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Little has changed after killing bin Laden

by Colman McCarthy



(Chris Van Es)

COLUMN

Except for a few moments of artificial national pride, and a meaningless bump in the polls for Barack Obama, little of substance has changed, much less improved, since the May 1 assassination of the unarmed Osama bin Laden, one of his children and three others by the 72 members of the Navy SEAL Team 6.

The spigot through which nearly a trillion dollars flows annually to bankroll American militarism remains wide open. Construction continues of a massive military base in Afghanistan across the way from a refugee camp for thousands of displaced Afghans, ensuring that Obama's "war of necessity" stays necessary. The lives of millions of Iraqi and Afghan civilians remain shattered, the death toll long beyond counting and the suffering as inconsequential to the Obama administration as it was to George W. Bush's. Guantanamo's prisoners -- pardon, detainees -- remain uncharged and lawyerless. CIA drone flights over Pakistan go on. It's all but forgotten that in August 2007, Obama, a relatively unknown junior senator

from Illinois, announced that he supported taking the fight against terrorism into Pakistan, regardless of international law forbidding unprovoked invasions of another nation. As president, he's done it.

The alleged success of putting two bullets into the body of bin Laden -- as much a child of God as the assassin himself -- has led to far more than drunken college students cheering in the front of the White House on May 1.

In Congress a move is underway to renew the original Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against Terrorists. The vote on Sept. 14, 2001, was 98-0 in the Senate and 420-1 in the House. The lone dissent was Rep. Barbara Lee of Oakland, Calif. Her warning that Friday afternoon -- coming after a morning prayer service at the National Cathedral led by Billy Graham and a Catholic cardinal -- has proven prophetic: "If we rush to launch a counterattack, we run too great a risk that women, children and other noncombatants will be caught in the crossfire. ... Let us not become the evil that we deplore."

The reauthorization of this bill means continued legalization of presidential power "to use all necessary and appropriate force during the current armed conflict with al-Qaeda, the Taliban and associated forces." Decoded: Let's keep killing our way to peace.

If it means trillions more to fund the killing -- the target date is 2015 for the currently corrupt and incompetent Afghan government to protect its citizens -- Congress will supply the money while the U.S. economy sinks deeper into debt that is already beyond precedent.

Meanwhile, glorifying the Navy SEALs and their tactics has reached new heights of euphoria. Parroting her husband, Michele Obama hailed the "small group of brave men, dropped by helicopter, half a world away in the dead of night into unknown danger" as exemplifying "the very essence of the word *service*." As an extension of U.S. foreign policy, nearly all missions of the SEALs, which are part of the Joint Special Operations Command based at Fort Bragg and Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina, are classified, secretive and lethal. Their ethic is akin to the 1980 death squads in El Salvador.

Occasionally a SEAL bobs above the murky waters of killing. In the spring of 2001, Bob Kerrey, elected to the Senate in 1988, went public with an account of leading seven SEALs in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. They had been dispatched to "eliminate the local political leadership of the South Vietnamese communists" said to be hiding in the village of Thanh Phong. Between 13 and 20 unarmed civilians -- mostly women and children -- were slaughtered. Kerrey, 25 years old at the time, said in 2001, "I have been haunted by it for 32 years." He called the mission "a tragedy."

For his valor in gunning down women and children, Kerrey's military superiors awarded him the Bronze Star. While word has yet to come whether the SEAL killers of May 1 have had their chests adorned with medals, the landscape shines bright with the wattage of praise for the "small group of brave men."

Before the mythologizing gets out of hand, the killing of bin Laden and the others should be defined accurately: an extralegal, cold-blooded execution that denied due process and continued the Bush-Obama delusion that the nation's violent foreign policy is accountable to no one.

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[Colman McCarthy directs the Center for Teaching Peace in Washington.]

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