August, CIA’s Counterterrorism Center briefed Panetta about the new information, telling him they had tracked a suspected courier to “a place that looks like a fortress.” Panetta asked, “A fortress? Tell me about

<sup>47</sup>Joby Warrick, “Systemic Failures Led to Suicide Attack, CIA Says,” *The Washington Post*, 20 October 2010; see also Joby Warrick, “‘The Triple Agent’: The Final Days of the Suicide Bomber Who Attacked the CIA,” *The Washington Post*, 28 June 2011.

<sup>48</sup>Bob Woodward, “Death of Osama bin Laden: Phone Call Pointed U.S. to Compound—and to ‘The Pacer,’” *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2011.

<sup>49</sup>Scott Calvert, “Md.-Based Intelligence Agencies Helped Track Bin Laden,” *Baltimore Sun*, 8 May 2011. See also The History Channel, “Targeting Bin Laden,” first aired 6 September 2011; and Bergen, *Manhunt*, 122–123. This incident is described in a number of other accounts, including Jones, *Hunting in the Shadows*, 416–417. Mazzetti writes that the NSA and CIA had actually been monitoring the courier’s cell phone; Bergen, *The Way of the Knife*, 270.

<sup>50</sup>Schmidle, “Getting Bin Laden.”

<sup>51</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 71.

<sup>52</sup>Adam Goldman and Matt Apuzzo, “The Man Who Hunted Osama Bin Laden,” Associated Press, 5 July 2011.

<sup>53</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 127.

that fortress.”<sup>54</sup> Panetta went to the White House to tell the President that they had found the Abbottabad compound and suspected that bin Laden might be there. For the next several weeks, CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell gave personal updates to Deputy National Security Adviser Tom Donilon and Counterterrorism Adviser John Brennan, but the information on Abbottabad was so compartmented it was not included in the threat matrix that was part of the President’s normal, highly secret daily brief.<sup>55</sup>

### WHO WAS LIVING IN THE HOUSE?

To many observers, the most-surprising aspect of the search for Osama bin Laden may be that even after the American intelligence community had identified the compound in Abbottabad, it was still unable to confirm whether the world’s number one terrorist was living there. Intelligence agencies, led by the CIA, deployed every tool in their surveillance arsenal, and reports indicate that the effort demonstrated remarkable ingenuity and creativity. But despite the application of as much technology, manpower, and imagination as the world’s greatest intelligence system could muster, when it came time for President Obama to decide whether to authorize the raid by U.S. Navy SEALs, the best intelligence that officials could give him was an educated guess as to whether bin Laden was in the house.

A team of Pakistani agents working for the CIA rented a house down the road from the compound, and used it as a clandestine surveillance post.<sup>56</sup> Local residents reported that people came knocking on their doors in the neighborhood, admiring the houses and asking for architectural plans because they wanted to build something similar.<sup>57</sup> Signals intelligence was of little use because the house had no telephone lines or Internet connections, and the residents used an impressive level of operational security. Whenever anyone left the compound to make a cell phone call, they followed very strict security rules, driving about 90 minutes away before even putting the battery in their phone.<sup>58</sup> They also burned their trash inside the compound rather than leaving it out for collection.

A number of imaginative ideas were considered about how to confirm whether bin Laden lived there. Peter Bergen reports that Panetta’s chief of

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<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>55</sup>Allison, “How It Went Down.”

<sup>56</sup>Aid, *Intel Wars*, 2–3, and Greg Miller, “CIA Spied on Bin Laden from Safe House,” *The Washington Post*, 6 May 2011.

<sup>57</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 73; and Adrian Brown, “Osama Bin Laden’s Death: How it Happened,” BBC News, 7 June 2011, accessed at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-13257330>, 2 February 2013.

<sup>58</sup>Woodward, “Death of Osama bin Laden.”

staff told the CIA team to come up with 25 ideas for how to get into the compound, adding that they should not be afraid to be creative. One idea that was not accepted was to throw stink bombs into the compound, forcing the occupants into the street. Another idea, also rejected, was to set up loudspeakers outside the house and broadcast messages from a “voice of Allah” commanding them to come into the street.<sup>59</sup> Still other options considered were to use a miniature unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that looked like a bird (reportedly one was so life-like it was attacked by an eagle), and to analyze local sewage for genetic markers.<sup>60</sup>

The most imaginative approach—and one that surely would have worked if this had been a movie, instead of real life—was the hiring of a Pakistani doctor to run a hepatitis B vaccination program as a ruse to obtain DNA evidence from members of bin Laden’s family. The doctor, Shakil Afridi, had reportedly assisted the CIA in the past, and that history could be part of the reason why Pakistani authorities responded so harshly once the operation became public.<sup>61</sup> He evidently did not live in the Abbottabad area, but travelled there and hired local nurses to unwittingly conduct the vaccination program, using real vaccinations. The doctor did get access to the compound, but never saw bin Laden and did not get any DNA samples.<sup>62</sup>

The team watching the house soon noticed that a man came out of the house on most days and walked inside the courtyard for an hour or two. He never left the compound, and imagery never provided a clear view of his face.<sup>63</sup> The watchers started calling him “the pacer,” and wondered whether he could be bin Laden himself—or perhaps a decoy. They knew bin Laden was at least 6 feet 4, so the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) was tasked with analyzing satellite imagery of the compound to determine his height. According to *The Washington Post*, the agency concluded that the man was somewhere between 5’ 8” and 6’ 8” —hardly a very useful piece of analysis. Other sources told the *Post* that the estimate was narrower than that, but that because the NGA did not know the width of the walls or other

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<sup>59</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 126.

<sup>60</sup>Allison, “How It Went Down.”

<sup>61</sup>The doctor was eventually sentenced by a Pakistani court to 33 years in prison, although that conviction was later overturned and he was ordered to be retried. Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife*, 279–284, 295–297; Salman Masood and Declan Walsh, “Pakistan Overturns Conviction of Doctor in Bin Laden Hunt,” *The New York Times*, 30 August 2013.

<sup>62</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 126–127; Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 80. Defense Secretary Panetta later acknowledged Afridi’s role in the vaccination program; Robert Burns, “Panetta Cites Key Intelligence On Bin Laden Raid,” Associated Press, 27 January 2012.

