

GOVERNMENT

The Former Head of the CIA on Managing the Hunt for Bin Laden

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May 2 marks the fifth anniversary of the operation that killed the world's most wanted terrorist, Osama Bin Laden. His death was the culmination of a global manhunt that lasted more than a decade and assumed extreme urgency after the September 11, 2001, attacks.

The Bin Laden operation was a seminal moment in the campaign to decimate Al Qaeda's leadership. Three prior CIA directors, and countless senior officials, operations officers, analysts, technical experts, and support teams carried out this campaign, developing important pieces of intelligence along the way. But when we arrived at Langley in early 2009, there were no solid leads on Bin Laden's whereabouts. The trail had gone cold.

The hunt for Bin Laden from 2009-2010 yielded many lessons about managing a large, complex organization that is focused on varied missions under intense pressure. These management lessons, we believe, are relevant far beyond Langley.

Where We Started

The CIA is a global institution that undertakes high-risk missions to defend the United States. Its analysis is scrutinized every morning by no less an exacting customer than the president of the United States. Its successes are largely unknown; its failures are legendary. Simply put, CIA has one of the toughest jobs in all of government.

The workforce is comprised of career professionals who are deep experts in their craft. They often came to the Intelligence Community early in their careers and stayed. Due to the secret nature of their work, the employees confide mostly in one another, creating skepticism of outsiders and an understandable resistance to doing the life-and-death business of intelligence in a new way.

Reorienting priorities in a large government bureaucracy is hard enough. Pushing for such change at CIA – particularly in 2009, the year we joined, when counterterrorism missions were receiving harsh media and political scrutiny – was even more challenging.

When we were briefed on the Bin Laden hunt, we were assured that there was a team running down every lead. But in our view, the mission lacked urgency, and it was not receiving the type of senior-level attention that it required and deserved. It was not a top-focus item of the Agency's senior management. What follows are the insights we gained as we worked to address the situation:

Structure the Team to Achieve Strategic Goals

An organization's structure and reporting chain must reflect its priorities. Finding Bin Laden was ostensibly the top priority of the president and the director, but we received no regular updates and there was no *single* person inside CIA to turn to for information and operational updates. In short, the director had limited line of sight into the Bin Laden effort and only sporadic contact with the individuals who were pursuing the leads.

This situation became untenable in December 2009, when a suicide bomber killed seven CIA officers at a remote base in Eastern Afghanistan. The officers were there to meet with an asset who had promised access to Bin Laden's inner circle. The asset, it turned out, was a double agent who detonated a suicide bomb. This incident drove home the urgency of redoubling the Bin Laden hunt.

At a meeting shortly after in the director's conference room back at Langley, we asked a roomful of top-ranking Agency officers, "Who here is in charge of finding Osama Bin Laden?" Everybody raised his or her hand, thinking that was the answer we were looking for. The scene captured a big problem: Within CIA, everyone felt ownership of the hunt, but there was no senior official – accountable to the CIA director – who woke up every day and went to sleep every night working on the Bin Laden mission.

We put one person in charge – a career operations officer who had served in the field and had been running the unit overseeing counterterrorism missions along the Afghan-Pakistan border. He had deep knowledge and credibility. To keep pressure on the team and to signal to the staff that this effort was a top priority, we assigned the officer – let's call him "Gary" – to brief Director Panetta every Tuesday afternoon, even if he had nothing new to report.

Gary and his deputy went to work building a team and revitalizing a set of initiatives to track Bin Laden, his family, and his network of associates. It was a lot of effort with few results. For many months, Gary brought no news to the Tuesday briefings. Those months

were tough on Gary and his team – nobody likes telling the boss there’s nothing new to report – but it drove them to dig deeper into every possible lead. The Bin Laden hunt became personal for Gary, for his deputy, and for their entire team.

In late August 2010, Gary came to the briefing with something new to report. The revitalized effort had led Agency officers to two brothers who had served as couriers for Bin Laden nearly a decade earlier. The CIA had located the brothers in Pakistan, followed them to a suburb called Abbottabad, and down a dead-end street. At the end of the street, Gary said, was a “fortress”: a villa with 12-foot-high walls in the front, 18-foot-high walls in the back, a 7-foot-high wall on the balcony, no internet service, no phone service, and some of the occupants never left the compound.

This was a huge breakthrough, borne of single-minded, focused determination. Gary had the full-time command of this, and he finally had a solid lead to follow.

Challenge the Working Hypothesis

The job of a CIA analyst is to pull together all of the evidence and expertise on a given topic and provide an answer to a policy maker’s question. An analyst develops a working hypothesis based on intercepts, human intelligence operations, photographs and videos, and other streams of information. This hypothesis then drives further collection of information.

