

OBL, Assassination and Imperial Decline

Monday 9 May 2011, by [FINKEL David](#), [Solidarity \(USA\)](#) (Date first published: 4 May 2011).

“U-S-A! U-S-A!” The celebrations – in gatherings in front of the White House, at Ground Zero and around the country as the news spread of the U.S. assassination of Osama bin Laden – are understandable, after a decade in which the mass murderer OBL was portrayed as the incarnation of all things evil. The popular euphoria will fade quickly. The triumphal comment by the President of the United States – *“The U.S. has shown it can do whatever it wants to do”* – points to something more serious and sinister.

Nothing important, in the United States or the world, has changed. Not for those college students, reveling as if their basketball team just made the Final Four, who will leave school facing mountains of debt and few job prospects. Not for African Americans satisfied that president Barack Obama “succeeded in getting OBL” where George W. Bush failed, whose communities confront literally a crisis of survival. Not for military families looking at third or fourth deployments to Iraq or Afghanistan, or even for the Ground Zero first responders with debilitating or lethal illnesses from the toxins at the site, for which they’re still denied compensation or proper treatment. Not, in reality, for any of us.

How little difference does the killing of Osama bin Laden really make? It reveals, but does nothing to resolve, the contradictions between the American superpower and the Pakistani military and intelligence services – which couldn’t conceivably be so slothful that they suspected nothing of OBL hiding out on their very doorstep. It underscores the fantastic weakness of the Pakistani government, which can barely even issue a pro forma protest over a foreign assassination squad, complete with air cover, operating on its sovereign territory. It doesn’t change the fact that anything resembling U.S. “victory” in Afghanistan lies many years if not decades down the road, if ever. It has nothing to do with \$4 (and maybe soon \$5) a gallon gasoline, or the fatal grip of the super-rich and corporate lobbies in Washington, or the destruction of working people’s rights in states all over the country.

Even for the al-Qaeda fanatical-totalitarian-jihadist network that OBL founded, he was no longer the central organizer and certainly not the financier. His death will have little more than symbolic importance to the AQ franchises that now operate autonomously in Pakistan, Yemen, North Africa and elsewhere. In any case, except perhaps for the Haqqani network operating around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan no longer has much of anything to do with al-Qaeda.

President Obama’s proclamation notwithstanding, the United States cannot “do whatever it wants to do.” To the contrary, this is a society in serious decline from the standpoint of human development, social equality, physical infrastructure, even economic power. Internationally, the United States’ ability to control nations in Latin America is weakening, it’s losing ground to Chinese influence in Asia and Africa, and the Arab Uprising has torn a huge hole in the system of U.S. domination of Middle East oil resources through friendly dictatorships. The pretense that “the United States supports the democratic aspirations of people everywhere” – as the president intoned as the Tunisian revolt was spreading to Egypt – is shown for the lie it is when Washington denounces the Palestinian people’s efforts to overcome the factional divisions in their leadership.

What the United States has shown, however, is that it can kill whomever it wants to kill – and claims the right to do so. It's hardly surprising that the Navy SEALs kill team not only snatched OBL's body but dumped it at sea, making sure that there would be no gravesite and no shrine, nor the risk of a trial where bin Laden might have detailed his long association with the CIA during the anti-Soviet Afghan war of the 1980s.

Conveniently for the assassins, the fear and loathing that OBL generated means that there is little revulsion over the methods of his killing and its aftermath. To be clear, we shed no tears ourselves, and very few people in the world do either, for the likes of Osama bin Laden. It is too often forgotten that his early terrorist spectaculars, the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in East Africa, actually killed hundreds of innocent African civilians walking on the street. *The issue here is not bin Laden, it's imperialism.*

Our comrade Warren in Philadelphia puts it well:

"Imperialist intervention in Pakistan is 'legitimized' according to Obama's strategy, (and) pressure will be likely for a U.S. base to remain in Iraq, and certainly in Afghanistan, given the ongoing threats of neighboring Pakistan and Iran. This 'success' also reinforces for domestic audiences in imperial countries the manifest necessity for a leadership role and the advanced capacities of the U.S. military. From the plea from NATO for the resumption of U.S. air support in Libya to the success of special ops forces in Pakistan, U.S. intervention takes on an essential appearance.

"The patriotic enthusiasm for the killing of OBL is only a symptom of this artful demonstration of U.S. omnipotence. And while U.S. public opinion is predictably opposed to prolonged 'nation-building' enterprises, the tolerance, even enthusiasm for quick-hitting special operations is manageable."

To sum up: George W. Bush used 9/11 and the lying pretext of Weapons of Mass Destruction to launch wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, aimed at "transforming the Middle East." This enterprise collapsed in ruins, actually accelerating the U.S. imperial decline it was intended to reverse. President Obama has inherited these wars, doubling down on the one in Afghanistan. The disaster is disguised by the orgiastic celebrations of the long arm of American revenge – but the reality of decline can be only temporarily hidden.

The former war correspondent and trenchant social critic Chris Hedges observed in a speech shortly after the killing was announced [\[1\]](#).

"(E)mpire finally, as Thucydides understood, is a disease. As Thucydides wrote, the tyranny that the Athenian empire imposed on others it finally imposed on itself. The disease of empire, according to Thucydides, would finally kill Athenian democracy. And the disease of empire, the disease of nationalism ... these of course are mirrored in the anarchic violence of these groups, but one that locks us in a kind of frightening death spiral. So while I certainly fear al-Qaida, I know its intentions. I know how it works. I spent months of my life reconstructing every step Mohamed Atta took. While I don't in any way minimize their danger, I despair. I despair that we as a country, as Nietzsche understood, have become a monster that we are attempting to fight."

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Footnotes

[1] you can read the full text at “[Some Words on Osama bin Laden’s Death](#)”, ESSF article 21465.