

‘We [for]got him’:

Remembering and Forgetting in the Narration of bin Laden’s death

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This is the accepted version of a paper (version 2) published in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*

(Paper prepared 21 November 2013).

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Abstract

This article explores how the death of Osama bin Laden was narrated by the Obama Administration between the night of his killing and the 2012 State of the Union address. Three aspects of this unfolding story, in particular, are explored: i) Descriptions of the operation itself; ii) Constructions of bin Laden’s life and character; and, iii) Accounts of the significance and likely consequences of his killing. The article argues that the narration of these events was characterised, first, by considerable discursive continuity with the war on terrorism discourse of George W. Bush. And, second, by a gradual removal or ‘forgetting’ of bin Laden and the circumstances of his death. Each of these dynamics, we argue, contributed to the legitimisation of his killing, demonstrating the importance of narrative remembrance and forgetting alike for the conduct and justification of liberal violence.

Key words: Forgetting; Memory; Narrative; Osama bin Laden; Barack Obama; War on Terror

Introduction

This article explores how Barack Obama’s Administration narrated the killing of Osama bin Laden in a US Special Forces mission in Pakistan on 2 May 2011. Employing a discourse analytic approach,¹ the article focuses, specifically, on three dimensions of the storying of this event within elite political discourse: (i) descriptions of the operation that ended in bin Laden’s death; (ii) accounts of bin Laden’s life and character; and, (iii) evaluations of his killing’s significance. The article makes two primary observations. First, that the narration of bin Laden’s killing demonstrated considerable discursive continuity with the ‘war on terrorism’ discourse of the George W. Bush administration. As demonstrated below, numerous recognisable themes from that paradigm returned throughout each of our three dimensions, despite Obama’s apparent abandonment of this discursive framework.² The article’s second observation is that the writing of this event was also characterised by a gradual removal or ‘forgetting’ of bin Laden the man, and the circumstances of his death. This took place, first, via a stylistic shift toward ‘cleaner’ language and metaphorical description. And, second, through an increasing focus on the consequences - rather than the fact and details - of his death for the US and its constituent publics.

¹ As discussed below, this approach is inspired by post-positivist theorists of discourse working within International Relations (IR) and beyond. See, for instance, David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, revised edn. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); see also Jutta Weldes and Diana Saco, ‘Making State Action Possible: The United States and the Discursive Construction of “The Cuban Problem”, 1960-1994’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 25 no.2 (1996): 361-398; Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London, Routledge, 2006); Laura J. Shepherd, ‘Loud Voices Behind the Wall: Gender Violence and the Violent Reproduction of the International’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 34 no.2 (2006): 377-401.

² Richard Jackson, ‘Culture, identity and hegemony: Continuity and (the lack of) change in US counterterrorism policy from Bush to Obama’, *International Politics*, 48, no. 2/3 (2011): 390-411; Michelle Bentley ‘Continuity we can Believe in’ in Michelle Bentley and Jack Holland, eds. *Obama’s Foreign Policy: Ending the War on Terror* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013); Adam Hodges, *The War on Terror Narrative: Discourse and Intertextuality in the Construction and Contestation of Sociopolitical Reality*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

The article's primary argument is that these dynamics of discursive continuity (with the Bush administration) and discontinuity (within the administration's (re)telling of this story) are intimately connected. Each, we argue, contributed to the legitimisation of the assassination of bin Laden. In the former, this took place via a return to the war on terror's ethical certainties, especially in constructions of terrorism, heroism, cowardice, and justice. In the latter, it occurred via a gradual de-emphasising of the administration's responsibility for bin Laden's death, and the legal and moral questions integral to this use of lethal force. This gradual effacement, we argue, evidences the centrality of narrative forgetting³ – as much as remembrance – to the organisation and routinisation of particular types of violence.

In making these arguments, this article seeks to contribute to three distinct literatures. The first is the wealth of contemporary studies exploring terrorism's discursive and performative productions. Heterogeneities notwithstanding, this work offers an important contribution to recent critiques of terrorism research and the ostensible surety of this sub-field's conceptual and normative foundations.⁴ Richard Jackson's *Writing the War on Terrorism* remains the fullest example here, in which the construction of events (9/11), identities (terrorists and Americans), threats (terrorism) and ethics (around the war on terror) are traced across the language of the Bush Administration's war on terror.⁵ For the purposes of this article, this literature is significant because of the scepticism it fosters toward the rubric of 'terrorism' and its apparent ontological stability. The broadly constructivist framework shared by much (though not all) of this work, means (counter-)terrorism can be approached - as in this article - not as an extra-discursive reality to be discovered or known. Rather, as a "social construction, hence a social fact produced in discourse".⁶ This facilitates the asking of radically different research questions, not least: how is 'terrorism' produced discursively, and what do (re)productions of 'terrorism' do socially and politically? Anchoring this rethinking of terrorism research and its purpose, therefore, is an appeal that scholars, "focus on the discourse by which the terrorist actor and his or her actions are constituted".⁷

Second, as constructions of (counter-)terrorism have stimulated a vast contemporary literature within IR and beyond, so too have practices, technologies and objects of

³ Uri Ram, 'Ways of Forgetting: Israel and the Obliterated Memory of the Palestinian Nakba', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 22, no. 3 (2009): 366-395.

⁴ Jeroen Gunning, 'A Case for Critical Terrorism Studies?', *Government and Opposition*, 42 no. 3 (2007): 363-93; Richard Jackson, Marie Breen-Smyth, and Jeroen Gunning, eds. *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda*, (London: Routledge, 2009); Richard Jackson, Lee Jarvis, Jeroen Gunning, and Marie Breen-Smyth, eds. *Terrorism: A Critical Introduction*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011); Lee Jarvis, 'The Spaces and Faces of Critical Terrorism Studies', *Security Dialogue*, 40 no. 1 (2009): 5-27.

⁵ Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); see also: Sandra Silberstein, *War of Words: Language, Politics and 9/11*, (London: Routledge, 2002); John Collins and Ross Glover, eds. *Collateral Language: A User's Guide to America's War on Terror*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2002); Stuart Croft, *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); James Brassett, 'Cosmopolitanism vs. Terrorism? Discourses of Ethical Possibility Before and After 7/7', *Millennium - Journal of International Studies*, 36 no.2 (2008): 311-338; Jack Holland, *Selling the War on Terror: Foreign Policy Discourses after 9/11*, (New York: Routledge, 2012).

⁶ Rainer Hülse, and Alexander Spencer, 'The Metaphor of Terror: Terrorism Studies and the Constructivist Turn', *Security Dialogue* 39 no.6 (2008): 571-592, at 572.