<sup>63</sup>Bergen *Manhunt*, 132.

information to help serve as reference, they were not able to make a very exact determination.<sup>64</sup>

Imagery intelligence was useful in other ways, however. An NGA team spent six weeks building a table-top scale model of the compound for use by planners, complete with concertina wire on the walls, a dark red minivan parked out front, and a white Land Cruiser inside the compound.<sup>65</sup> After the raid, it was put on display at the entryway of the NGA's headquarters building, and in May 2012, it was taken to the Pentagon for display. Imagery was used throughout the planning of the SEAL mission, including in the construction of a rough replica of the compound built at the SEAL training facility in North Carolina, and at another practice site in the desert in Nevada.<sup>66</sup> NGA analysts checked historical imagery of the area to try to learn when and how the house had been built. Imagery was also useful in determining that there was standing water near the compound, indicating that the water table was probably near the surface. This led the special operations planners to conclude that they would not be able to tunnel in, but it also reassured them that bin Laden probably did not have an escape tunnel.<sup>67</sup>

Along with satellites, imagery was provided by the RQ-170 Sentinel drone, which had stealth technology and could take photos and transmit real-time video from high altitude without being detected by Pakistani authorities.<sup>68</sup> Another Sentinel drone later crashed in Iran.<sup>69</sup> But even with drones and satellites, U.S. officials could get overhead coverage of the house for no more than several hours each day.<sup>70</sup>

### *Planning the Raid*

In the fall of 2010, CIA Director Panetta briefed congressional leaders and obtained authority to divert from other accounts the millions of dollars that

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<sup>64</sup>Woodward, "Death of Osama bin Laden," and Bowden, "The Hunt for 'Geronimo.'"

<sup>65</sup>Agence France-Presse (AFP), "US Spy Agency Unveils Scale Model of Bin Laden Hideout," 17 May 2012.

<sup>66</sup>Schmidle, "Getting Bin Laden." On the contribution of geospatial intelligence and the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency in the search for bin Laden, see Marc Ambinder, "In Raid on bin Laden, Little-Known Geospatial Agency Played Vital Role," 5 May 2011, accessed at <http://www.nationaljournal.com/white-house/in-raid-on-bin-laden-little-known-geospatial-agency-played-vital-role-20110505?page=1>, 3 February 2013; also "Osama bin Laden Operation," National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency Fact Sheet, NGA Office of Corporate Communications, 25 October 2011.

<sup>67</sup>Schmidle, "Getting Bin Laden."

<sup>68</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 74. Greg Miller, "Stealth Drones Kept Watch Over Bin Laden Home," *The Washington Post*, 18 May 2011.

<sup>69</sup>Scott Shane and David E. Sanger, "Drone Crash in Iran Reveals Secret U.S. Surveillance Effort," *The New York Times*, 8 December 2011.

<sup>70</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 92.



would be needed for the operation.<sup>71</sup> As has been widely reported, it soon became clear that it would take more than the CIA's small paramilitary force to carry out the mission of capturing or killing bin Laden, and military planning began under the direction of William McRaven, then a Vice Admiral and commander of the secretive Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC).<sup>72</sup> The decision was also made not to involve or notify Pakistani officials of what was being planned.

While the operational planning was getting underway, the analytical effort continued. Intelligence officials wondered: could bin Laden really be hiding essentially in plain sight, less than a mile from the Pakistani equivalent of West Point? It also seemed unlikely that he would be sleeping in the same bed every night.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps another high-level al Qaeda leader or even a wealthy drug lord could be living in the house, or it might all be an elaborate ruse to throw them off bin Laden's trail. As many as 40 intelligence reviews were conducted through April 2011, examining and re-examining the available intelligence.<sup>74</sup> Peter Bergen reports that the analysts used structured analytical techniques, setting out questions such as: what is the evidence that the Kuwaiti is actually bin Laden's courier? How could the argument be made that he was not? They considered alternative hypotheses, such as that the courier had stolen money from al Qaeda and was now hiding in the house.<sup>75</sup> Trying to figure out who lived in the house was a balancing act: the more work undertaken to confirm bin Laden's presence, the more people who became involved, the longer it took, and the more likely it was that the secret would be blown.<sup>76</sup>

Michael Leiter, the director of the NCTC, had not been briefed on the planning in the early stages. When he became involved in late April 2011, he went to John Brennan to urge that a "red team" be established to look at the evidence from a fresh perspective and try to come up with alternative explanations for what might be going on in the Abbottabad compound. Brennan argued that the CIA had already done all that, but Leiter persuaded him that one more look was needed, by a group of advisers who were not already involved in the case. A team was assembled, including two analysts from the NCTC and two from the CIA who had not been

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<sup>71</sup>Allison, "How It Went Down," and Dilanian, "In Finding Osama Bin Laden."

<sup>72</sup>Allison, "How It Went Down."

<sup>73</sup>Later after-action reports concluded that he had never left the compound in the six years before the raid; Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 92.

<sup>74</sup>Allison, "How It Went Down."

<sup>75</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 128.

<sup>76</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 74.

involved up to that point. The team was told to “murder board” the evidence and come up with the best case for why bin Laden was *not* in the house.<sup>77</sup>

The week before the raid, Leiter reported that the team had set out three alternative scenarios that could cause problems: the house could belong to bin Laden, but he only used it occasionally and might not be there now; it could belong to a different al Qaeda leader or other high value target; or (in the worst scenario for a raid) it could belong to some other rich drug lord or Middle Eastern prince in search of seclusion.<sup>78</sup> The first scenario was considered the most likely of the three, but there was no way to know for certain.<sup>79</sup>

Then only days before the raid, the whole show was almost given away when the WikiLeaks website published documents that revealed that the United States was interested in and knew something about the importance of Abbottabad. On 25 April, *The New York Times* published details about these documents, which concerned detainees being held by the U.S. government at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.<sup>80</sup> One of the documents was from the interrogation of Abu Faraj al Libbi, who had been al Qaeda’s number three leader until he had been captured in Pakistan in 2005. According to the interrogation records, Libbi had moved to Abbottabad in 2003, after receiving a letter from bin Laden’s “designated courier” inviting him to become bin Laden’s “official messenger.” Graham Allison writes that “Had bin Laden’s protectors read the Times closely ... the house could have been empty when the SEALs arrived.”<sup>81</sup>

At a final meeting in the White House Situation Room on Thursday, 28 April, Obama’s senior advisers gave him their views, some offering percentage estimates of how confident they were that bin Laden was in the house. But Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has said that such estimates were subjective. According to Clapper, “Sure, it would’ve been nice to have somebody inside the compound—the maid or the cook we could’ve recruited—someone who could say, ‘Yeah, that’s him and that’s who’s there.’ Well, we didn’t have that.”<sup>82</sup>

The next morning, on Friday, Obama told his top advisers that he had decided to approve the raid, and told Donilon to issue the necessary

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 91 (citing an interview with Leiter); Bergen, *Manhunt*, 191–193.

