

# Obama on “60 Minutes:” A political assessment

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In his first and so far only interview since the assassination in Pakistan of Osama bin Laden, US President Barack Obama spent half an hour on the CBS News program “60 Minutes” reveling in the details of the extra-judicial killing, while insisting that anyone who questioned the action must be insane.

The interview, conducted by CBS’s Steve Kroft, epitomized the role of the corporate media. In its sycophantic and wholly uncritical celebration of the Bin Laden killing, it is indistinguishable from a propaganda arm of the US government.

There were no probing questions, including on the many contradictions and absurdities in the official version of events. There were no attempts to examine the implications of targeted assassinations for relations between states. Nor was there any challenge to the US president on the connection between this killing and broader US policy in the region and internationally.

Among Kroft’s first questions:

“Mr. President, was this the most satisfying week of your presidency?”

“Was the decision to launch this attack the most difficult decision that you’ve made as commander-in-chief?”

“Was there a sense of excitement? Did this look promising from the very beginning?”

Another line of questioning centered on how Obama was able to keep the planned kill operation secret while going about his public appearances as president. This included:

“Was it hard keeping your focus?”

“Did you have to suppress the urge to tell someone? Did you want to tell somebody? Did you want to tell Michelle? Did you tell Michelle?”

The interview was organized as part of a well-orchestrated campaign to rebrand Obama, exploiting the killing of Bin Laden to cast him as a “war president” along the lines of George W. Bush. It is one more indication that domestic political concerns played a pivotal role in the decision to organize the assassination.

Faced with a deepening economic crisis and mounting social tensions at home, the killing is seen, on the one hand, as a means of diverting popular anger and, on the other, forging a more solid political base within the military, the intelligence apparatus and the most reactionary sections of the financial-corporate elite.

Obama was allowed to expound on the decision-making responsibilities of the commander-in-chief, “where you make a decision, you’re making your best call, your best shot” in “tough, complicated operations.”

While he claimed that his overriding concern in carrying out the operation was getting “our guys... in and get out safely,” he also

asserted that the intelligence upon which it was based was anything but conclusive.

“As outstanding a job as our intelligence teams did... at the end of the day, this was still a 55/45 situation,” he said. “I mean, we could not say definitively that Bin Laden was there.”

If this is true, it underscores the extreme recklessness of the entire operation. Obama sketched out one scenario in the event the intelligence proved faulty: “And so if it turns out that it’s a wealthy, you know, prince from Dubai who’s in this compound, and, you know, we’ve sent Special Forces in we’ve got problems. So there were risks involved geo-politically in making the decision.”

He failed to spell out that such “problems” would stem from the Navy Seal unit murdering said prince and members of his family. This is hardly a hypothetical outcome, given that similar events take place with numbing regularity in Afghanistan, where special operations hit squads conduct night raids that routinely claim the lives of unarmed civilians.

Still greater problems were posed by the possibility that the Pakistani military would respond to the violation of their country’s sovereignty by an unknown invading force.

While hinted at, this possibility was glossed over in Kroft’s interview. He asked Obama, “There was a backup plan?” Obama responded, “There was a backup plan.” What it entailed was left entirely to the viewer’s imagination. It seems obvious, however, that it would have involved the use of military force against the Pakistani military, posing the threat of war.

Other sections of the interview dealt with the well-worn themes of glorifying the military and the intelligence agencies, while hailing a successful assassination as the confirmation of American strength and ingenuity. Obama declared that “the skill with which our intelligence and military folks operated in this was indescribable.”

He added, “So it was a moment of great pride for me to see our capacity as a nation to execute something this difficult so well.”

Needless to say, Kroft did not ask Obama whether he thought other nations would be entitled to take similar pride if they proved capable of executing similar operations against their enemies abroad.

At the end of the interview, Kroft asked what was perhaps his most interesting question: “Is this the first time that you’ve ever ordered someone killed?”

Obama responded, “Well, keep in mind that, you know, every time I make a decision about launching a missile, every time I make a decision about sending troops into battle, you know, I understand that this will result in people being killed. And that is a sobering fact. But it is one that comes with the job.”

Kroft made no attempt to follow this up and allowed Obama to

evade the fact that this is indeed not the first time he has “ordered someone killed,” and not only in the general sense of authorizing military actions that result in deaths.

The “60 Minutes” interview was conducted on Wednesday and broadcast on Sunday. On the Friday in between the shooting and airing of the program, a US Predator drone carried out a missile strike in Yemen that killed at least two people but missed its intended target, Anwar al-Awlaki, a US citizen born in New Mexico. Al-Awlaki, a Muslim cleric, has never been charged with any crime, much less found guilty in a court of law.

