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Obama and Bush: Two Very Different Wars

By Michael Hirsh

Officials from the previous administration are taking credit for bin Laden's death, but the current president has corrected his predecessor's misguided thinking on terrorism



Ever so gingerly, even as they praised President Obama's success against Osama bin Laden, some former senior Bush administration officials have sought to take a little credit for the mission themselves. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, interviewed by MSNBC this week, even called the operation "a good story for continuity across two presidencies."

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That assessment couldn't be further from the truth. Behind Obama's takedown of the Qaida leader this week lies a profound discontinuity between administrations--a major strategic shift in how to deal with terrorists. From his first great public moment when, as a state senator, he called Iraq a "dumb war," Obama indicated that he thought that George W. Bush had badly misconceived the challenge of 9/11. And very quickly upon taking office as president, Obama

reoriented the war back to where, in the view of many experts, it always belonged. He discarded the idea of a "global war on terror" that conflated all terror threats from al-Qaida to Hamas to Hezbollah. Obama replaced it with a covert, laserlike focus on al-Qaida and its spawn.

This reorientation was part of Obama's reset of America's relations with the world. Bush, having gradually expanded his definition of the war to include all Islamic "extremists," had condemned the United States to a kind of permanent war, one that Americans had to fight all but alone because no one else agreed on such a broadly defined enemy. (Hezbollah and Hamas, for example, arguably had legitimate political aims that al-Qaida did not, which is one reason they distanced themselves from bin Laden.) In Obama's view, only by focusing narrowly on true transnational terrorism, and winning back all of the natural allies that the United States had lost over the previous decade, could he achieve America's goal of uniting the world around the goal of extinguishing al-Qaida.

Bush had also portrayed al-Qaida and terrorism in general as a millennial threat; he and his top aides especially liked to compare the conflict to the Cold War. "This is the great ideological struggle of the 21st century--and it is the calling of our generation," Bush said in 2006, in a dramatic rendezvous-with-destiny speech timed to the fifth anniversary of 9/11. "Freedom is once again contending with the forces of darkness and tyranny"--the terrorists who would seek to impose what he called a "totalitarian Islamic empire."

But the comparisons to the Cold War or the fight against fascism in the 1940s were silly. Al-Qaida, even in its best days, never represented anything like the ideological threat from the Soviet Union or the hegemonic threat of Hitler's Germany. As Wall Street Journal reporter Alan Cullison wrote in a little-noted article in The Atlantic in September 2004, on the eve of 9/11, al-Qaida was a small, fractious group whose members could not even agree among themselves what its goal was. Quoting a remarkable series of letters he found on Ayman al-Zawahiri's old computer in Afghanistan, Cullison wrote that jihadis who were members of Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad--the biggest component of al-Qaida--still wanted to make Egypt the main enemy. They wanted to focus on the jihadis' old adversary, the "near enemy" of the repressive Arab regimes, rather than endorse bin Laden's rather grandiose effort to take on the "far enemy," the United States.

By invading Iraq, the Bush administration resolved the debate for al-Qaida, turning America into the "near enemy." Years of relief followed for al-Qaida in Afghanistan and Pakistan as Bush dealt with the Iraqi insurgents, lumping them together with the "terrorists" of 9/11 as though one static group of global bad guys existed whom Americans would be fighting at home if they weren't in Iraq. The 43rd president, in effect, concocted a new war in the middle of a half-finished one, sapping our military, our credibility, our economy, our morale, and our moral standing; alienating much of the world; and diverting our attention from destroying the chief culprit of 9/11.

The Bush approach remained scattershot throughout his two terms in office and was conceived "piece by piece," in the words of one



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European diplomat in Washington. There is no evidence that Bush ever held a grand strategy session with his principals, in which all of the variables were laid on the table: the price of the global war on terrorism, the strategic goal, and the real costs, in dollars and lives, of an Iraq invasion.

The lack of clarity in strategic conception led directly to the imbroglio in Afghanistan and Pakistan today. There is no longer any question that the diversion of U.S. troops and, in particular, intelligence assets and special forces to Iraq in 2002 and 2003 produced a Taliban and Qaida resurgence in South Asia. It also made the Pakistanis--who even in the best of times were playing a double game--hedge about their own strategic shift away from support for jihadis as a counterweight to India. In 2007, Mahmud Ali Durrani, Pakistan's ambassador to the United States at the time, suggested that this was when Washington began to lose some of his country's support. After 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed was captured in Rawalpindi in March 2003--just as Bush was invading Iraq--"al-Qaida was almost destroyed in an operational sense," Durrani told me. "But then al-Qaida got a vacuum in Afghanistan. And they got a motivational area in Iraq. Al-Qaida rejuvenated."

Fortunately for the United States, Osama bin Laden made his share of mistakes in the past decade as well. And now, at long last, with America's focus once again back where it belonged, he has paid for them. Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld once famously lamented that "we lack metrics to know if we are winning or losing the global war on terror." Neither he nor other senior members of the Bush administration ever developed those "metrics." But by any metric, Barack Obama has just tallied a major victory.

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