<sup>78</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 92–93.

<sup>79</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 193.

<sup>80</sup>*The New York Times*, “Times Topics: Abu Faraj al Libbi,” accessed at [http://topics.nytimes.com/topic/reference/timestopics/people/l/abu\\_faraj\\_al\\_libbi/index.html](http://topics.nytimes.com/topic/reference/timestopics/people/l/abu_faraj_al_libbi/index.html), 3 February 2013.

<sup>81</sup>Allison, “How It Went Down.”

<sup>82</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 197.

orders.<sup>83</sup> The President maintained a busy schedule for the next several days, traveling to Alabama and Florida later on Friday, and on Saturday evening speaking as scheduled at the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner. At the dinner it seemed momentarily that there might have been a break in the tight wall of secrecy surrounding the operation. ABC News anchor George Stephanopoulos had learned that tours of the White House would be cancelled for the next day, Sunday, and he asked White House Chief of Staff Bill Daley, "You guys have got something big going on over there?" Daley told him it was only a plumbing issue, and remarkably, the secrecy held through to completion of the raid on Sunday.<sup>84</sup> As Graham Allison put it, "The biggest surprise of the entire operation was that it was a surprise."<sup>85</sup>

The raid on bin Laden's compound was officially and legally conducted by the CIA under its Title 50 authority in the U.S. code as a covert action, but in practice, it was planned and conducted by the military's special operations community.<sup>86</sup> Leon Panetta, then the CIA Director, said in an interview soon after the raid that "this was what's called a 'title 50' operation, which is a covert operation, and it comes directly from the President of the United States who made the decision to conduct this operation in a covert way."<sup>87</sup> It is not known whether Obama signed a specific "finding" authorizing the raid, or whether the operation was considered to be authorized by an earlier finding signed by President Bush after the September 11 attacks. Jeff Mustin and Harvey Rishikof write that "The likely legal scenario for this operation was that President Obama issued his finding, which authorized the CIA to 'own' the operation and, under subsequent Title 50 authorities, allowed Joint Special Operations Command to conduct the raid."<sup>88</sup>

## THE LESSONS FOR INTELLIGENCE

It has been widely acknowledged that the bin Laden raid could not have been accomplished before September 11, or even a few years before 2011. As Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker describe in their book *Counterstrike*, the

<sup>83</sup>Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 94–97; Bergen, *Manhunt*, 205.

<sup>84</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 209, and History Channel, "Targeting Bin Laden."

<sup>85</sup>Allison, "How It Went Down."

<sup>86</sup>Siobhan Gorman and Julian E. Barnes, "Spy, Military Ties Aided bin Laden Raid," *Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 2011. See also Jennifer D. Kibbe, "Conducting Shadow Wars," *Journal of National Security Law & Policy* 5 (January 2012): 373–392.

<sup>87</sup>Panetta interview on PBS Newshour, 3 May 2011, transcript accessed at [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/terrorism/jan-june11/panetta\\_05-03.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/terrorism/jan-june11/panetta_05-03.html), 3 February 2013.

<sup>88</sup>Jeff Mustin and Harvey Rishikof, "Projecting Force in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Legitimacy and the Rule of Law," *Rutgers Law Review* 63 (Summer 2011): 1235–1251; Preston, "CIA and the Rule of Law."

challenges of international terrorism required that the United States develop new mindsets, principles, doctrines, and strategies, and “The mission that successfully took Al Qaeda’s founder forever off the battlefield would not have been possible for the American government to organize and execute in the years immediately after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001.”<sup>89</sup>

The search for bin Laden also tends to confirm a comment made several years ago by then-CIA Director Michael Hayden about the difference between the problems faced by the intelligence community during the Cold War and today. During the Cold War, Hayden said, the enemy’s forces, such as armies and ballistic missile silos, were relatively easy to find, but hard to kill. Today, on the other hand, “the situation is reversed. We’re now in an age in which our primary adversary is easy to kill, he’s just very hard to find.”<sup>90</sup>

How, then, did the agencies and analysts of the American intelligence community find such a hard target? What changes were made that enabled this successful operation? This section considers first, what worked to produce success, and next, what does not appear to have been as successful.

### *What Worked?*

The most striking single aspect of the intelligence success appears to have been the close cooperation between the military and the intelligence community following the September 11 attacks. Admiral William McRaven said, “The bin Laden operation would simply not have been possible if CIA and JSOC had not spent a decade in bed together.”<sup>91</sup> This coordination has been noted before,<sup>92</sup> but the search for bin Laden represented an unusually close convergence of the intelligence and military functions, in what Schmitt and Shanker have called the “blurring of lines between soldiers and spies.”<sup>93</sup> The appointment in 2011 of former CIA Director Leon Panetta as Secretary of Defense, followed shortly afterward by the

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<sup>89</sup>Schmitt and Shanker, *Counterstrike*, 1.

<sup>90</sup>Michael V. Hayden, “General Hayden’s Remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations,” 7 September 2007, accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/news-information/speeches-testimony/2007/general-haydens-remarks-at-the-council-on-foreign-relations.html>, 3 February 2013. This point has more recently been made by Mark Bowden. See his interview with NPR, “Technology Helps Track a Terrorist in ‘The Finish,’” accessed at <http://www.npr.org/2012/10/16/162965855/technology-helps-track-a-terrorist-in-the-finish>, 3 February 2013.

<sup>91</sup>Allison, “How It Went Down.”

<sup>92</sup>For example, John Ferris, “A New American Way of War? C4ISR, Intelligence and Information Operations in Operation ‘Iraqi Freedom’: A Provisional Assessment,” *Intelligence and National Security* 18 (Winter 2003): 155–174.