Early last year, Obama’s then-director of national intelligence testified to Congress that the administration reserved the right to carry out “targeted killings” of US citizens overseas as part of the “war on terror.” Administration officials subsequently confirmed that Al-Awlaki had been placed on a “hit list” along with other American citizens. While they alleged that the cleric had some unspecified involvement in terrorist plots, no evidence has been presented and his assassination has been authorized on the sole say-so of President Obama.

The killing of Bin Laden also came just one day after a missile strike that claimed the lives of the son and three grandchildren of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who was the intended target of an assassination attempt. There is no question that such an attempted killing of a state leader could only have been carried out with Obama’s approval.

If Obama were to offer an honest answer to Kroft’s question, he would have had to acknowledge that there was nothing unprecedented in his order to kill Bin Laden. Rather, assassination has become a standard instrument of US policy, on a scale that outstrips the infamous period of the 1960s and 1970s when the CIA earned the name of “Murder Inc.”

In his final remarks in the interview, Obama concluded: “The one thing I didn’t lose sleep over was the possibility of taking Bin Laden out. Justice was done. And I think that anyone who would question that the perpetrator of mass murder on American soil didn’t deserve what he got needs to have their head examined.”

Here one has the essence of the Osama Bin Laden operation. “Taking him out,” a phrase generally associated with gangland killings, is equated with justice being done. Anyone questioning this equation is dismissed as sympathetic to Bin Laden and mentally ill.

This bullying by the US president, however, only underscores the administration’s desire to silence the very real questions posed by the Bin Laden killing. This was made clear by the evolving claims made by administration officials over why Bin Laden was killed. Initially, Obama’s counterterrorism advisor, John Brennan, claimed that the Al Qaeda leader was killed in a “firefight,” while using a woman as a “human shield.”

This was later acknowledged by White House spokesman Jay Carney to have been false. According to his account, Bin Laden was, in fact, unarmed when shot to death. One woman, Bin Laden’s wife, had been shot and wounded when she allegedly “lunged” at the Seals, while another woman had been shot and killed for unexplained reasons. Neither woman, Carney admitted, had been used as a “human shield.”

Carney claimed that the Seals were operating under a “capture or kill” order, and that Bin Laden had resisted capture in some unspecified way. “Resistance does not require a firearm,” he said. As in the earlier “firefight” account, the aim was to provide a “self-defense” justification for the killing.

Georgia Republican Senator Saxby Chambliss, the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, was briefed repeatedly on the operation before it was carried out. In an interview last week with the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, he reiterated what military officials said on condition of anonymity immediately after Bin Laden’s death the order from the White House was to kill, not capture, the Al Qaeda leader.

The Navy Seals, he said, “went in with the idea of killing him, not capturing him.” Chambliss added, “We needed to take this guy out, and I know that’s what the executive order said.”

That such an order is illegal under international law is unquestionable. The real issue is why the Obama administration was determined to kill Bin Laden and not capture him, interrogate him and try him for his alleged crimes. Here a number of elements come into play.

What would have come out at such a trial?

First, there is Bin Laden’s long record as a valued “asset” of the CIA, going back to the early 1980s when he funneled CIA aid to the mujahideen guerrillas fighting Soviet troops in Afghanistan and continuing through the wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

Second, any trial would have necessarily opened up the circumstances of the 9/11 attacks to judicial review, raising questions as to what prior knowledge elements in the US government had about these attacks and why they were allowed to take place.

Finally, there was undoubtedly the conception, worked out long in advance, that a “clean kill” of Bin Laden could be marketed as a triumph for the Obama administration and the military, setting in motion the propaganda barrage that has been unleashed over the past week.

Obama’s attempt to intimidate notwithstanding, these questions will not go away.

Among those raising them is Benjamin Ferencz, a former chief prosecutor in the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals at the end of World War II. “This can’t be done, not in this way,” Ferencz said in an interview with the Flemish newspaper *De Morgen*. “People cannot be killed in cold blood.”

In a letter to the *New York Times*, Ferencz contrasted the treatment of Bin Laden with that meted out to the leaders of Hitler’s Third Reich, responsible for the deaths of millions.

“The Nuremberg trials earned worldwide respect by giving Hitler’s worst henchmen a fair trial so that truth would be revealed and justice under law would prevail,” he said. “Secret non-judicial decisions based on political or military considerations undermine democracy.”



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