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From Bin Laden to Gaza

THE FBI FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

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Ten Most Wanted

The FBI is offering rewards for information leading to the apprehension of the Ten Most Wanted Fugitives. Select the images of suspects to display more information.

Facts on the Program | Historical Photos of Each Top Tenner | 60th Anniversary Booklet

ROBERT WILLIAM FISHER	ALEXIS FLORES	SEMION MOGILEVICH	JASON DEREK BROWN	USAMA BIN LADEN
GLEN STEWART GODWIN	EDUARDO RAVELO	JOE LUIS SAENZ	JAMES J. BULGER	VICTOR MANUEL GERENA

USAMA BIN LADEN

Murder of U.S. Nationals Outside the United States; Conspiracy to Murder U.S. Nationals Outside the United States; Attack on a Federal Facility Resulting in Death

Deceased

REWARD: The Rewards For Justice Program, United States Department of State, is offering a reward of up to \$25 million for information leading directly to the apprehension or conviction of Usama Bin Laden. An additional \$2 million is being offered through a program developed and funded by the Airline Pilots Association and the Air Transport Association.

Usama Bin Laden is wanted in connection with the August 7, 1998, bombings of the United States Embassies in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and Nairobi, Kenya. These attacks killed over 200 people. In addition, Bin Laden is a suspect in other terrorist attacks throughout the world.

Bin Laden is the leader of a terrorist organization known as Al-Qaeda, "The Base". He is left-handed and walks with a cane.

SUMMARY
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Federal Bureau of Investigation – Ten Most Wanted May 3, 2011

The dramatic events of the last six weeks have left the U.S. position in the Middle East a total wreck, with Washington coming across as a dog being wagged by its tail, the state of Israel, which is carrying out the genocidal elimination of the Palestinian people in Gaza, of whom over 11,000 have been killed by airstrikes. Nowhere was the bankruptcy of American diplomacy in the region and globally more exposed than during the UN General Assembly vote on October 30, 2023, for a Jordan-sponsored resolution for an immediate ceasefire and the establishment of a humanitarian corridor for aid which passed 120 to 14, with the United States and Israel in opposition.

The wreckage of the American position in the Middle East, however, was created not just by recent events but by a chain of events in which one man played a central role: Osama bin Laden.

From Che Guevara to Osama Bin Laden

Bin Laden operated with something like Che Guevara's "foco theory." Guevara had believed that direct engagement of the enemy was necessary to show peasants that guerrillas could defeat the military and encourage them to join the revolution. Bin Laden, operating on a global stage, saw the September 11, 2001, assault on the Twin Towers in Manhattan as an act that would expose the vulnerability of the "Great Satan" and inspire Muslims to join his jihad against it. It would create many fronts and lead to the overextension of U.S. military power as Washington would move to put out many fires.

It did not quite work out that way. Instead of being inspired, most Muslims were horrified and distanced themselves from the terrible deed. Still, bin Laden lucked out, thanks to George W. Bush and the neoconservatives that had come to power with him in Washington in 2001. For them, Osama's attack was a god-given opportunity to teach both America's enemies and friends that the empire was omnipotent. Ostensibly waged to go after the "roots of terror," the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were in fact what the Romans called "exemplary wars," and their aim was to reshape the global strategic environment to fit Washington's "unipolar" status following the demise of the Soviet Union.

Disappointed with the reluctance of his father, President George H.W. Bush, to finish off Saddam Hussein during the 1990-91 Gulf War, George W. Bush initiated these invasions as the first steps in a demarche that would eliminate the so-called rogue states, compel greater loyalty from dependent states or supplant them with stronger allies, and put strategic competitors like China on notice that they should not even think of vying with the United States.

Bush Provoked into Waging Unwinnable Wars

Disregarding the lessons of Vietnam and the British and Soviet debacles in Afghanistan, the George W. Bush administration drove the United States into two unwinnable wars against highly motivated insurgents in the Middle East as bin Laden watched with satisfaction, living unperturbed under the protection of an American ally, the Pakistani military, in the peaceful garrison town of Abbottabad in Pakistan. It was not exactly the scenario he had envisaged, but he was not about to quibble if the Bush administration,

owing to its drive for unipolar hegemony, placed the United States on the road to overextension, which was, after all, his strategic aim.

Prolonged occupation demanded boots on the ground, and as Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage saw it, “The Army, in particular, [is] stretched too thin...fighting three wars—Afghanistan still, Iraq, and the global war on terrorism.” At the height of the Iraq War, defense analyst James Fallows wrote, it was “only a slight exaggeration to say that today the entire U.S. military is either in Iraq, returning from Iraq, or getting ready to go.” Most of the Army’s maneuverable brigades were overseas, and those left in the United States were too few to maintain the contingency reserve or the training base necessary. Even the famed Special Forces were degraded, with their actual numbers in the field coming to hundreds at the most. Lack of human resources led the high command to call on the Reserves and the National Guard. As might be expected, morale plummeted, especially as tours of duty were extended and casualties mounted in lands to which these part-time soldiers had never expected to be assigned.