In the case of the Bin Laden manhunt, the questions were: How would he be hiding? Where? What security would he employ? The working hypothesis was that he was located in the tribal areas in Western Pakistan, probably in a cave or a rural area, separated from his family. The hypothesis was that well-armed guards surrounded him. There was also a suggestion that his health was failing and that he may have been hooked up to a makeshift kidney dialysis machine.

Yet our new lead suggested that Bin Laden was living in a villa in the suburbs, with his wives, kids, and two other families, hooked up to cable TV.

Could this be possible – that almost everything about the working hypothesis might be wrong?

Believing that Bin Laden was in that suburban villa required us to shed our most basic assumptions about how he would operate.

We *assumed* he would deem it unsafe to live with other families, whose children left the compound every day to go to school.

We *assumed* he would not want to live near a military compound where helicopters flew overhead most days.

We *assumed* he would have set up layers of defenses around a booby-trapped lair, posting sentries and guards, and perhaps digging escape tunnels or otherwise having an intricate escape plan.

For the Abbottabad lead to be right, all of those assumptions had to be wrong. For us to recommend to the president of the United States that he risk the lives of two dozen Special Operations Forces, we would first have to admit that we had been wrong for about a decade. The strength of the team hunting Bin Laden was that they were willing to challenge the prevailing hypothesis. They were willing to admit that the Agency had been wrong. And they were willing to dedicate finite resources to an entirely new theory, one that upended all previous assumptions, and to imagine that Bin Laden's plan to "hide in plain sight" was more brilliant than we had ever guessed he'd be.

Know When to Trust the Professionals

One of the hardest decisions a manager has to make is when to trust his or her own instincts, and when to rely on the professional judgment of the subject-matter experts. Throughout the Bin Laden hunt, we realized that there are times – particularly involving technical matters – when managers should defer to the professionals.

After several weeks of surveillance of the Abbottabad compound, we were growing impatient. We wanted a clear photograph of the man in the villa, and we weren't buying the arguments that Gary and his team had made about why getting a camera close in was going to be too risky. The response was always some version of, "We thought of that, boss, and we can't do that."

The man in the compound liked to walk in circles in the courtyard at the same time each day; we dubbed him "the Pacer." Our thought was to place cameras in a stand of trees whose branches hung over the compound's 12-foot walls. We planned to send in a team at night, emplace the cameras among the branches, record images when Pacer got his exercise, and somehow retrieve the images – all without getting caught. We knew it was risky, but how else were we going to get proof that the Pacer was, in fact, Bin Laden?

The CIA professionals thought the idea was bad. The two of us had only arrived at CIA the year before; our considerable enthusiasm did not make up for our lack of real-world spycraft. Everyone has seen such technology work in the movies, but this was no Tom Clancy blockbuster. Most of the CIA officers working on Gary's team had spent their careers at the Agency, including tours overseas running agents in austere conditions. They politely dismissed the idea, cautioning about the battery life of the cameras and the fact that the trees were deciduous (that is, they would lose their leaves as fall gave way to winter). We thought they weren't being creative enough.

Then, one afternoon, during one of our intelligence updates, we looked at satellite images that revealed that the trees had been chopped down. They were laying in a heap outside the compound walls. Clearly, the brothers who lived there realized that branches hanging over the walls posed a security risk. The professionals were spot-on. Had we undertaken the camera mission, those cameras would have fallen to the ground. We would never have been able to retrieve the images. Worse, if the cameras had been discovered, Bin Laden would have fled the compound, and our best lead since Tora Bora would have evaporated.

But worse still, had Bin Laden made a move for the exits, we would have had to rush to the White House and urge that U.S. military forces fly into Pakistan to find him. Had we had to conduct the mission on the night they cut down the trees, we would have sent in an untrained, unprepared, unequipped force. Not only would they have likely failed, but also they could have been injured or killed. The careful planning for the operation, including the specific terrain-hugging helicopter routes, the selection of the SEAL team, the raid planning, all came later and took time.

Trusting the professionals on specific operational or technical matters is not easy, particularly when it seems that they may have run out of creative juice. Most of the ideas to solve a problem should come from the team; if the boss is the one generating all of the new ideas, then something is wrong. When the boss has an idea that the team has not surfaced, the boss's idea deserves a thorough scrub. No idea should be dismissed out of hand. But it is also important to create an atmosphere where the professionals can say to the boss, "Your idea won't work, and here is why." Then it is up to the boss to trust the professionals.

Consider All Possible Outcomes and Plan for Them

In any complex task where success is uncertain, it is critical to consider various outcomes and deviations from the plan. Often, those closest to the initial plan benefit from the perspective of others who can weigh other considerations.

So it was with the plan to raid the compound. Admiral Bill McRaven, head of the Joint Special Operations Command, charged his team with designing a helicopter assault on the compound on a moonless night that would be both stealthy and efficient. McRaven's forces had conducted many hundreds of these raids over the past decade, in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

But for this operation, it was important to view the plan through another lens as well: Since this mission was in Pakistan and since the target was so high-profile, what would be the fallout if our forces got pinned down?