⁷ Ibid.

remembrance.⁸ Although not without criticism,⁹ contributions to this ‘memory boom’¹⁰ have been integral in developing understanding of memory’s association with core features of the social, such as the ways in which collective identities are negotiated.¹¹ Much of this research draws inspiration from Halbwachs’ pioneering efforts to rethink memory as a fundamentally social phenomenon: one that is created and organised around dynamic, and incomplete, social and interpretive frameworks.¹² Approached thus, memory is viewed not as a ‘thing’ but as a process¹³ in which the past is, “constantly selected, filtered and restructured in terms set by the questions and necessities of the present”.¹⁴ This continuous and selective engagement with the past is precisely the space wherein social actors exercise agency through their rewriting and reinventing of that which has taken place. This is done not only in the context of concerns about the present and future.¹⁵ But, in addition, through the interplay of remembrance and its ostensible antithesis, forgetting, about which far less has been written.¹⁶

The final literature to which this article contributes concerns the role and significance of discourse(s) within IR. Although we focus primarily on the use of language, our analysis follows those - inspired by Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, in particular - for whom the social and discursive are coterminous.¹⁷ This scholarship’s importance is in its detailing of the ceaseless and contested dynamics through which meaning is imposed on the social world,

⁸ For scholarship on memory rooted within IR concerns, see Duncan Bell, ‘Introduction - Violence and Memory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38 no.2 (2009): 361-377; Maja Zehfuss, ‘Hierarchies of Grief and the Possibility of War: Remembering UK Fatalities in Iraq’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38 no.2 (2009): 419-440; Lee Jarvis, ‘Remember, Remember, 11 September: Memorialising 9/11 on the Internet’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 3 no.1 (2010): 69–82.

⁹ For example, Kerwin Lee Klein, “On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse”, *Representations*, 69 (2000): 127-150; Norman Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering*, (2nd ed.) (London: Verso, 2003); David Berliner, “The Abuses of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology”, *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 no.1 (2005): 197-211.

¹⁰ Jay Winter, “The Generation of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Contemporary Historical Studies”, *German Historical Institute Bulletin* 27 (2000): 69-92.

¹¹ See, amongst many others, Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*”, *Representations* 26 (1989): 7-24; Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Edited, Translated, and with an Introduction by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Maria Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, “Social Memory Studies: From ‘Collective Memory’ to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices”, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 (1998): 105-140; Peter Novick, *The Holocaust and Collective Memory: The American Experience* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999); Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds. *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹² See, Jay Winter. and Emmanuel Sivan. ‘Setting the Framework’, in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds, *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 6–39, at 28.

¹³ Jeffrey Olick and Joyce Robbins, ‘Social Memory Studies: From “Collective Memory” to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24 no.1 (1998): 105–40, at 101; Myrian Santos, ‘Memory and Narrative in Social Theory: The Contributions of Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin’, *Time & Society*, 10 no.2/3 (2001): 163–89, at 169.

¹⁴ Paolo Jedlowski, ‘Memory and Sociology: Themes and Issues’, *Time & Society*, 10 no.1 (2001): 29–44, at 30.

¹⁵ Olick and Robbins, ‘Social Memory Studies’, 128; Santos, ‘Memory and Narrative in Social Theory’; Robin Wagner-Pacifici and Barry Schwartz, ‘The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Commemorating a Difficult Past’, *American Journal of Sociology*, 97 no.2 (1991): 376–420, at 379; Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*.

¹⁶ We return to conceptions of forgetting in the article’s final section.

¹⁷ See Eric Herring and Doug Stokes, ‘Critical realism and historical materialism as resources for critical terrorism studies’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 4 no.1 (2011): 5-21, at 6-8.

albeit in temporary and (often) unstable form.¹⁸ Thus, our exploration of the narration of bin Laden's death, and changes therein, seeks to follow this work in unpacking the constitution of subjects, objects and events in the (re)telling of this particular story. In so doing, it attempts to build on earlier studies of political discourse around, *inter alia*, national security,¹⁹ recreational drugs,²⁰ global climate politics,²¹ and nuclear strategy.²² And, in the process, to unpack the importance of absences that appear or emerge in the formulation of prominent and hegemonic narratives, in particular.²³

This article seeks to contribute to these literatures in three primary ways. First, its principal contribution is empirical, concentrating on bin Laden's killing as an under-explored case study through which to investigate the discursive production of (counter-)terrorism, and the importance of dialectics of memory and forgetting therein. Second, it seeks a conjunctural contribution by approaching elite discourse on this event as an opportunity to consider the war on terror's rhetorical as well as material longevity. And, third, the article makes a conceptual contribution, contributing to understandings of the legitimisation (and condemnation) of violence through tracing the significance of practices of forgetting within articulations of meaning in global political life.

The article's methodology employs a discourse analysis of over one hundred linguistic texts – speeches, interviews, and press briefings – produced within the White House, Department of Defense and US intelligence community. Inclusion in this corpus was limited by two criteria. First, the time of its creation, with our focus here on the eight months between bin Laden's death and Obama's January 2012 State of the Union address. This period, importantly, incorporated the tenth anniversary of the events of 11 September 2001. The second criterion was explicit or implicit reference to bin Laden, the circumstances of his death, or the consequences of his killing. Our analysis of these texts in the remainder of the article proceeds in four sections. These focus on narrative constructions of bin Laden's death, life, and the consequences of his killing, respectively, before assessing the implications of narrative forgetting for this case study and beyond.

Killing bin Laden

¹⁸ For an excellent overview, see Jacob Torfing, 'Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges', in *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, eds David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 1-32.

¹⁹ Campbell, *Writing Security*.

²⁰ Eva Herschinger, 'Hell is the Other': Conceptualising Hegemony and Identity through Discourse Theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 41 no.1 (2012): 65-90.

²¹ Chris Paul Methmann, 'Climate Protection' as Empty Signifier: A Discourse Theoretical Perspective on Climate Mainstreaming in World Politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39 no.2 (2010): 345-372.

²² Carol Cohn, 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 12 no. 4(1987): 687-718.

²³ We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for helping us to clarify this.

When news of bin Laden's killing first broke, the fate that had befallen him was articulated in primarily descriptive phrasing. He was, initially at least, either "dead"²⁴ or "deceased".²⁵ Amidst ongoing appeals for evidence of his 'death' – encouraged, in part, by vacillation over the release of photographic evidence – this writing was often combined with explicit recognition of American agency. Bin Laden, for instance, "was killed by the assaulting force";²⁶ "we killed"²⁷ him with "U.S. bullets".²⁸ In one prominent and forthright framing, he had been, simply, "eliminated".²⁹ While this language of death and killing persisted throughout following weeks, over time it was gradually, but perceptibly, substituted with less strictly descriptive accounts. Rather than killed, bin Laden had instead been "removed";³⁰ "taken off the battlefield"³¹ and "off the streets".³² "Brought down"³³ or "took down",³⁴ he had been "got",³⁵ was "gone",³⁶ and, as such, "lost" as a figurehead for other terrorists.³⁷ In other descriptions still, his death was erased altogether; the completion rather than consequences of the mission being here emphasised. This was achieved metaphorically – "the hunt for Osama bin Laden ... ended successfully a few days ago"³⁸ – and via reference to the "successful mission against Osama bin Laden"³⁹ or "the successful bin Laden raid".⁴⁰ Yet,

²⁴ John Brennan, 'Press Briefing', Briefing Room, 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-and-assistant-president-homela> (all speeches accessed 20-22 March 2012).

²⁵ Jay Carney, 'Press Briefing', Briefing Room, 4 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/04/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-542011>.

²⁶ Jay Carney, 'Press Briefing', Briefing Room, 3 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/03/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-532011>.

²⁷ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 4 May 2011. Emphasis added.

²⁸ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, 'DOD Background Briefing', by Telephone on U.S. Operations Involving Osama Bin Laden, 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4818>.

²⁹ Jay Carney, J., 'Press Briefing', Briefing Room, 9 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/09/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-592011>.

