

Into the Rat Holes and Safe Houses

“PEOPLE think bin Laden is hiding in the Hindu Kush, but did you know that every day from 4 to 5 p.m. he hosts a show on C-SPAN?”—Comedian Seth Meyers at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner, less than 24 hours before the raid that killed Osama bin Laden.

As it turns out, bin Laden was hiding in plain sight after all, in a large, highly secure compound in the military town of Abbottabad, Pakistan. It took 13 years for the US to find the world’s most wanted terrorist after al Qaeda bombed the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania—and nearly a decade after the 9/11 terror attacks elevated the manhunt to an entirely new level.

But there is a positive lesson to be learned from this: Contrary to bin Laden’s early beliefs, the United States does not quit when its national interests are at stake.

Osama bin Laden had given the US the slip before. In 1998, a cruise missile attack on al Qaeda training sites in Afghanistan just missed him. At the end of 2001, he may have narrowly escaped from Tora Bora and slipped into Pakistan. Then the trail went cold, but the working assumption was that he was living, perhaps in a cave, in the rugged and largely ungoverned frontier along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

He made many changes to stay safe.

Bin Laden had once traveled by SUV with bodyguards and communicated by cell phone. He gave all of that up to make it more difficult for the US to find him. His ultimate compound was custom built with high walls, darkened windows, and no clear lines of sight from neighboring buildings. It was in an area where people wouldn’t ask too many questions. The compound had no phone service or Internet connection, and its occupants burned their trash. Bin Laden himself never left it. Despite all this, US intelligence professionals eventually tracked him down, and for this they are to be commended.

“Last August, after years of painstaking work by our Intelligence Community, I was briefed on a possible lead to bin Laden,” President Obama said in announcing the terror leader’s death. “It was far from certain, and it took many months to run this thread to ground.”

The full might of the US national security apparatus went into this mission, which culminated with the May 1 operation that killed bin Laden and seized a priceless stash of intelligence information.

Bin Laden felt he could drive the US from Muslim lands, and eventually topple moderate Arab governments, because the US would turn and run when confronted.

He misread two events: the 1983 bombing of Marine barracks in Beirut,

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Lebanon, that killed 241 Americans, and the 1993 “Black Hawk down” battle in Mogadishu, Somalia, which left 19 American troops dead. Presidents Reagan and Clinton withdrew US troops from the scene shortly after each of those attacks. But bin Laden “failed to understand that Beirut and Mogadishu represented a peacekeeping and a humanitarian mission, respectively,” noted *National Journal’s* James Kitfield, “with limited national interests at stake.”

A common theme emerges when looking at the international manhunts for terrorists and thugs wanted by the United States: The searches take months or years, but they eventually pay off. A handful of cases prove this point.

Mir Amal Kanshi. In January 1993, Kanshi murdered two CIA employees in their cars as they waited to turn into the agency’s Langley, Va., headquarters. He was picked up in Pakistan in June 1997—four-and-a-half years later.

Abd al Rahim al Nashiri. The mastermind behind the October 2000 bombing of the Navy destroyer *Cole* while it was docked in Yemen. Nashiri was captured in the United Arab Emirates in November 2002, two years after the attack.

Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. The principal architect of the 9/11 plot, with ties to the 1993 World Trade Center bombing and the murder of Daniel Pearl. “KSM” was picked up at a safe house in Pakistan in March 2003, a year-and-a-half after the Sept. 11 hijackings.

Saddam Hussein. Army Maj. Gen. Raymond T. Odierno said Saddam “was

caught like a rat” when the deposed Iraqi dictator was found hiding in a hole on a farm near Tikrit. It was December 2003—nine months after the US invasion.

Abu Musab al Zarqawi. The brutal head of al Qaeda in Iraq led terrorist efforts during the darkest days of the war there, and was also behind the 2004 Madrid subway bombings. Zarqawi was killed in an air strike by a pair of F-16s north of Baghdad. It was June 2006, nearly three years after the US first offered a reward for his whereabouts.

The bin Laden success was clearly no anomaly. The US has proved time and again that when the stakes are high, it will eventually get its man. The computers, flash drives, CDs, videos, and documents scooped up by the Navy SEALs in Abbottabad will yield all sorts of valuable new leads.

“If I were Mullah Omar [the fugitive head of the Taliban], I’d certainly be worried,” said Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Richard P. Mills, until recently the top Marine in Afghanistan, on May 5.

Ayman al Zawahiri, bin Laden’s long-time deputy, should also be looking over his shoulder.

Anwar al Awlaki, the American-born head of al Qaeda in Yemen, certainly is. He narrowly avoided a Predator missile attack just days after the bin Laden raid—and this was even before analysts had a chance to pore over the intelligence collected from bin Laden’s compound.

The radical Islam advanced by al Qaeda and the Taliban is being rejected throughout the Arab world. The population helped drive al Qaeda from Iraq, the Taliban relies on terror to secure support in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and this year’s Arab Spring revolutions show the Muslim world has a desire for freedom, not extremism.

Terrorists such as Mullah Omar, Ayman al Zawahiri, and Anwar al Awlaki would be wise to take the advice given by Iraq’s Prime Minister when Zarqawi was killed five years back. Extremists “should stop now,” Nuri al Maliki said. “They should review their situation and resort to logic while there is still time.”

Failing that, sooner or later, the US will come for them. ■