<sup>93</sup>Schmitt and Shanker, *Counterstrike*, 244. Also Associated Press, “Raid Raises Question: Who’s Soldier, Who’s Spy?” 5 May 2011.

appointment of General David Petraeus to take Panetta's job at the CIA, demonstrated this convergence. The CIA has been transforming itself into more of a paramilitary organization, while the military's special operations forces and defense intelligence agencies are moving more into the CIA's turf, with increased intelligence collection operations around the world.<sup>94</sup>

Another notable feature of the search for bin Laden is that the success was more the work of the CIA than of any other individual agency. This appears to serve as a corrective to the conventional view that following the September 11 attacks, the CIA had fallen from its position as the premier American intelligence agency.<sup>95</sup> It may be too soon to argue that the Central Intelligence Agency is once again "central" within American intelligence, and it is unclear whether this signals a long-term improvement in the CIA's reputation and morale. More recently, some have argued that after the deaths of Americans in Benghazi, Libya, and following the sudden departure of Petraeus as agency head after an extramarital affair came to light, it may be time for the CIA to return to a focus on collection and analysis of intelligence rather than on paramilitary operations.<sup>96</sup> The Obama administration and the CIA's new director, John Brennan, have indicated that they intend for it to do just that.<sup>97</sup> In any case, it appears clear that among the many competitive agencies and organizations of the intelligence community, the CIA has emerged from the search for bin Laden in a stronger position.<sup>98</sup>

Another lesson is the importance of all-source fusion in the intelligence process. Much of the success was the result of the fusion—mostly within the CIA—of many sources of information from intelligence collectors and analysts throughout the intelligence community. There is nothing new about the concept of intelligence fusion; American intelligence agencies developed it into an art form during the Cold War.<sup>99</sup> But the intelligence failure of September 11 was largely seen as a failure of fusion and intelligence sharing, and experts during the past decade have pondered whether the intelligence community had regained the ability to share and fuse

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<sup>94</sup>Greg Miller, "Military to Boost Its Spy Corps," *The Washington Post*, 2 December 2012.

<sup>95</sup>Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, "The Rise and Fall of the CIA," in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 122–137.

<sup>96</sup>David Ignatius, "The CIA After Petraeus," *The Washington Post*, 15 November 2012.

<sup>97</sup>Mark Mazzetti, "C.I.A. to Focus More on Spying, A Difficult Shift," *The New York Times*, 24 May 2013.

<sup>98</sup>Dilanian, "In Finding Osama Bin Laden."

<sup>99</sup>The U.S. Navy is often credited with being an early innovator in all-source intelligence fusion. See, for example, Christopher A. Ford with David A. Rosenberg, *The Admiral's Advantage: U.S. Navy Operational Intelligence in World War II and the Cold War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

intelligence.<sup>100</sup> The answer appears to be yes, at least on this one critically important problem of finding bin Laden.

Finding bin Laden was to a considerable extent a success for intelligence analysis. Since September 11, the intelligence community has begun to make greater use of various types of formal analytical methodologies, and tools and techniques such as “red teams” and “competitive analysis” have been widely adopted as part of an effort to both make the analytical process more transparent, and to take advantage of more rigorous and sophisticated analytical techniques.<sup>101</sup> Intelligence analysts have attempted to make their assumptions and wording clearer to consumers, with National Intelligence Estimates including a section entitled “What We Mean When We Say: An Explanation of Estimate Language” intended to help policymakers understand the meaning behind terms such as “probably” and “estimate.”<sup>102</sup> Agencies have instituted new courses in intelligence analysis, and a vigorous discussion has been underway among intelligence practitioners and scholars over whether the business of intelligence analysis can be made more professional.<sup>103</sup>

The search for bin Laden provides a number of examples of how these techniques and methodologies were used, occasionally to good effect. One such methodology was to approach intelligence challenges much as a lawyer approaches a case or a political scientist conducts research. Rather than attempt to remain completely objective and just report the facts, the point is to try to make and prove (or disprove) a hypothesis. This is what CIA analysts were doing when they wrote papers such as “Anatomy of a Lead.” The analysts involved told Peter Bergen that they knew they were going out on a limb by going beyond the specific facts available. But they were trying to make their case—that the Kuwaiti was the key to finding Osama bin Laden—and ultimately they were proved correct.

The accounts we have of CIA analysts’ work also tends to confirm other reporting that female analysts have played an especially large role in the search for bin Laden. For example, the book *No Easy Day*, written by

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<sup>100</sup>Richard L. Russell, “Achieving All-Source Fusion in the Intelligence Community,” in Loch K. Johnson, *Handbook of Intelligence Studies* (London: Routledge, 2009), 189–198.

<sup>101</sup>Center for the Study of Intelligence monograph, *A Tradecraft Primer: Structured Analytic Techniques for Improving Intelligence Analysis*, March 2009, accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/Tradecraft%20Primer-apr09.pdf>, 10 January 2013.

<sup>102</sup>See the discussion in the publicly released version of the National Intelligence Estimate *The Terrorist Threat to the US Homeland*, July 2007, accessed at <http://www.fas.org/irp/dni/nie071707.pdf>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>103</sup>See, for example, Roger Z. George and James B. Bruce, eds., *Analyzing Intelligence: Origins, Obstacles, and Innovations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008).

former Navy SEAL Matt Bissonnette under the pseudonym Mark Owen, describes a CIA analyst known as Jen who had spent five years searching for bin Laden.<sup>104</sup> A central character in the movie “Zero Dark Thirty,” which dramatizes the search for bin Laden, is reportedly modeled on a real-life female CIA officer—possibly the same woman.<sup>105</sup> Bergen describes the work of several female analysts, including Barbara Sude, a senior analyst with a doctorate from Princeton, who had been the principal author of the 2001 President’s Daily Brief item, “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in the U.S.”<sup>106</sup>

A final, remarkable success was the use of operational security, especially in the later stages of planning and conducting the bin Laden raid. As Graham Allison notes, one of the lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis was that leaders need time for careful deliberation, especially in circumstances where the stakes are high and the facts unclear.<sup>107</sup> During the 50 years since that crisis, the spread of information technology and the speed of leaks in Washington would seem to make it highly unlikely that another administration could keep the lid on an operation of the importance and scale of the bin Laden raid. Yet the secret did not leak out, even though the administration had notified Congressional intelligence leaders.<sup>108</sup>

The decision not to notify Pakistani officials about the raid was probably an important factor in maintaining operational security, and illustrates the difficulties inherent in American–Pakistani intelligence sharing.<sup>109</sup> Pakistani intelligence officials have a history of opposing U.S. policies, and Mark Mazzetti describes the relationship between the CIA and Pakistan’s Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence as having “all the worst

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<sup>104</sup>This is discussed in the review of *No Easy Day* by Dexter Filkins, “Taking Bin Laden,” *The New York Times*, 21 October 2012. Also useful is Eli Lake, “The CIA’s Secret Weapons,” *The Daily Beast*, 17 September 2012, accessed at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2012/09/16/secret-weapons.html>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>105</sup>Greg Miller, “In Movie, She’s a Hero. In Real Life, It’s Complicated,” *The Washington Post*, 11 December 2012; Mike Hixenbaugh, “Zero Dark Thirty, From a Navy SEAL’s Perspective,” *Norfolk Virginian-Pilot*, 13 January 2013.