³⁰ Senior Administration Officials, 'Background Conference Call to Preview the President's Plan for Implementing His Strategy to Draw Down Troops in Afghanistan', 22 June 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/background-conference-call-senior-administration-officials-preview-presi>.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Senior Intelligence Officials 'Background Briefing on Intelligence Aspects of the U.S. Operation Involving Osama Bin Laden', Pentagon, 7 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4820>.

³³ Robert Gates, 'Office of the Director of National Intelligence', Virginia, 25 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1573>.

³⁴ Leon Panetta, '9/11 Commemoration for Pentagon Personnel', Pentagon Courtyard, 9 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1607>.

³⁵ Leon Panetta, 'Swearing-In Ceremony Remarks', Pentagon, 22 July 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1596>.

³⁶ Barack Obama, 'Address to the United Nations General Assembly', United Nations, New York, 21 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/21/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

³⁷ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, 'DOD Background Briefing', 2 May 2011.

³⁸ Jay Carney, 'Press Gaggle aboard Air Force One en route El Paso, Texas', 10 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/10/press-gaggle-press-secretary-jay-carney-aboard-air-force-one-en-route-el>.

³⁹ Jay Carney, 'Press Briefing', Briefing Room, 9 June 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/09/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-692011>.

although bin Laden's death became less explicitly invoked, his removal was portrayed as both appropriate – “Osama bin Laden is finally where he belongs”⁴¹ – and legitimate, in that he had finally “met his just end”.⁴²

Mission: Accomplished

The fluidity within this (re)writing of bin Laden's death was also apparent within representations of the operation itself. Indeed, this was explicitly discussed, and linked to the challenges of swiftly releasing information to the public which would inevitably later be “reviewed”, “updated” and “elaborated”.⁴³ Gradually, however, a coherent narrative developed that focused, primarily, on the mission's courageous prosecution. The “heroic actions”⁴⁴ of the Special Operations forces, praised by the Vice President's wife, were also acknowledged by the President: “I want to again recognize the heroes who carried out this incredibly dangerous mission”.⁴⁵ In the words of the First Lady, the operation's prosecutors were “a small group of brave men, dropped by helicopter, half a world away in the dead of night...into unknown danger inside the lair of the most sought after man in the world”.⁴⁶ Flying “into a foreign country at the dead of night” and undeterred by the compound's “high walls” and “barbed wire”,⁴⁷ this group of brave men were prepared “to follow bin Laden to...hell's gate if necessary”.⁴⁸ Having made one of the “toughest”, “most courageous”⁴⁹ and “gutsiest calls of any President in recent memory”,⁵⁰ their collective bravery was portrayed as reflective of a courage that stretched all the way up to the president.

A second explanation for the mission's success, in this emerging narrative, concerned its protagonists' professionalism. The Special Forces received particular praise for their “stunning display”⁵¹, of “precision and skill” seen by the “entire world”.⁵² Likewise, the

⁴⁰ Josh Earnest, J. ‘Press Gaggle Aboard Air Force One en route Pittsburgh, PA’, 11 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/11/gaggle-principal-deputy-press-secretary-josh-earnest-aboard-air-force-on>.

⁴¹ Robert Gates, ‘United States Naval Academy Commencement’, Annapolis, Maryland, 27 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1574>.

⁴² Panetta, ‘9/11 Commemoration’, 9 September 2011.

⁴³ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 3 May 2011.

⁴⁴ Jill Biden, ‘Remarks at Mother's Day Tea for Military Spouses’, East Room, 6 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/06/remarks-first-lady-and-dr-biden-mothers-day-tea-military-spouses>.

⁴⁵ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks at Congressional Bipartisan Dinner’, East Room, 2 May 2011, Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/remarks-president-congressional-bipartisan-dinner>.

⁴⁶ Michelle Obama, ‘Remarks at University of Northern Iowa Commencement’ Cedar Falls, Iowa, 7 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/07/remarks-first-lady-michelle-obama-university-northern-iowa-commencement>.

⁴⁷ Brennan, ‘Press Briefing’, 2 May 2011.

⁴⁸ Joe Biden, ‘Remarks at the Pentagon 9/11 10th Anniversary Commemoration’, Pentagon, 11 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/11/remarks-vice-president-biden-pentagon-911-10th-anniversary-commemoration>.

⁴⁹ Leon Panetta, ‘9/11 Tenth Anniversary Summit’, Newseum, Washington, D.C., 8 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1606>.

⁵⁰ Brennan, ‘Press Briefing’, 2 May 2011.

⁵¹ Leon Panetta, ‘DIA 50th Anniversary Ceremony’, Bolling AFB, Washington, D.C., 29 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1615>.

CIA's "relentless" decade-long "hunt for Osama bin Laden"⁵³ was applauded for the "painstaking work"⁵⁴ that had made it a "classic and historic intelligence success".⁵⁵ The mission's success was held up as "a model of seamless [inter-agency] collaboration";⁵⁶ a "staggering undertaking" that left the Vice President in "absolute awe"⁵⁷ and would provide a valuable "model for future operations".⁵⁸ As Obama noted, beyond its principal aim, it also resulted in the successful seizure of a "treasure trove of information", constituting "the single largest collection of senior terrorist materials ever", including several "golden nuggets of information on communications within the al Qaeda group".⁵⁹ For the Obama Administration, this haul served to "further confirm how important it was to go after Bin Laden".⁶⁰

A third explanation of the mission's success focused on the reinvigorated pursuit of bin Laden following Obama's election. White House Press Secretary Jay Carney noted his determination "to refocus ... attention on that region" and "on al Qaeda" in a "very carefully deliberated ... plan ... for Afghanistan", of which "getting bin Laden was very much a part".⁶¹ As the President and Vice President recounted, respectively, "the killing or capture of Osama bin Laden" was elevated to "the top priority in our war to defeat al Qaeda";⁶² "the number one priority was to get Osama bin Laden".⁶³ Narrated thus, this constituted a significant departure from the previous administration's assumption that bin Laden, "could never be found";⁶⁴ reversing, as such, Bush's shifting focus "from al Qaeda in Afghanistan and bin Laden onto Iraq".⁶⁵ Thus, where the narrativisation of the Abbottabad operation drew heavily upon the 'war on terror' discourse of Obama's predecessor – revitalising the trope of 'heroism' and scripting the US as a resolute actor – it also served to introduce distance between the Bush and Obama administrations.

⁵² Leon Panetta, 'SOCOM Change of Command', MacDill Air Force Base, Tampa, Florida, 8 August 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1600>.

⁵³ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, 'DOD Background Briefing', 2 May 2011.

⁵⁴ Panetta, '9/11 Tenth Anniversary Summit', 8 September 2011.

⁵⁵ Senior Intelligence Officials, 'Background Briefing at the Pentagon on Intelligence Aspects of the U.S. Operation Involving Osama Bin Laden', 7 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4820>.

⁵⁶ Leon Panetta, 'On the Record Statement', 7 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4820>

⁵⁷ Joe Biden, 'Remarks at the Atlantic Council's 50th Anniversary Dinner', The Ritz Carlton Washington, D.C., 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/04/remarks-vice-president-atlantic-councils-50th-anniversary-dinner>.

⁵⁸ Robert Gates, 'Office of the Director of National Intelligence', Virginia, 25 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1573>.

⁵⁹ Senior Intelligence Officials 'Background Briefing', 7 May 2011.

⁶⁰ Panetta, 'On the Record Statement', 7 May 2011.

