

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 4, 2011 at 6:48am

The Consequences of the Killing

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Distinctly Catholic

As the details, many of them grim, about last Sunday's raid on Osama bin Laden's compound are produced, corrected, and magnified I begin to lose interest. There is a morbid fascination with death at work here that is profoundly unhealthy. What matters now is not the manner of his death but the consequences of his death.

It is very unclear what effect the killing of bin Laden will have on the jihadists. There may well be a struggle for control of the organization between rival factions as no one enjoys bin Laden's long-standing relationships with each constituent group and many of his leading assistants have reputations for pugnacity within the organization. Needless to say, if jihadists must be fighting, it is best if they be fighting each other.

Perhaps the most important consequences of the raid to get Osama will be felt in the area of bilateral Pakistani-American relations. There are many unanswered questions, but they all boil down to two questions. First, did the assistance over the years that we have received from Pakistan help us snag Osama more than the evident complicity of some in the Pakistani security or intelligence service in his hiding kept us from finding him? And, following on that question, the really tough one: What to do about it? The other day I heard U.S.-Pakistani relations described as akin to a bad marriage in a culture that has no provision for divorce. Yes, there are extremist elements in their military and intelligence services. Yes, they have a nuclear weapon. Yes, they have more or less permitted us to negate their sovereignty with our drones and, now, with this raid. Yes, they was going to try and fleece us for all the can. The relationship is complicated but whatever happens, it is better to have a bad relationship than not having any relationship with a nation with nuclear weapons and extremists close to power.

In Afghanistan, the President's options all remain risky, but he has earned himself some wiggle room. If

the drawdown of troops begins this summer as planned, it will be harder for the hawks in the administration and the Pentagon to press their case, but it is far from clear the drawdown is a good idea. If the President decides to keep the surge going and maintain the higher troop levels he inaugurated last year, those who want a speedy end to the war will be frustrated in making their case, but it is not clear that the surge is working or has any prospect of working. In this sense, the killing of bin Laden does not change the realities on the ground so much as it changes the realities in Washington.

President George H. W. Bush made the grave mistake of thinking that he could ride a foreign policy triumph to re-election even while the economy was anemic. It is unlikely that the Obama campaign will make the same mistake. Nonetheless, this was a huge win for the President politically and not only because his approval rating ticked upward. The biggest threat to his re-election was the prospect of another terrorist attack on U.S. soil. President George W. Bush's proudest claim was that there was no second attack on American soil, although the role his policies played in preventing such an attack is a subject of debate. Had there been another attack on Obama's watch, he would have been portrayed as weak and ineffectual, unable to fulfill his most basic constitutional obligation of protecting the country. Now, if there is another attack, it will be in retaliation for killing Osama bin Laden and Americans will greet it with an entirely different response from what we would have seen if a second attack had occurred with bin Laden still at large.

Over the long haul, the biggest winner – other than the Muslim world, which has lost more people to bin Laden's butchery than were lost in lower Manhattan – was the counter-terrorism approach that understood that attacking terrorism more closely resembled legal, prosecutorial and investigative work than it resembled a war, that the blunt tools of the military – two full-scale invasions – were unable to capture or kill bin Laden but old-style spying and a precision military attack did succeed. Back in 2004, the Bushies made fun of Sen. John Kerry for suggesting that this was the case. Kerry's position is entirely vindicated by the events of this past weekend.

Already, Washingtonians and New Yorkers have begun planning conferences and memorial services and various other methods of commemorating the 10th anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11. Those commemorations will have an entirely different feel to them now that bin Laden has met his maker. The lives lost have not returned. The twin towers have not been rebuilt. But, a measure of justice has been rendered to the victims' families. They would prefer to have their loved ones back, of course. But justice is a kind of comfort too.

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