<sup>106</sup>Bergen, *Manhunt*, 75. The role of female analysts in the hunt for bin Laden preceded the September 11 attacks, as many of the personnel assigned to the CIA “virtual bin Laden station” in the 1990s were women, and some in the CIA reportedly called them “the Manson family.” See Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin), 454.

<sup>107</sup>Graham Allison, “The Cuban Missile Crisis at 50,” *Foreign Affairs* 91 (July/August 2012): 11–16.

<sup>108</sup>Graham Allison reports that when Donilon later learned that Panetta had notified Congressional leaders, “he was astonished.” Allison, “How It Went Down.”

<sup>109</sup>On the problems of intelligence sharing more generally, see James Igoe Walsh, *The International Politics of Intelligence Sharing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); and Don Munton and Karima Fredj, “Sharing Secrets: A Game Theoretic Analysis of International Intelligence Cooperation,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 26 (2013): 666–692.

qualities of a failing marriage,” in which the two sides cannot trust each other, but cannot split up, either.<sup>110</sup> That lack of trust was in full evidence during the search for Osama bin Laden. The CIA needed sources and agents on the ground in Pakistan, but informing Pakistani officials was another matter: Former CIA Director Michael Hayden said later, “It would not have occurred to me to inform the Pakistanis.”<sup>111</sup>

### *What Did Not Work?*

The search for bin Laden illustrates not only the capabilities, but also the limitations of American intelligence. For example, it was truly remarkable that the intelligence community could narrow down the search to that one house in Abbottabad, and then apply so many different techniques to surveillance: everything from agents in a house down the street, to spy satellites, to the vaccination ruse were brought to bear. But despite all this effort, American intelligence was not able to confirm that bin Laden actually lived there. An important lesson appears to be that more assets are not always better.

This lesson applies to people: in the early years of the search, the more agents the CIA deployed to Afghanistan and Pakistan, the more leads were generated and the more wild goose chases resulted. And it also applies to technology. Several observers have argued that modern computing and information technology played a major part in the search for bin Laden. Mark Bowden, for example, argues that such technology helped American military and intelligence personnel “connect the dots” and sort through the vast amount of data available.<sup>112</sup> Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker also stress the importance of technology, arguing that “No tool has revolutionized the nation’s ability to take apart terror networks, or received less acclaim, [more] than the computer.”<sup>113</sup> But even though information technology was undoubtedly critical to the search for bin Laden—as it is critical to many aspects of modern life—in the end, number-crunching did not find bin Laden; plodding, all-source analysis of the old fashioned kind was ultimately more useful.<sup>114</sup>

It might seem logical to conclude that the intelligence reforms and reorganizations implemented since the September 11 attacks contributed

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<sup>110</sup>Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife*, 26–27.

<sup>111</sup>The History Channel, “Targeting bin Laden.”

<sup>112</sup>Bowden, “Technology Helps Track a Terrorist in ‘The Finish.’”

<sup>113</sup>Schmitt and Shanker, *Counterstrike*, 204.

<sup>114</sup>For an argument supporting this view, see Mark M. Lowenthal, “A Disputation on Intelligence Reform and Analysis: My 18 Theses,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 26 (2013): 31–37.



to the success of the search for bin Laden. Intelligence community leaders have been eager to make such a claim.<sup>115</sup> But the available evidence suggests that these intelligence reforms enabled the search only in a general way, by encouraging closer cooperation among the different parts of the intelligence and national security communities. Less successful were the primary organizations formed as a result of these reforms—the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the NCTC—inasmuch as they appear to have played secondary roles behind the CIA.

Another important aspect of intelligence reform since September 11 has been to increase the rigor of intelligence analysis, and as was discussed above, this effort appears to have been useful. But the search for bin Laden also illustrated the limits of intelligence analysis—and in particular, the limits to efforts by the intelligence community in recent years to develop methods to make analysis more precise. In the final step of providing advice to the President about the proposed bin Laden raid, each analyst was asked to provide not only their assessment of whether bin Laden was in the house, but also their confidence level in that assessment. As Mark Bowden describes, the result was to add to the President's confusion, rather than reduce it. Obama told Bowden that “what you started getting was probabilities that disguised uncertainty as opposed to actually providing you with more useful information.” In Bowden's words, “the CIA had instituted an almost comically elaborate process for weighing certainty. It was like trying to craft a precise formula for good judgment.”<sup>116</sup>

A final technique that did not prove as useful as some might have expected was the use of open-source intelligence (OSINT).<sup>117</sup> Some valuable information clearly came from open sources, such as from the biographies and books about bin Laden scoured by the CIA analysts. And at least one unofficial open source effort provided interesting results: in 2009, a group of geography students and faculty members from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) used a scientific algorithm to determine that al Qaeda's leader was most probably living in a small city or town near the Afghanistan–Pakistan border. They chose Parachinar as the most likely town, and although they did not get it right, their analysis was

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<sup>115</sup>James R. Clapper, “How 9/11 Transformed the Intelligence Community,” *Wall Street Journal*, 7 September 2011.

<sup>116</sup>Bowden, “The Hunt for ‘Geronimo.’”

<sup>117</sup>On the strengths of open source intelligence, see Robert David Steele, “Open Source Intelligence,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *Strategic Intelligence*, vol. 2 (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), chap. 14.

impressive.<sup>118</sup> Few intelligence experts would argue that OSINT is unimportant today, but the search demonstrated that even in this era of information everywhere, the right information may still not be easy to find. The intelligence that eventually led to bin Laden did not come from open sources, but was collected by the intelligence community the old fashioned way—secretly.

### THE TRADITIONAL AMERICAN STYLE OF INTELLIGENCE

Military historians and security studies scholars regularly debate what has been called the American way of war, which is typically thought to emphasize large-scale conventional conflict.<sup>119</sup> Somewhat surprisingly—given the large literature that has developed on intelligence in recent years—relatively little attention has been focused on the question of whether there is a distinctive American style of intelligence.<sup>120</sup> Nonetheless, several aspects can be identified as making up what has traditionally been seen as the American way of intelligence.