⁶¹ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 3 May 2011.

⁶² Barack Obama, 'Remarks to the Intelligence Community at CIA Headquarters', Langley, Virginia, 20 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/20/remarks-president-cia-director-leon-panetta-and-dni-director-james-clapp>.

⁶³ Joe Biden, 'Remarks to the Troops at Fort Campbell, Kentucky', 6 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/06/remarks-president-and-vice-president-troops-fort-campbell-ky>.

⁶⁴ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 9 May 2011.

⁶⁵ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 3 May 2011.

Mission: Legitimate

Beyond reflecting on the mission's success, the Obama Administration also repeatedly emphasised its legitimacy. The language of justice was particularly frequent here, featuring from Obama's very first announcement of bin Laden's death: "on nights like this one, we can say to those families who have lost loved ones to al Qaeda's terror: Justice has been done".⁶⁶ In the coming days, the President, First Lady, Defense Secretary and Press Secretary would all speak explicitly of "justice" being "brought" by American forces and "received" by a "deserving" victim in an "entirely appropriate" way.⁶⁷ It was a language that, very explicitly, continued core discursive themes of Bush's war on terrorism and its promises of frontier justice. As he had earlier stated, terrorists are "nothing but a bunch of cold blooded killers and that's the way we're going to treat them";⁶⁸ and "whether we bring our enemies to justice, or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done".⁶⁹ On 2 May 2011, the Obama Administration could argue this had finally been achieved.

This depiction of the operation as a bringer of justice was complemented by other constructions of its legitimacy. First, precision in its execution was repeatedly emphasised in just war-inflected framings of "a targeted operation", which took care to minimise "collateral damage",⁷⁰ by avoiding "civilian casualties"⁷¹ and striving "to protect ... noncombatants."⁷² Within initial writings of the mission, this caution was even more noteworthy given the 'resistance' encountered by US forces. As one official stated: "The American team engaged in a firefight... Osama bin Laden did resist".⁷³ The harm that befell some, in this writing, was an outcome only of their belligerence: "the woman who was shot in the leg physically assaulted the - or attempted to assault - or charged, rather, one of the U.S. assaulters".⁷⁴ Second, the Administration stressed the considerable care and attention that was extended to the treatment of bin Laden's body. Here, the requirements of Islamic tradition were repeatedly invoked: his corpse having been, "handled in accordance with Islamic practice"⁷⁵ and his burial performed in "strict conformance with Islamist precepts".⁷⁶ Detailed accounts

⁶⁶ Barack Obama, 'Remarks on Osama bin Laden', East Room, 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/remarks-president-osama-bin-laden>.

⁶⁷ Barack Obama, 'Remarks at "Pride of Midtown" Firehouse', New York, 5 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/05/remarks-president-pride-midtown-firehouse-engine-54-ladder-4-battalion-9>; Michelle Obama, M. 'Remarks at DNC event', Grand Hyatt, Washington, DC, 19 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-first-lady-dnc-event-washington-dc>; Panetta, '9/11 Commemoration', 9 September 2011; Carney, 'Press Briefing', 4 May 2011.

⁶⁸ George W. Bush. 'President Rallies Troops at Fort Hood', 3 January 2003.

⁶⁹ George W. Bush, 'Address to Joint Session of Congress and the American People', 20 September 2001.

⁷⁰ Brennan, 'Press Briefing', 2 May 2011.

⁷¹ Obama, 'Remarks on Osama bin Laden', 2 May 2011.

⁷² Carney, 'Press Briefing', 3 May 2011.

⁷³ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, 'DOD Background Briefing', 2 May 2011.

⁷⁴ Carney, 'Press Briefing', Briefing Room, 3 May 2011.

⁷⁵ Senior Administration Officials 'Press Briefing on the Killing of Osama bin Laden Via Conference Call', 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/press-briefing-senior-administration-officials-killing-osama-bin-laden>.

⁷⁶ Brennan, 'Press Briefing', 2 May 2011.

of the burial were provided,⁷⁷ contrasting “the respect that was shown to him and his body” with the “respect that Osama bin Laden showed to the victims on 9/11”.⁷⁸

Alongside justice, respect and precision, an additional writing of legitimacy emphasised the mission’s global backing. This took place via assertion – “people around the world are glad that he is gone”⁷⁹ – and by the explicit naming of supporters: “numerous world leaders expressed their congratulations ... Calderon ... Cameron ... Merkel ... Netanyahu ... Pinera ... Santos, and ... Sarkozy”.⁸⁰ This roll call of international support was swiftly reciprocated, as allies, such as British Prime Minister David Cameron, congratulated the President mimetically: “This was not just a victory for justice, but a strike right at the heart of international terrorism”.⁸¹ Interestingly, these efforts to highlight the operation’s (international) legitimacy contrasted with the far sparser attention afforded its (international) legality. Where addressed directly, national security and the laws of war were, typically, invoked:

The operation was conducted in a manner fully consistent with the laws of war. ...There is simply no question that this operation was lawful. Bin Laden was the head of al Qaeda, the organization that conducted the attacks of September 11, 2001. And al Qaeda and bin Laden himself had continued to plot attacks against the United States. We acted in the nation’s self-defence. ...Furthermore, consistent with the laws of war, bin Laden’s surrender would have been accepted if feasible.⁸²

Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counter-terrorism, John Brennan, argued similarly four months later along two principal lines. There he noted, first, that the US was “engaged in an armed conflict with al-Qa’ida ... [where] in accordance with international law—we have the authority to take action ... without doing a separate self-defense analysis each time”. And, second, that the United States “reserves the right to take unilateral action if or when other governments are unwilling or unable to take the necessary actions themselves”.⁸³ Taken together, the Administration remained certain of the rightness of its operation, refusing to “apologize for the action that ... this President took” as it was “simply beyond a doubt ... that he had the right and the imperative to do this”.⁸⁴ In Press Secretary Jay Carney’s words, the Administration felt “very strongly that the successful mission against a mass murderer of Americans and people around the world was entirely justified”.⁸⁵

⁷⁷ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 3 May 2011.

⁷⁸ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 4 May 2011.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Office of the Press Secretary, ‘Readout of the President’s Phone Calls on the Death of Osama bin Laden’, 2 May 2011 Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/readout-presidents-phone-calls-death-osama-bin-laden>.

⁸¹ David Cameron, ‘Remarks in Joint Press Conference’ London, 25 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/25/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-cameron-united-kingdom-joint->

⁸² Carney ‘Press Briefing’, 4 May 2011.

⁸³ Integral to this, as he went on to claim, were questions about the definition and reality of Al Qaeda’s “immanent” threat. John Brennan, ‘Strengthening our Security by Adhering to our Values and Laws’, 16 September 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/09/16/remarks-john-obrennan-strengthening-our-security-adhering-our-values-an>.

⁸⁴ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 9 May 2011.

⁸⁵ Jay Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, Briefing Room, 11 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/11/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-5112011>.

