

The killing of Osama bin Laden: Obama's "historic moment"

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Of all the images that have emerged from the morally unclean events of Sunday night, the most politically significant and, one has reason to believe, enduring will prove to be the official photograph, released by the White House, of President Barack Obama, Vice President Joseph Biden, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and other high officials of the United States government seated together in the situation room as they witnessed the killing of Osama bin Laden and several other human beings, including one woman.

Normally, the witnesses to an execution are not photographed. But the White House clearly wanted this "historic moment" captured for posterity. The eyes of all the participants in this ghoulish tableau—with the exception of a military officer who is working his computer—are apparently focused on a television screen. Obama, leaning forward, is stone faced as he stares ahead. Gates wears the sour expression of a man who is too well acquainted with such operations. Hillary Clinton's right hand is raised over her mouth, a gesture that betrays the horror of what is unfolding before her eyes.

After bin Laden had been liquidated, the White House and the media moved quickly to orchestrate the celebration of what was, in fact, an extra-legal state killing. The president chose the East Room to inform the nation, late Sunday night, of bin Laden's death.

Obama, so desperately anxious to associate himself with the killing, no doubt believes that this is the "defining" event of his presidency. But what does this conception—so enthusiastically endorsed by the media—say about the political and moral condition of the government of the United States?

The scenes that followed the announcement of bin Laden's liquidation—or, to be more precise, those reported and encouraged by the media—have been ugly

and degrading. The grunting of "USA! USA!"—a chant which was unknown in the United States until it was incited by the filthy chauvinism of sportscasters who disgraced the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles—has over the last quarter century assumed the character of a public ritual. Of course, very few people are involved in such displays of political backwardness. But they are featured and promoted by the media to intimidate the public, suppress critical thought, and encourage a sense of political and emotional isolation among all those who are not prepared to surrender their democratic principles and moral integrity.

By now, what words can one find to describe the mass media in the United States? The response to the killing of bin Laden exposes yet again the degree to which the distinction between news and propaganda has been virtually effaced. In an unintentionally revealing comment, as the networks awaited Obama's speech, CNN's principal anchor, Wolf Blitzer, informed his audience that the network had received a message from the White House complimenting CNN for its "responsible" coverage of the unfolding events. This compliment, which would be received with shame by a serious journalist, was reported by Blitzer with pride.

The front page of Tuesday's *New York Times* carries a banner headline: "Behind the Hunt for Bin Laden." The article that follows is not a news lead, but rather a work of bootlicking propaganda. We read: "For an intelligence community that had endured searing criticism for a string of intelligence failures over the past decade, Bin Laden's killing brought a measure of redemption. For a military that has slogged through two, and now three vexing wars in Muslim countries, it provided an unalloyed success. And for a president whose national security leadership has come under question, it proved an affirming moment that will enter

the history books.”

So much for a critical examination of the clear illegality of the incursion into Pakistan and the killing itself, let alone an investigation of the mass of unanswered questions and contradictions raised by the Obama administration’s version of events. In fact, by Tuesday night the initial claims that bin Laden had been killed rifle in hand were refuted by later reports that he was unarmed when he was shot to death.

The *Times*’ lead editorial is no less celebratory. It begins: “The news that Osama bin Laden has been tracked and killed by American forces filled us, and all Americans, with a great sense of relief.”

Aside from the *Times*’ unwarranted presumption that it speaks for “all Americans,” why should the killing of a man who has been in hiding for a decade and who was, as is almost universally acknowledged, incapable of significantly influencing, let alone directing events, produce “relief?” Why should the “relief” over his killing outweigh the profound concern that should be aroused by the far-reaching and long-lasting consequences and implications of the United States’ extra-legal killing of an individual? Not surprisingly, the *Times* fails to note that the murder of bin Laden occurred just one day after the United States and NATO killed the son and three grandchildren of Muammar Gaddafi in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the Libyan leader.

The media proclaims over and over the “historic” significance of the killing of bin Laden. It has not been able, however, to explain precisely why this event is of such monumental significance. Neither Obama nor the media have sought to suggest that bin Laden’s death will bring an end to the wars and occupations in which the United States is engaged. Quite the opposite: the *New York Times* declared, in the same above-cited editorial, “Even as we now breathe a bit more easily, we must also remember that the fight against extremists is far from over.” In other words, the wars will continue. Another bogeyman will soon be found, or invented, to take the place of bin Laden.

The misuse of the term “historic” to describe Sunday’s killing is not merely an example of journalistic exaggeration. It expresses a delusional belief within the American ruling class that it can through acts of wanton violence determine the course of history.

But the movement of history is shaped by processes, economic and social, that are far more powerful than the American military.

The inexorable decay of American capitalism continues. During the last 20 years, despite the endless series of military engagements and wars, it has not been possible for the ruling class to restore the global economic position of the United States. During the week that preceded bin Laden’s killing, the US dollar fell to historic lows.

American capitalism remains mired in the worst economic recession since the Great Depression. The national government teeters on the brink of bankruptcy. The states are starved of resources. The social infrastructure is breaking down. The greed, corruption and parasitism of the super-rich are provoking ever greater popular indignation. But the political system is incapable of responding to popular demands for social reform and economic relief.

As with so many of the previous events deemed “historic” by American presidents and the media—the capture of Saddam Hussein being among the more recent—this one too will be quickly overtaken by the unforeseen consequences of the reckless decisions from which it emerged. Obama’s “historic moment” will soon prove to be only another sordid episode in the political, economic and moral putrefaction of the American ruling class.

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