First and most obvious, the American intelligence community was developed after the Second World War to focus on one particular threat, the Soviet Union. One result of this focus was what Philip Zelikow has described as a “Pentagon-centered” approach to intelligence, with the bulk of the American intelligence community occupied with defense issues and the Department of Defense controlling most of the budget and personnel.<sup>121</sup> Richard J. Aldrich and John Kasuku argue that this has created an American intelligence culture focusing on strategic analysis in support of policy-makers, and in particular aimed at avoiding the threat of surprise attack.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>118</sup>Thomas W. Gillespie and John A. Agnew, “Finding Osama bin Laden: An Application of Biogeographic Theories and Satellite Imagery,” *MIT International Review*, 17 February 2009. For a discussion of the methodology used by the UCLA group, see John D. Deniston, “Gleaning Insight from Absence: Intelligence Tradecraft Lessons from Finding Bin Laden,” Edith Cowan University Research Online, accessed at <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/act/11/>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>119</sup>For a useful recent survey, see Antulio J. Echevarria II, “What Is Wrong with the American Way of War?” *Prism* 3 (September 2012): 109–115, accessed at <http://www.ndu.edu/press/american-way-of-war.html>, 3 February 2013.

<sup>120</sup>Exceptions include James J. Wirtz, “The American Approach to Intelligence Studies,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *Handbook of Intelligence Studies* (London: Routledge), 28–38; Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, “The Intelligence Analysis Crisis,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 359–374; and Michael A. Turner, “A Distinctive U.S. Intelligence Identity,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 17 (January 2004): 42–61.

<sup>121</sup>Philip Zelikow, “The Evolution of Intelligence Reform, 2002–2004,” *Studies in Intelligence* 56 (September 2012): 1–20, at 3–4. A useful survey of the earlier era of American intelligence is Michael Warner, “The Rise of the U.S. Intelligence System,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107–121.

<sup>122</sup>Richard J. Aldrich and John Kasuku, “Escaping from American Intelligence: Culture, Ethnocentrism and the Anglosphere,” *International Affairs* 88 (September 2012): 1009–1028.

Second, American intelligence—especially during the Cold War—has been marked by its use of expensive, high-technology systems. As James Wirtz puts it, “Americans have an obsession with technology, which is reflected in their approach to intelligence.”<sup>123</sup> William Nolte calls the Cold War “a golden age of technical intelligence.”<sup>124</sup> Jake Blood, one of the few I am aware of to use the phrase “American way of intelligence,” uses it to describe the use of sophisticated intelligence technology during the Vietnam War.<sup>125</sup> Although human intelligence has been used extensively, it has been mostly restricted to the CIA, and in terms of budget outlays, it has made up a relatively small share of the American intelligence effort.<sup>126</sup>

This aspect of American intelligence can be seen in what Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott have described as the “American intelligence culture,” reflecting the mass-production mode of American business and emphasizing quantity over quality.<sup>127</sup> They argue that this produced a “money can buy anything” mentality, especially at the CIA, and applies to human intelligence as well as to technical means. Early in the Korean War, they note, the CIA attempted to mass produce HUMINT by sending 200 case officers to Korea, none of whom spoke Korean; they ultimately proved unable to penetrate North Korea.<sup>128</sup>

The emphasis on technology contributed to a third aspect of American intelligence: what Bar-Joseph and McDermott call an “emphasis on operations over analysis.” At the CIA, in particular, the analytical side of the house, the Directorate of Intelligence received less attention than the covert action side, the Directorate of Operations (now the National Clandestine Service).<sup>129</sup> This point is also made by Rob Johnston, who writes that “The Intelligence Community, in its culture and mythos and in its literature, tends to focus on intelligence operations rather than on intelligence analysis.”<sup>130</sup> Analysis has always been a key part of the intelligence process, to be

<sup>123</sup>Wirtz, “The American Approach to Intelligence Studies,” 35.

<sup>124</sup>William Nolte, “Ongoing Reform in the Practice of American Intelligence,” *Harvard Journal on Legislation* 45 (Winter 2008): 209–217, at 211.

<sup>125</sup>Jake Blood, *The Tet Effect: Intelligence and the Public Perception of War* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 76.

<sup>126</sup>A useful survey of these issues is Aris A. Pappas and James M. Simon, Jr., “The Intelligence Community: 2001–2015,” *Studies in Intelligence* 46 (2002), accessed at <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/csi-studies/studies/vol46no1/article05.html>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>127</sup>Uri Bar-Joseph and Rose McDermott, “The Intelligence Analysis Crisis,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 359–374.

<sup>128</sup>Bar-Joseph and McDermott, “The Intelligence Analysis Crisis,” 362.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*, 365.

<sup>130</sup>Rob Johnston, *Analytic Culture in the US Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, Center for the Study of Intelligence, 2005), 17.

sure, and in fact many standard texts—typically written by former intelligence analysts—describe analysis as the most important part of the “intelligence cycle.”<sup>131</sup> But in terms of the money and attention lavished on it, analysis has been a poor second behind giant collection systems and covert operations.

The fourth feature of the traditional American way of intelligence is that the U.S. intelligence community is widespread, with numerous separate organizations, a lack of central authority, and a dearth of collegiality that inhibits information sharing and tends to prevent agencies from working together.<sup>132</sup> This structure—which Mark Lowenthal has described as “wittingly redundant”—can be useful, inasmuch as it brings a number of different organizations to bear on a problem at the same time.<sup>133</sup> But it also often contributes to intelligence failures, such as when the CIA and FBI proved unable to coordinate sufficiently before the September 11 attacks.<sup>134</sup>

And a fifth element that has often been cited as making up a distinctive American approach to intelligence is what Jennifer Sims has described as a national commitment to civil liberties and a “deep suspicion of governmental secrecy and worry about its connection to governmental overreach.”<sup>135</sup> Michael Turner writes that a distinctive “U.S. intelligence identity” has been shaped in part by a suspicion of strong, centralized government, and ambiguity about secret intelligence.<sup>136</sup>

Many of the failures of the search for Osama bin Laden reflected this traditional approach toward intelligence. The attempt to “flood the zone” in Pakistan and Afghanistan with CIA personnel during Operation Cannonball, for example, demonstrated the same “more is better” attitude that was described by Bar-Joseph and McDermott as occurring during the Korean War. More generally, the failures of the search demonstrated that the best technology, the most money, and even the most-brilliant thinking is not always enough. The things that did work tended to reflect new ways of thinking about intelligence, such as a greater emphasis on closer collaboration and cooperation among agencies and organizations, and on all-source fusion analysis rather than on technical collection.