The attention afforded the legitimacy of bin Laden's killing was, perhaps, unsurprising. Although condemnation of the operation may not have been particularly widespread, serious concerns were articulated from several sources, not least in relation to the absence of legal processes, whether bin Laden was armed, and Pakistani sovereignty. In one critical view of the language of justice that so permeated this unfolding narrative, for instance: "the killing of an unarmed man is always going to leave a very uncomfortable feeling because it doesn't look as if justice is seen to be done, in those circumstances". Within this critique, "the different versions of events" that had emerged and evolved after the operation had "not done a great deal to help", given how "important" it was "that justice [was] seen to be observed" in dealing with a "war criminal".⁸⁶ As this section has shown, the Obama Administration's response to critiques such as these was multifaceted, drawing, frequently, upon the just war tradition prominent in the war on terror's earlier writings.⁸⁷ Thus, beyond straightforward designations of the actions as 'just', there was a repeated emphasis on presidential intent to 'get' bin Laden, the international backing this enjoyed, and the operation's careful precision.

bin Laden, Osama, b. 1957, d. 2011

As events leading to bin Laden's death were being recounted, the Obama Administration also took the opportunity to revisit the man himself and his legacy, reawakening a number of the war on terror's discursive themes in the process.⁸⁸ The language of terrorism was unsurprisingly prominent here. For instance, bin Laden was "the leader of al Qaeda, and a terrorist who's responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children".⁸⁹ He was, however, no ordinary terrorist, rather: "the most infamous terrorist of our time";⁹⁰ the "butcher"⁹¹ and "sworn enemy"⁹² who "started this war",⁹³ and a continuing "danger to all humanity".⁹⁴ The writing of *present* threat was important, with bin Laden's significance in this emergent obituary stretching far beyond responsibility for past violences. He was still, "the number one guy for al-Qaeda";⁹⁵ "an important symbolic figure";⁹⁶ and,

⁸⁶ Rowan Williams, 'Archbishop on Osama bin Laden', 5 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2028/archbishop-on-osama-bin-laden>.

⁸⁷ See Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, 121-152.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Debra Merskin, "The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush", *Mass Communication & Society*, 7 (2004): 157-175.

⁸⁹ Obama, 'Remarks on Osama bin Laden', East Room, 2 May 2011.

⁹⁰ Barack Obama, Leon Panetta, and James Clapper, 'Remarks to the Intelligence Community at CIA Headquarters', Langley, Virginia, 20 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/20/remarks-president-cia-director-leon-panetta-and-dni-director-james-clapp>.

⁹¹ Joe Biden, 'Remarks by the Vice President at the Atlantic Council's 50th Anniversary Dinner', The Ritz Carlton Washington, D.C., 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/04/remarks-vice-president-atlantic-councils-50th-anniversary-dinner>.

⁹² Senior Administration Officials 'Press Briefing', 2 May 2011.

⁹³ Barack Obama, 'Remarks Welcoming the Wounded Warrior Project's Soldier Ride' South Lawn, 4 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/04/remarks-president-welcoming-wounded-warrior-projects-soldier-ride>.

⁹⁴ Senior Administration Officials 'Press Briefing', 2 May 2011.

⁹⁵ John Campbell, 'DOD News Briefing via Teleconference from Afghanistan', 10 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4821>.

⁹⁶ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 3 May 2011.

“the only leader that al Qaeda had ever known”.⁹⁷ Questions over his continued centrality to al Qaeda, moreover, were misplaced; here was an individual “actively involved in plotting operations and in directing the daily operations of the group...throwing operational ideas out there and...specifically directing other al Qaeda members”.⁹⁸ Intelligence materials recovered in the raid offered sufficient evidence to confirm that “bin Laden remained an active leader in al Qaeda, providing strategic, operational and tactical instructions to the group”.⁹⁹ And, although the unfolding ‘Arab Spring’ was invoked to evidence the anachronistic nature of bin Laden’s struggle, given that he “stood in direct opposition to what the greatest men and women throughout the Middle East and North Africa are risking their lives for”,¹⁰⁰ this “relic of the past”¹⁰¹ still represented the active “leader of a violent extremist movement with affiliates across the globe”.¹⁰²

Bin Laden’s writing as a current, if anachronistic, threat was augmented in two principal ways, which both drew upon and reworked key themes in the war on terror discourse. First, the Obama Administration reaffirmed bin Laden’s contingent relationship to Islam. Carney, for example, reminded the media that this had “never been a war against Islam”,¹⁰³ echoing the language of Cheney and others before him.¹⁰⁴ Within this writing, bin Laden was “a mass murderer of Muslims”,¹⁰⁵ who “offered a message of hate” and rejected “rights for Muslims in favour of violent extremism”¹⁰⁶. Second, this discursive discrediting also made use of repeated constructions of cowardice and vanity, with bin Laden’s apparent withdrawal from the frontlines of conflict a prominent theme here. In the words of John Brennan, for instance, bin Laden’s “hiding” spoke to “the nature of the individual he was”.¹⁰⁷ Bush’s earlier mocking of an enemy inclined to “hit and run” and then “hide in caves” was, in this way, reworked to account for bin Laden’s more recent cosseted lifestyle.¹⁰⁸ The grand scale of his “\$1 million” compound¹⁰⁹ was, in the process, contrasted with the plight of those he directed to fight. Living “high on the hog”,¹¹⁰ bin Laden was obituarised as a proud, vain man, as evidenced by the video footage released after his capture. As one ‘Senior Intelligence Official’ noted, “he jealously guarded his image”: “you can see that his beard has been dyed black...[and the] video clip shows him watching his own images on television”.¹¹¹ These

⁹⁷ Senior Administration Officials, ‘Background Conference Call’, 22 June 2011.

⁹⁸ Senior Intelligence Officials, ‘Background Briefing on Intelligence Aspects of the U.S. Operation Involving Osama Bin Laden’, Pentagon, 7 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4820>.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 3 May 2011.

¹⁰² Senior Administration Officials ‘Press Briefing’, 2 May 2011..

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Cheney, ‘Remarks at the 56th Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner’, Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/vicepresident/news-speeches/speeches/vp20011018.html> (Accessed 11 September 2004).

¹⁰⁵ Obama, ‘Remarks on Osama bin Laden’, 2 May 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks on the Middle East and North Africa’, State Department, 19 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

¹⁰⁷ Brennan, ‘Press Briefing’, 2 May 2011.

¹⁰⁸ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, ‘DOD Background Briefing’, 2 May 2011.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, ‘DOD Background Briefing’, 2 May 2011.

¹¹¹ Senior Intelligence Officials ‘Background Briefing’, 7 May 2011.

revelations, it was hoped, showed an “alone and desperate” bin Laden, isolated from the “hardships” of “the fighters”, left “in a small room looking at a TV of pictures of himself”.¹¹² And, when fighting eventually arrived at his door, this ‘butcher’s’ cowardice was confirmed as he opted to hide, “behind women who were put in front of him as a shield”.¹¹³

In sum, bin Laden’s obituarisation by Obama’s Administration clearly offered an opportunity for further condemnation of the man widely viewed as the war on terror’s instigator. Absent – or forgotten – here was any sustained reflection on the contexts or aims of his conflict with the United States. Politics only surfaced in expressions of the liberal demands deemed antithetic to bin Laden’s own struggle for which others across the Middle East and North Africa were now striving. Instead, he was demonised and discredited as a cowardly terrorist, reinforcing the writing of legitimacy into his killing (or disappearance) explored above.

After bin Laden

A third theme of particular - and increasing - concern in the Administration’s framing of bin Laden’s killing was its likely future significance.¹¹⁴ Four major consequences of his death were posited throughout the following months, each adding to the sense that we had witnessed an “historic and singular” event,¹¹⁵ of “incredible”, “extraordinary”,¹¹⁶ and “monumental” proportions.¹¹⁷ These concerned: al Qaeda’s future, (inter)national security, the US/Pakistan relationship, and the American national identity, respectively.