And as the prospect of prevailing in the battlefield became more and more distant, public support for the Iraq and Afghanistan expeditions, which was very limited right from the start, went up in smoke.

Even as the United States was bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, Israel, the Euro-American settler colony in the Middle East and Washington’s only solid ally, was being challenged by new actors. In Gaza, Hamas took over as the dominant force following Israel’s withdrawal in 2005-2006 and began to implement its military plan to eventually dismantle the apartheid state.

In Lebanon, the Hezbollah, allied with Hamas, carried out border raids against Israel that resulted in 2006 in Israel’s invasion of southern Lebanon and bombing of South Beirut. Hezbollah’s resistance, however, forced a withdrawal of Israel after a month, under the cloak of a UN-brokered ceasefire, inflicting an outcome that even members of the Israeli government regarded as a defeat for the apartheid state. Both Hamas and Hezbollah were part of the new, reinvigorated stream of Muslim political radicalism of which Osama bin Laden’s al-Qaeda was also a part, which increasingly displaced secular liberation movements like the Palestine Liberation Organization in the Arab world. But, unlike al-Qaeda, Hamas and Hezbollah had a solid mass base on the ground.

Obama Pushes Deeper into the Quagmire

Barack Obama came to power in 2009 promising an end to the Middle East wars. In Iraq, the bulk of U.S. forces were withdrawn during his first term, but thousands of marines and

Special Forces personnel were reintroduced to fight against the Islamic State whose growth had been provoked by the U.S. presence in the Middle East. Even as this was happening, what had been a key U.S. objective in Iraq—a stable non-sectarian pro-U.S. state—collapsed as the Iraqi Shiite government aligned itself with Iran, against whom the United States was colluding with the Israelis in a high-tech effort to sabotage Tehran’s nuclear energy program.

Obama also began an open-ended intervention in the Syrian Civil War, deploying Special Forces and airstrikes that eventually enmeshed the United States in a multi-cornered confrontation with the Islamic State and other jihadists, Syrian forces, and Russian troops. The Democratic president, ironically a recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, in fact expanded the U.S. military reach to North Africa during the Arab Spring in 2011, unilaterally enforcing with its NATO allies a “no fly zone” featuring attacks on Libyan defenses that resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths and massive air support of the ground campaigns of anti-Qaddafi rebels. The intervention left Libya with no centralized government, and the country lapsed into an anarchy that persists until the present, another American-made disaster.

In Afghanistan, Obama added 33,000 troops to the 68,000 already in the country when he came to office, thinking this “surge” would cripple the Taliban. This surge failed, but he maintained 8,400 troops in the country. In fact, Obama expanded the war to Pakistan, using drones to target Taliban leaders and jihadists operating from bases near the border with Afghanistan; this computer-managed war took the lives of hundreds of innocent civilians that the military termed “collateral damage.” He also sent Special Forces on raids deep into Pakistan, the most prominent example being the one to Abbotabad that killed Osama bin Laden in 2011, though by this time, this was mainly a PR event with no strategic value.

In contrast to Bush II, who preferred “boots on the ground,” Obama, as *The New York Times*’ David Sanger, put it, embraced “hard, covert power, “alluding to the necessity of a “‘light footprint’ that enables [the United States] to fight its wars stealthily, execute its operations with the speed of the bin Laden raid, and then avoid lengthy entanglements.” Like Bush II, who had never experienced war firsthand, Obama brought to his brand of war-making an “aggressiveness” that people around him found “surprising.”

Obama, though, did appreciate the fact that being bogged down in the Middle East was sapping U.S. power by provoking disaffection at home and alienation from America abroad. Fighting so-called “asymmetric warfare” with irregulars like the Taliban and the

jihadists could go on forever, and Obama wanted to shift the global U.S. military strategy to one that was more congenial to its perceived strength in conventional warfare instead of counterinsurgency. The grand new design was the “Pivot to Asia” that involved the deployment of the bulk of the U.S. naval strength to the Indo-Pacific area to contain China. Reorientation was easier said than done, however, as extrication from the Middle East morass was made impossible by the strength of interests that made up the War on Terror/Counterinsurgency lobby.