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<sup>131</sup>For example, Mark M. Lowenthal, *Intelligence From Secrets to Policy*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Los Angeles: Sage/CQ Press, 2012), 119.

<sup>132</sup>Philip H.J. Davies, “Intelligence Culture and Intelligence Failure in Britain and the United States,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17 (October 2004): 495–520, at 503.

<sup>133</sup>Lowenthal, *Intelligence From Secrets to Policy*, 14.

<sup>134</sup>Zegart, *Spying Blind*.

<sup>135</sup>Jennifer E. Sims, “Understanding Ourselves,” in Jennifer E. Sims and Burton Gerber, eds., *Transforming U.S. Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 35.

<sup>136</sup>Turner, “A Distinctive U.S. Intelligence Identity.”

It is important not to overstate the nature of these changes in emphasis and approach toward intelligence. This article does not argue that there has been a sudden, all-encompassing shift in the way American intelligence agencies go about their business. The traditional American way of intelligence developed over many decades, partly as a reflection of American history and culture, but also as a response to the challenges posed by the Cold War. Similarly, the new American way of intelligence has developed over time, as the intelligence community has shifted and adapted to new threats and challenges. Those changes can be understood as a series of sea changes—periods of great uncertainty—that have faced American intelligence roughly once a decade since the end of the Cold War.

### A SERIES OF SEA CHANGES

The first sea change for the modern American intelligence community came during the early 1990s and involved a transition from facing a single major enemy—a “dragon,” in the words of former CIA Director R. James Woolsey—to facing instead “a jungle filled with a bewildering variety of poisonous snakes.”<sup>137</sup> In response to the disappearance of its principal target, the intelligence community went through an intense period of turmoil and introspection, with as many as four commissions and blue ribbon studies examining the future of U.S. intelligence active in 1996 alone.<sup>138</sup>

The lack of a primary enemy did not mean that the job of intelligence was any easier. In fact, as Joseph Nye noted, the questions policymakers wanted answered were becoming harder, because they were less likely to be about secrets whose answers can be found or stolen, and more likely to be about mysteries, what Nye called “an abstract puzzle to which no one can be sure of the answer.”<sup>139</sup> The intelligence community never really found its footing during this decade of uncertainty, until the shock of September 11 caused a second great sea change.

After the September 11 attacks, as Gerald Hughes and Kristan Stoddard wrote, there was once again a single “dragon” to slay, in the form of al Qaeda and radical Islamist terrorism.<sup>140</sup> Faced with an identifiable enemy, the national security and intelligence communities became engulfed in another decade of debate and upheaval over how and whether significant reform

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<sup>137</sup>Douglas Jehl, “C.I.A. Nominee Wary of Budget Cuts,” *The New York Times*, 3 February 1993.

<sup>138</sup>Zegart, *Spying Blind*, 29.

<sup>139</sup>Joseph S. Nye Jr., “Peering into the Future,” *Foreign Affairs* 73 (July–August 1994): 82–93, at 88.

<sup>140</sup>R. Gerald Hughes and Kristan Stoddard, “Hope and Fear: Intelligence and the Future of Global Security a Decade after 9/11,” *Intelligence and National Security* 27 (October 2012): 625–652, at 628.

was needed, and then whether the changes that were made to the organizations and leadership of American intelligence were sufficient or even useful at all.<sup>141</sup> Experts argued that the earlier distinction between secrets and mysteries no longer sufficed. Gregory Treverton wrote that new challenges for intelligence, often involving non-traditional and non-state actors, “do not necessarily repeat in any established pattern and are not amenable to predictive analysis in the same way as mysteries.”<sup>142</sup> These new problems, even more difficult to address than mysteries, were described as “complexities” and “mysteries-plus.”<sup>143</sup>

Many intelligence community insiders argue that the changes made since September 11 have transformed and improved the functions of American intelligence.<sup>144</sup> Others argue that relatively little has changed, or even that things have gotten worse.<sup>145</sup> In the growing academic field of intelligence studies there is a considerable literature on changes and revolutions in intelligence today. Much of this literature is prescriptive, arguing for more or different kinds of reforms. Deborah Barger, for example, has called for a “revolution in intelligence affairs.”<sup>146</sup> William Lahneman argues for a transformation in the U.S. intelligence enterprise toward what he calls a new intelligence paradigm that is better suited to addressing non-state-based threats.<sup>147</sup> The intent of this article, however, is descriptive as well as prescriptive, examining the impact of changes that are already underway and arguing that they constitute a new, more effective approach toward American intelligence.

## A NEW AMERICAN WAY OF INTELLIGENCE

The lengthy and ultimately successful search for Osama bin Laden suggests that many of the most-significant reforms to American intelligence have not been the highly visible organizational changes that have received most of the attention, such as the creation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence or the National Counterterrorism Center. Instead, the key changes have taken place largely outside of public view. Some

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<sup>141</sup>Useful discussions of the challenges are Sims and Gerber, *Transforming U.S. Intelligence*; Gregory F. Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>142</sup>Gregory F. Treverton, “Addressing ‘Complexities’ in Homeland Security,” in Loch K. Johnson, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of National Security Intelligence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 344.

<sup>143</sup>Treverton, *Intelligence for an Age of Terror*, 33–34.

<sup>144</sup>Clapper, “How 9/11 Transformed the Intelligence Community.”

<sup>145</sup>Gregory Treverton, “Intelligence Test,” *Democracy* 11 (Winter 2009): 54–65.

<sup>146</sup>Deborah G. Barger, “It is Time to Transform, Not Reform US Intelligence,” *SAIS Review* 24 (Winter-Spring 2004): 23–31.

<sup>147</sup>William J. Lahneman, “The Need for a New Intelligence Paradigm,” *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 23 (2010): 201–225.

of these changes have developed mostly in secret, such as the growth of special operations forces and their improved integration with intelligence. Other changes have occurred in the open but below the radar of public and media attention, such as improvements in all-source fusion analysis. Overall, these changes indicate that we are beginning to see a new American approach toward intelligence that is shaped by three critical features.