First, on al Qaeda’s future, the Obama Administration framed the operation as “the most significant victory”¹¹⁸ and “greatest achievement”¹¹⁹ of the war on terror to date. This “major blow” not only concerned the removal of al Qaeda’s active leader, after a decade-long conflict. It also related to the impact of his death for would-be terrorists. As a Senior Defense Official noted, his killing “should send a signal” indicating “U.S. resolve” and “capability” to bring terrorists to “justice”.¹²⁰ The operation would encourage “other al Qaeda leaders out there” to re-evaluate “their safety and security”.¹²¹ Thus, after “what occurred on Sunday”,¹²²

¹¹² Campbell, ‘DOD News Briefing’, 10 May 2011.

¹¹³ Brennan, ‘Press Briefing’, 2 May 2011.

¹¹⁴ On the importance of the future to US political discourse, see, Patricia Dunmire, *Projecting the Future Through Political Discourse: The Case of the Bush Administration*, (Amsterdam: John Benjamin Publishing, 2011); and, Patricia Dunmire, “‘New World Coming’: Narratives of the Future in Post-Cold War National Security Discourse” In *Discourses of War and Peace*, Adam Hodges (ed.), 23-46, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹⁵ Jay Carney, ‘Gaggle Aboard Air Force One, en route Indianapolis’, 6 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/06/gaggle-press-secretary-jay-carney-aboard-air-force-one-en-route-indianap>.

¹¹⁶ Biden, ‘Remarks at the Atlantic Council’s 50th Anniversary Dinner’, 2 May 2011.

¹¹⁷ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 4 May 2011.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Panetta, ‘9/11 Tenth Anniversary Summit’, 8 September 2011.

¹²⁰ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, ‘DOD Background Briefing’, 2 May 2011.

¹²¹ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 3 May 2011.

¹²² Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 3 May 2011.

they “should be watching their back” because America would “finish the job”.¹²³ Yet, as this framing implied, al Qaeda would likely outlive its figurehead. Although “the head off the snake” had been removed, “the body, while battered ... is still there”.¹²⁴

Second, on US and global security, the Obama Administration emphasised that bin Laden’s demise increased the safety of Americans, thus rendering the world a “better place”.¹²⁵ That Osama bin Laden would “never again threaten the United States of America” was a frequent feature of this unfolding narrative.¹²⁶ Optimism, however, was moderately cautious, given that there were still “threats out there”.¹²⁷ The ‘body of the snake’, in particular, presented the potential for “revenge attacks”¹²⁸, with a need, therefore, for American “hyper-vigilance”.¹²⁹ As such, while the mission was a significant step toward American and global security, Americans and their allies should be “under no illusion that killing bin Laden removes the threat entirely”.¹³⁰ In short, the US was “not done going after terrorists”.¹³¹

Third, America’s relationship with Pakistan was also widely discussed due to two principal reasons: (i) the suspicion that Pakistan had been either “involved or incompetent”¹³² in bin Laden’s Abbottabad residence; and, (ii) the operation’s questionable legality given its conduct on Pakistani soil. The dominant portrayal of this relationship emphasised the mutuality of interests in the combating of al Qaeda. Carney, for instance, stressed the importance of the relationship for American “national security interests”.¹³³ Continuing counter-terrorism cooperation was, however, also deemed important to Pakistan: “bin Laden is responsible for supporting operations that have killed scores of Pakistanis as well, so there’s a mutual interest in us working together”.¹³⁴ And, as was frequently noted, “more terrorists have been killed on Pakistani soil than probably any other country”.¹³⁵ The narration of this symbiotic relationship benefitted from invocation of historical and contemporary collaboration, whilst also acknowledging the challenges thereof in “a complicated relationship that is not perfect and that requires a lot of attention”.¹³⁶ In this sense, although Pakistan presented “a steadfast partner ... in some areas” of

¹²³ Obama, Panetta, and Clapper, ‘Remarks to the Intelligence Community’, 20 May 2011.

¹²⁴ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 3 May 2011.

¹²⁵ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks Awarding the Medal of Honor to Private First Class Anthony Kaho’ohanohano and Private First Class Henry Svehla’, East Room, 2 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/remarks-president-awarding-medal-honor-private-first-class-anthony-kahoo>.

¹²⁶ Obama, ‘Remarks at DNC Event’, 18 May 2011.

¹²⁷ Barack Obama, ‘Remarks to Police Officers in New York’, New York First Precinct Police Station, 5 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/05/remarks-president-police-officers-new-york-new-york>.

¹²⁸ Jay Carney, ‘Press Gaggle’, Briefing Room, 13 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/13/press-gaggle-press-secretary-jay-carney-5132011>.

¹²⁹ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 9 May 2011.

¹³⁰ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 3 May 2011.

¹³¹ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 4 May 2011.

¹³² Leon Panetta, cited by CNN Wire Staff, ‘Pakistan Reacts Angrily to Tone of US Questions’, 5 May 2011. Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/05/04/us.pakistan.relations/index.html>

¹³³ Jay Carney ‘Press Briefing’, Briefing Room, 17 May 2011 Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/17/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-5172011>.

¹³⁴ Senior Intelligence Officials ‘Background Briefing’, 7 May 2011.

¹³⁵ Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, 4 May 2011.

¹³⁶ Jay Carney, ‘Press Briefing’, Briefing Room, 15 June 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/15/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-6152011>.

counterterrorism,¹³⁷ difficulties in others ensured the Obama Administration would stay true to his predecessor's approach of 'unilateralism where necessary':¹³⁸ "working with the Pakistanis whenever we can, but also working on our own".¹³⁹

Fourth, almost immediately, the killing was also inserted into the American historical narrative – "the story of our history"¹⁴⁰ – as "a good day for America"¹⁴¹ and an "historic week in the life of our nation"¹⁴². For Carney, it represented a "great victory for the American people".¹⁴³ Irreducible to internal politicking or "partisan narrative", this was an "*American* accomplishment."¹⁴⁴ As the President recounted in his State of the Union, party allegiances and personal ambitions "didn't matter that day in the Situation Room, when I sat next to Bob Gates - man who was George Bush's defense secretary – and Hillary Clinton – a woman who ran against me for president".¹⁴⁵ This moment of unity also reaffirmed the character of the American national identity. Like Bush before him, Obama insisted that US counter-terrorism operations served as a "reminder of what we're about as a people".¹⁴⁶ And, almost inevitably, constructions of bin Laden's killing both drew upon and reinforced notions of American exceptionalism:

Our national story has been, and still is, the envy of the world. Indeed, the death of Osama bin Laden after a decade-long manhunt by the United States reminded us earlier this month that, as President Obama said, when faced with tough times 'we do not falter'.¹⁴⁷

First, then, bin Laden's death was proof that "America does not forget; America will ensure that justice is done".¹⁴⁸ Second, beyond accounting for bin Laden's ultimate defeat, identity-premised narrations also helped to explain the manner of the operation's prosecution: his body was treated with respect, for instance, "because that's *who we are*" and "we feel very comfortable with the fact".¹⁴⁹ Third, the scripting of (an exceptional) American national identity accounted for the refusal to release post-mortem images: "That's not *who we are*. We

¹³⁷ Senior Defense and Intelligence Officials, 'DOD Background Briefing', 2 May 2011.