Here is where the president's political lens made a critical difference. As the president received briefings on the plan, he urged the team to develop a backup plan in case one of the helicopters went down and our forces had to fight their way out. In Afghanistan or Iraq, where U.S. forces controlled territory, fighting our way out was not politically risky. But in Pakistan, the president rightly worried that a gunfight could pose unnecessary risk to our team members and to the relationship with Pakistan. He thus directed McRaven to add additional helicopters to the plan, so that there could be a Plan B if one of the helicopters failed or if backup troops were needed.

McRaven redesigned the mission and ordered two CH-47 Chinook helicopters to fly behind the lead Blackhawks. Pushing them into Pakistani territory was risky because it increased the radar signature of our entire operation, but the president weighed that risk and decided it was worth it.

On the night of the mission, the first helicopter approached the compound, slowly banked, began to lose lift, and turned 180 degrees around and just plopped down in the compound's animal pen. Our hearts were in our throats as we watched the rotors of the Blackhawk slowly churn to a halt. This wasn't the plan at all. Then the second chopper, seeing the "crash" of the first, aborted its plan to drop SEALs on the roof and went to another point outside the compound. All of sudden, instead of having a dozen SEALs in the courtyard, several on the roof, and the rest on the perimeter, we had a dozen SEALs in the compound's animal pen, and the rest stuck outside the compound walls.

This is where the training of Special Operators kicked in. On a secure video teleconference line, we asked McRaven, "What the hell is going on?" McRaven coolly responded that nobody was hurt, that they would carry out the mission, and that he was sending in a backup helicopter.

The SEALs conducted the mission from these alternative entry points, all the while knowing that their only "ride out of Dodge" was disabled for good and would have to be destroyed. (There was no way the single remaining helicopter could hold everyone for

the flight back to Afghanistan.) The team conducted the raid flawlessly, killing both brothers, heading up the stairs of the main compound, killing Bin Laden's adult son Khalid, and finally killing Bin Laden in his bedroom on the villa's third floor.

After taking Bin Laden's body off the compound, collecting as many computers and thumb drives as they could grab, and ensuring that all of the surviving women and children were safe, the team ran out to the inbound backup CH-47 Chinook. They boarded the helicopter – all of us watching from the CIA operations center in stunned silence. The operation went nothing like we had rehearsed, but the backup plan worked.

Know When to Take the Long View

The hunt for Bin Laden lasted a decade, overseen by four CIA directors and two presidents. The U.S. spent billions in military and intelligence resources dedicated to the mission. We were the beneficiaries of all of these prior efforts. But the fact that much had been tried did not absolve us of the need to try harder.

We needed to address a problem that plagues so many managers: the tyranny of the inbox, where the urgent replaces the important. Managers need to know when to take the long view to keep a team focused on the key priorities, even in the face of crises or distractions. Finding Bin Laden was a classic case of an important, but not always urgent, mission.

But taking the long view requires more than simply keeping an important mission atop one's to-do list. It requires regular scrutiny of how the challenge is being addressed, who is working on it, what resources are dedicated to it, and progress toward the important milestones along the path to success.

The president deserves enormous credit for returning our focus, time and again, to this unfinished business and then making the final tough call to execute the mission. It's not easy to summon the troops and push them to go after a problem that had led them down a thousand dead ends. The only thing we had was the faith that somehow, somewhere, this terrorist would make a mistake and that we needed to be ready to pounce.

To our surprise, some inside and outside CIA were prepared to move on from the Bin Laden hunt. They felt that we had vested him with too much importance and power; if we wanted to diminish him, we should stop building him up. We never felt that way. We stayed on this mission not because we knew we would succeed but because we felt the urgent need to send a message to the world that nobody attacks our country and gets away with it. Had we failed, at least we would have been able to move closer to the objective so that the next leadership team at CIA could finish the job.

Every organization needs to answer the question: What's the one mission we must pursue above all others – and if we stop trying, we will cease to be who we are? For us, that mission was closing the Bin Laden chapter for good. CIA had lost many fine officers in the wars since 9/11, including the seven who made the ultimate sacrifice in December 2009 at that remote base in Eastern Afghanistan. To give up would have been to dishonor them – and the country for which they gave their lives.

Leon E. Panetta served as United States Congressman, Budget Director, White House Chief of Staff, CIA Director, and the 23rd Secretary of Defense of the United States. He is the author of “Worthy Fights: A Memoir of Leadership in War and Peace” (Penguin Press, 2014). He chairs the Panetta Institute for Public Policy in Monterey, CA, and is a Senior Counselor at Beacon Global Strategies, a business advisory firm.

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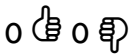
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