First, intelligence operations are likely to continue to exhibit a closer and more effective relationship between the intelligence community and the military—and in particular, the special operations community. The bin Laden raid has been described as a “proof of concept” of a new U.S. strategy in the war on terror, and while it is not clear how successful this strategy will be, it does appear that when intelligence is more closely aligned with operations in this way it can be more decisive than it has been in the past.<sup>148</sup> Matthew Aid has called such operations “intel wars,” of which the most-striking example today is the continuing campaign of unmanned drone strikes against terrorist targets.<sup>149</sup> Some observers argue that these drone strikes represent a myopic focus on finding and killing terrorists to the exclusion of other, longer term missions for the intelligence community.<sup>150</sup> But strikes by armed UAV’s—even if the Obama administration moves their responsibility from the CIA to the Department of Defense—are likely to be a major part of our national security strategy for years to come.<sup>151</sup>

The second aspect of the new American way of intelligence is a reduced reliance on big, expensive technology, and more emphasis on a balance of technical collection, human intelligence (HUMINT) operations, and all-source fusion analysis. Technology will still be required, of course, such as with drone strikes, and it will still be expensive. As recent revelations about NSA surveillance and monitoring indicate, efforts to manage and analyze “big data” are likely to remain critical for the American intelligence community.<sup>152</sup> But the search for bin Laden suggests that the future of

<sup>148</sup>Gorman and Barnes, “Spy, Military Ties Aided Bin Laden Raid.” See also Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife*.

<sup>149</sup>Charlie Savage, “Top U.S. Security Official Says ‘Rigorous Standards’ Are Used for Drone Strikes,” *The New York Times*, 30 April 2012; Greg Miller, “Under Obama, An Emerging Global Apparatus For Drone Killing,” *The Washington Post*, 17 December 2011; Robert F. Worth, Mark Mazzetti, and Scott Shane, “Drone Strikes’ Risks to Get Rare Moment in the Public Eye,” *The New York Times*, 5 February 2013.

<sup>150</sup>Joshua Foust, “Myopia: How Counter-Terrorism Has Blinded Our Intelligence Community,” 13 November 2012, accessed at <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/the-intelligence-communitys-gigantic-blind-spot/265130/>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>151</sup>Greg Miller, “U.S. Set to Keep Kill Lists For Years,” *The Washington Post*, 24 October 2012; Mark Mazzetti, “C.I.A. to Focus More on Spying, A Difficult Shift,” *The New York Times*, 24 May 2013.

<sup>152</sup>James Risen and Eric Lichtblau, “How the U.S. Uses Technology to Mine More Data More Quickly,” *The New York Times*, 9 June 2013.

American intelligence will not be shaped as strongly by such technology as many experts predict.<sup>153</sup> The Defense Intelligence Agency's proposed expansion of its human intelligence capabilities, and recent moves toward encouraging greater debate and dissent among intelligence community analysts, are examples of this aspect of the new American way of intelligence.<sup>154</sup>

And third, American intelligence will continue to be shaped by the tension between the active public discussion of intelligence operations necessary in a democracy and the secrecy required in order to ensure operational success. Intelligence and its role in shaping American foreign policy and national security is out in the open much more than it ever has been; as Charles Cogan puts it, "The CIA has now become part of the 'household' of American actions abroad."<sup>155</sup> At times, such as with revelations about NSA monitoring of telephone records and Internet files, this openness will be seen by officials as creating a security risk.<sup>156</sup> The search for bin Laden and the raid on Abbottabad demonstrate that when it counts, the American national security and intelligence apparatus is able to keep a secret. But as future threats and challenges may lie closer to home, and as the American intelligence community grapples with the challenges of domestic and homeland security intelligence, that veil of secrecy may be even harder to maintain, and the need for open discussion will be felt even more strongly.

## CONCLUSION

The search for Osama bin Laden revealed quite a bit about the limitations of U.S. intelligence, and a rather smaller amount about its capabilities. It confirmed that we are in a new age in which targets are hard to find, but easy to kill, and in which close coordination with operations can make intelligence more decisive than it has been in the past. It also has indicated that the intelligence reforms of the past decade have had a mixed impact. While those reforms encouraged the interagency cooperation that proved vital in the search for bin Laden, they also produced new organizations and

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<sup>153</sup>For a view contrary to this article—arguing that the intelligence community will be greatly shaped in the future by new challenges arising from open-source intelligence, social media, and big data—see a report by the Intelligence and National Security Alliance, *Expectations of Intelligence in the Information Age*, October 2012, accessed at <http://www.insaonline.org/>, 16 June 2013.

<sup>154</sup>Miller, "Military to Boost Its Spy Corps," and Lara Jakes, "US Intelligence Embraces Debate in Security Issues," Associated Press, 27 May 2013.

<sup>155</sup>Charles G. Cogan, "Intelligence: the Times They Are A-Changing," 4 June 2013, accessed at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-charles-g-cogan/intelligence-the-times-th\\_b\\_3385375.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-charles-g-cogan/intelligence-the-times-th_b_3385375.html), 10 June 2013.

<sup>156</sup>Charlie Savage, Edward Wyatt, and Peter Baker, "U.S. Says It Gathers Online Data Abroad," *The New York Times*, 7 June 2013.



procedures that were less useful than older organizations such as the CIA and its Counterterrorism Center.

This new American way of intelligence is a better way. It was built to counter the threat from al Qaeda and international terrorism, and it has proved remarkably effective. But two cautions may be in order. First, will this new approach to intelligence last? Some of these changes are the result of policy decisions that could be reversed relatively easily; new leaders at the Pentagon and among intelligence agencies, for example, could roll back much of the improved coordination between spies and special forces. Similarly, there is no guarantee that the intelligence sharing and all-source fusion that marked the search for bin Laden will continue, especially in the absence of a single dominant threat that encourages cooperation. American intelligence agencies still resemble silos or stove pipes more than they do a cohesive community, and more needs to be done to ensure that the many agencies and organizations in the sprawling intelligence system are able to work together.

Second, will this new approach toward intelligence be appropriate for tomorrow's challenges? After the death of Osama bin Laden, America and its allies may find themselves confronted yet again by a sea change. Although it may be too early to tell, it is likely that the intelligence community's focus on international terrorism will be replaced by concerns about a larger, more-diverse set of threats, ranging from domestic and homegrown terrorism, to rogue states such as Iran and North Korea, to unconventional challenges such as global economic turmoil and climate change. Intelligence agencies will need to be even more adaptable and entrepreneurial in the future. It took a decade for the American intelligence community to find and kill bin Laden; it may take even longer for it to come to grips with the many poisonous snakes it now faces.\*

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