¹³⁸ Robert Jervis, 'Understanding the Bush Doctrine', *Political Science Quarterly*, 118 no.3 (2003): 365-388.

¹³⁹ Senior Administration Officials, 'Background Conference Call to Preview the President's Plan for Implementing His Strategy to Draw Down Troops in Afghanistan', 22 June 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/background-conference-call-senior-administration-officials-preview-presi> (Accessed 20 March 2012).

¹⁴⁰ Obama, 'Remarks on Osama bin Laden', 2 May 2011.

¹⁴¹ Obama, 'Remarks Awarding the Medal of Honor', 2 May 2011.

¹⁴² Barack Obama, 'Remarks to the Troops at Fort Campbell', Kentucky, 6 May 2011 Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/06/remarks-president-and-vice-president-troops-fort-campbell-ky>.

¹⁴³ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 3 May 2011.

¹⁴⁴ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 3 May 2011, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁵ Barack Obama, 'State of the Union Address', United States Capitol, 24 January 2012. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/24/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Robert Gates, 'Notre Dame Commencement', Notre Dame University, 22 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1568>.

¹⁴⁸ Barack Obama, 'Remarks Welcoming the Wounded Warrior Project's Soldier Ride', South Lawn, 4 May 2011. Available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/04/remarks-president-welcoming-wounded-warrior-projects-soldier-ride>.

¹⁴⁹ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 4 May 2011, emphasis added.

don't trot out this stuff as trophies".¹⁵⁰ And, fourth, the victims of 9/11 and their families received particular attention in this writing, with bin Laden's killing increasingly turned into a mechanism for that tragedy's remembrance. For Obama, it "sent a signal around the world that we have never forgotten the extraordinary sacrifices that were made on September 11th".¹⁵¹ Although, "a moment long in coming, for the 9/11 families, for this city, and for our nation"¹⁵² and a "bittersweet moment...for many families of the victims",¹⁵³ bin Laden's death was scripted as providing a "sense of closure".¹⁵⁴ And, as Obama put it, on learning of bin Laden's death America(ns) "experienced the same sense of unity that prevailed on 9/11".¹⁵⁵ Within this writing of identity, unity and closure, it was, therefore, entirely:

appropriate and fitting [that the President] travel to New York...in the wake of the successful mission ... in order to recognise the terrible loss that New York suffered on 9/11, and to acknowledge the burden that the families of the victims, the loved ones of the victims, have been carrying with them since 9/11, almost 10 years.¹⁵⁶

Framing and Forgetting

The article's final section now turns to remembering and forgetting - and also therefore continuity and discontinuity - in the writing of bin Laden's killing.

Remembering (and) the War on Terror

A first point to note from the above discussion is the extent to which bin Laden's killing engendered a return to core discursive themes that dominated his predecessor's war on terror. The demonisation of bin Laden and his supporters, for example, via the language of terrorism and cowardice, was prevalent throughout the tenure of the Bush Administration.¹⁵⁷ The framing of Al Qaeda's struggle as anachronistic,¹⁵⁸ and only contingently related to Islam,¹⁵⁹ were also direct continuations of earlier representations with which Americans were already well familiar. The writing of American violences by each of these Presidents, moreover, is also characterised by considerable discursive overlap: the language of justice, heroism and professionalism, within broader appeals to exceptionalism, being recurrent.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁰ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 3 May 2011, emphasis added.

¹⁵¹ Obama, 'Remarks to Police Officers in New York', 5 May 2011.

¹⁵² William Lynn, 'Remarks on Managing the Defence Enterprise in a Drawdown', Intrepid Museum, New York, available at <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1563>

¹⁵³ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 4 May 2011.

¹⁵⁴ Carney, 'Gaggle Aboard Air Force One', 5 May 2011.

¹⁵⁵ Obama, 'Remarks at Congressional Bipartisan Dinner', 2 May 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Carney, 'Gaggle Aboard Air Force One', 5 May 2011.

¹⁵⁷ Croft, *Culture, Crisis*, 65; Jackson et al, *Terrorism*, 63.

¹⁵⁸ Lee Jarvis, *Times of Terror: Discourse and the Politics of Temporality*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 133-158.

¹⁵⁹ Richard Johnson, 'Defending Ways of Life: The (Anti-) Terrorist Rhetorics of Bush and Blair', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19, no. 4 (2002): 211-231, at 224.

¹⁶⁰ Jackson, *Writing the War on Terrorism*, 121-152.

Although these discursive themes extend back beyond Bush's presidency,¹⁶¹ they also shed light on the war on terror's longevity. Their re-emergence under Obama, indeed, may indicate the continuing hegemony enjoyed by this discourse; one Jackson explains by its institutionalisation in American life and connection to longstanding political myths.¹⁶² Alternatively, these continuities may be taken simply as further evidence of the lack of political or rhetorical distance between Obama and Bush in relation to the necessity of combating terrorism and securing the US.¹⁶³ Yet, however we explain it, this writing of self and other in familiar and simplified language clearly contributed to more than the condemnation of bin Laden, the 'terrorist'. It also, simultaneously, contributed to the justification of his killing and the operation from which it resulted. Discursive continuities with the War on Terror, in short, enabled this killing to be written as heroic and professional, successfully completed according to the laws of war, ethically conducted in accord with just war principles, and significant in the removal of an active terrorist of dubious moral worth.

Forgetting (and) bin Laden's death

The article's introduction included a brief overview of contemporary literatures on social, collective and narrative memory. In it, we noted that practices of remembrance and commemoration have attracted far greater attention, and are subsequently better understood, than dynamics of forgetting. Part of the reason for this relates, simply, to the challenges of identifying and accessing the forgotten given its status as partial or total absence.¹⁶⁴ At the same time, this forgetting of forgetting might also have something to do with the widespread valorisation of remembrance, and concomitant view of forgetting as failing, negation or loss in everyday and scholarly usage.¹⁶⁵

In spite of these challenges - methodological and normative – an important and growing body of literature on the processes of forgetting is now beginning to emerge. Although diverse, two primary insights for this article emerge from this work. First, forgetting is itself shorthand for a large range of practices. There are different types of forgetting, which take place in different sites and locations, by different agents. Connerton, for instance, identifies seven forms of forgetting, spanning the repressive and forceful erasure of memories, through to

¹⁶¹ See Carol Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post-World War II Era*, Albany, (NY: State University of New York Press, 2006); see also, Adam Hodges "The Generic U.S. Presidential War Narrative: Justifying Military Force and Imagining the Nation." In *Discourses of War and Peace*, Adam Hodges (ed.), 47-68, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) who argues against Bush's exceptional nature; and, John Oddo, "War Legitimation Discourse: Representing 'Us' and 'Them' in Four U.S. Presidential Addresses", *Discourse & Society*, 22 no.3 (2011): 287-314.

¹⁶² Jackson, 'Culture, identity and hegemony'.

¹⁶³ Trevor McCrisken, 'Ten years on: Obama's war on terrorism in rhetoric and practice', *International Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2011): 781-801.

¹⁶⁴ Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Chana Teeger, 'Unpacking the Unspoken: Silence in Collective Memory and Forgetting', *Social Forces*, 88, no. 3 (2010): 1103-1122, at 1104.

¹⁶⁵ Paul Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', *Memory Studies*, 1, no. 1 (2008): 59-71, at 59; Anna Tota, 'Homeless Memories: How Societies Forget their Past', *Studies in Communication Sciences*, 1, no. 2 (2001): 193-214; Dera Hawhee and Bradford Viviam, 'Review Essay: On the Language of Forgetting', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 95, no. 1 (2009): 89-104, at 89.

tacit, shared silences about difficult pasts.¹⁶⁶ Gregory's concept of 'colonial amnesia' offers an alternative framework, and one that connects to this article's normative concern in countering amnesiac histories of violence.¹⁶⁷ Colonial amnesia is, in part, shorthand for processes of narrative forgetting that enable and legitimise imperial violence. To forget is to make history, which, too often, serves as a platform for present and future liberal violences.

Second, this literature also usefully demonstrates that the drivers of forgetting are multiple and complex. On the one hand, forgetting occurs as a necessary response to the limits of human cognition, and to the need for simplification in order to narrate, remember, or otherwise make sense of the past.¹⁶⁸ As Ricoeur argues, "we cannot tell a story without eliminating or dropping some important event according to the kind of plot we intend to build."¹⁶⁹ At the same time, because forgetting is an inherently social phenomenon (as is memory), what can be forgotten will be constrained by social contexts, conventions, commemorative forms, political interests and the like. Thus, while, "the ability to remember, to speak of or to commemorate one thing may implicitly be predicated on the ability to keep silent on others...many of these silences and exclusions are far from benign and often reflect real desires to mute certain aspects of the past".¹⁷⁰ Here, the political imperative to 'never forget' 9/11 is intimately connected to the narrative forgetting of the less sanguine facts of the War on Terror's prosecution, such as the murky legal circumstances of bin Laden's death.

In the context of bin Laden's death, at least two types of forgetting may be identified, each of which emerged within the short period after those events with which we are here concerned. The first concerns what Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger term 'covert silences': those mechanisms that work to de-emphasise, distract from or diminish the importance of aspects of that which is being remembered.¹⁷¹ This type of forgetting involves pushing uncomfortable or less palatable aspects of a past event 'into the margins'; not as an exercise in outright denial, but rather, as a way of de-emphasising through highlighting the wider importance of an unfolding story. Two instances of this type of forgetting have been explored in this article. The first concerns the event of bin Laden's death and the gradual anaesthetisation of the language employed in its recounting. Although initially framed in descriptive, corporeal ways, 'dead' and 'killed' gradually became 'lost', 'removed' and 'gone'. His death, in other words, became increasingly alluded to, and therefore acknowledged only implicitly. The second example concerns questions of agency in relation to bin Laden's killing. Here, an initial claiming of responsibility, even early triumphalism, was gradually re-narrated in such a way that worked to remove his death's protagonists from the events. Indeed, the actions of the US military machine became discussed, far more frequently, in terms of its treatment of bin Laden's (dead) body than in its role in engendering the need for a burial. Again, though, this was not a complete denial: the diegetic conditions of this story's telling such as its narrators

¹⁶⁶ Connerton, 'Seven Types of Forgetting', 59; Tota, 'Homeless Memories'.

¹⁶⁷ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

¹⁶⁸ Barry Schwartz, 'Collective Forgetting and the Symbolic Power of Oneness: The Strange Apotheosis of Rosa Parks', *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 72, no. 2 (2009): 123-142.

¹⁶⁹ Ricoeur, 'Memory and Forgetting', 9.

¹⁷⁰ Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Teeger, 'Unpacking the Unspoken', 1104.

¹⁷¹ Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Teeger, 'Unpacking the Unspoken'.

and sites contained within them an implicit acknowledgement of responsibility. But, it was another example of de-amplification or forgetting through covert silences: an allusion to what had taken place, but one lacking any explicit engagement therein.

These types of silence both sat alongside and were gradually replaced by a second style of forgetting described by Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger: forgetting via overt silences.¹⁷² Where covert silences work primarily through de-emphasis, overt silences refer to those aspects of a past entirely unmentioned. A number of aspects of bin Laden's death may fit into this notion. Most obviously - and reproducing silences of the earlier war on terror - there was no explicit discussion here of bin Laden's ambitions and politics, including the motivations behind his campaign against the 'far enemy' of the United States and its allies.¹⁷³ Absent, too, was any sustained engagement with the more 'robust' intelligence techniques that may have contributed to his killing. Perhaps more interesting, though, is the gradual writing out of bin Laden himself from this narrative as attention turned to the significance of his killing: whether in terms of (inter)national security or US identity. Although his death functions as a point of departure for those projected futures, its significance as an event became increasingly diminished as events yet to arrive increasingly took centre stage.

Conclusion

This gradual forgetting of the operation's target may be seen, simply, as a continuation of a discursive process in place since 9/11. As the 'failure' to capture or kill bin Laden stretched into months and years, the 'war on terror' had been increasingly framed around accomplishments and goals stretching far beyond this one individual.¹⁷⁴ In this process, Osama bin Laden had, perhaps, already begun to decrease in importance: never completely forgotten, but also never a yardstick by which to judge the successes of this conflict's prosecution. Alternatively we might approach this forgetting as a product of a political desire to capitalise on this event's patriotic potentialities by returning to the memory of 9/11 and its victims. More prosaically, perhaps bin Laden's death was simply overtaken by events. The Arab Spring dominated much of the White House's attention throughout 2011, both prior to and after bin Laden's death. The planned withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, too, was central within political discourse at the time, as were the economic travails confronted by the US. In this sense, perhaps 'business as usual' simply intruded on the (re)telling of this story over time. As Jay Carney recounted on 9 May:

on the Monday after Osama bin Laden was eliminated, we had a meeting I was in that was policy-focused on a non-national security issue for 90 minutes with the President, and bin Laden was never mentioned - less than 24 hours after the event.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Vinitzky-Seroussi, & Teeger, 'Unpacking the Unspoken'.

¹⁷³ See, Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004); Fawaz A. Gerges, *The Far Enemy: Why Jihad Went Global*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁷⁴ Jarvis, *Times of Terror*, 122-131.

¹⁷⁵ Carney, 'Press Briefing', 9 May 2011.

However understood, these instances of covert and overt forgetting have important implications for the prosecution of the War on Terror and liberal violence more generally. They worked to augment the legitimacy of the killing of Osama bin Laden through the forgetting of those details and narratives that might highlight the murky legal and moral basis for an operation that, at its crux, amounted to the extra-judicial assassination of multiple unarmed and lightly-armed persons, in the sovereign territory of a uniformed ally. An operation with considerable questions around its legality, appropriateness and ethicality was gradually re-written in a manner that de-emphasised and excluded its more controversial moments. In this sense, these instances of narrative forgetting appear intimately related to the revisiting of the war on terror's moral certainties, adding, in the process, to this event's justification. As Gregory has argued, it is important to resist urges to "gloss over the terrible violence".¹⁷⁶ If "we do not successfully contest these amnesiac histories" they, and we, support the prosecution of liberal, and imperial, violences.¹⁷⁷ This article, then, offers one attempt to resist such instances of "studious disregard" by revealing those practices of narrative forgetting that help to make such violences possible.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 10, citing Maria Misra. 'Heart of Smugness', *Guardian*, 23 July 2002.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Gregory, *Colonial Present*, 145, and Gary Younge, 'The Limits of Generosity', *Guardian*, 7 April 2003.