Donald Trump Promises Withdrawal but Fails to Deliver

Donald Trump rode to power partly on the strength of anti-war sentiment, continually reminding people during his campaign for the presidency in 2015 and 2016 that his rival Hillary Clinton had voted for the invasion of Iraq in 2003 when she was a senator. In office, however, he ended up destabilizing the Middle East even more. There was, first of all, his unqualified support for Israel, which led him to a major move that infuriated Arabs: the transfer of the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Then he reversed the one tension-lessening achievement of Obama when he took the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal that had put effective checks on Tehran’s development of weapons-grade uranium in return for a relaxation of economic sanctions. Finally, he gave a blank check for weapons purchases to Saudi Arabia, enabling the benighted kingdom to wage its cruel intervention in the civil war in Yemen.

Trump occasionally remembered, however, that eliminating boots on the ground was one of his major campaign promises, so that the country could focus on “America First.” But, as in the case of Bush II and Obama, both of whom had an inferiority complex when dealing with generals owing to their lack of combat experience, draft dodger Trump also deferred to the military. After he decided to end the Obama-era intervention in Syria by withdrawing 1,000 U.S. troops in early October 2019, he caved in to the military’s pushback. Over a month later, the head of the U.S. Central Command stated there was no “end date” on Washington’s intervention in Syria and the presence of 2,500 American troops in neighboring Iraq.

Like Obama, Trump was passive-aggressive, eager to show the generals that he could be as macho as they were. The most notorious display of this behavior was when he flagrantly disregarded international law and ordered the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, a top Iranian general, at Baghdad International Airport in January 2020, against the advice of the top brass and the US intelligence elite.

Faced with passive resistance on the part of the generals, Trump ended up keeping thousands of troops in Afghanistan during his term in office, but, mindful of the consequences of not keeping his promise by the 2020 elections, he directed the military in February 2020 to withdraw all troops by November 2020. Again, the military procrastinated, with the support of the War on Terror lobby, the deadline passed, and Joe Biden inherited some 3,500 troops and Special Forces personnel still in the country when he took office in January 2021.

How the Israeli Tail Wagged the American Dog

The same pressures from the military to stay the course engulfed the new president, but by the time Joe Biden ascended into office there was no popular support for continuing the forever wars. They were, he realized, a severe distraction from the real threat to the U.S. strategic position, which was China. During the 20 years between the invasion of Afghanistan and the start of Biden's presidency, China had become the world's second biggest economy, possessing a military which, while still far from parity with U.S. military power, appeared headed in that direction.

When he decided in 2021 to withdraw from Afghanistan, Biden was not motivated by concerns for global piece but by an urgent desire to reframe U.S. strategy and refocus it on China, where the United States could rely on a strategy of containment, chiefly by naval power, for which its forces were far better geared to carry out than chasing after popular insurgents or engaging in nation-building where the conditions did not exist for success, as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. Obama had tried to do this with his "Pivot to Asia" but yielded to counter-pressures from his generals to "stay the course" in the Middle East. By the time he came to power, it was clear to Biden that staying the course had radically depreciated U.S. power. That he was no peacenik but a warlord determined to achieve unchallenged U.S. military hegemony with a new strategy would be shown in his provocative moves to bait China in the South China Sea and Taiwan a few months after the Afghanistan withdrawal.

But as was the case with Obama and Trump, leaving the Middle East was easier said than done. Instead of military engagement, Washington tried to regain a modicum of control of events there by putting together a diplomatic rapprochement among Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the smaller Arabian Gulf states like Qatar that would stabilize the region. The Hamas offensive into Israel in October 2023, however, blew up this plan for regional stabilization, since the Saudi government and the other reactionary Arab states could not afford to come to a deal with Israel while the latter was slaughtering another Arab people, the

Palestinians. The United States stood even more isolated than when it withdrew from Afghanistan over two years earlier, condemned by the whole Arab world, indeed by the whole world, as it provided the Israelis with weapons to commit genocide in Gaza. Meanwhile, its rival, China, allied with the global South, promoted a peacemaking diplomacy that contrasted with Washington's unqualified support for Israel's genocidal military offensive.

Ethical Outrage, Political Masterstroke

In sum, though what he desired did not unfold exactly like his blueprint, with his attack on the Twin Towers on Sept 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden was able to provoke the United States into committing to an unending military commitment to the Middle East. This resulted in the overextension of American power. Once committed to a campaign of exemplary wars, the United States found it very difficult to withdraw and the condition of overextension would worsen over time, sapping the resources of the empire.

Indeed, Osama bin Laden succeeded beyond his wildest dreams, for one of the reasons for overextension is that it is infernally difficult to shed old priorities, so that everything becomes a priority. Few have been the empires that have been able to unclench their fists and let go of self-destructive commitments. Bin Laden was killed in a U.S. raid on his house in Abbotabad in Pakistan in 2011, but by then the chain reaction triggered by al-Qaeda's attack on the Twin Towers was unstoppable.

Judged ethically, 9/11 was a moral outrage. Judged politically, however, it was a masterstroke whose negative consequences for U.S. global power are still being felt today. One may profoundly disagree with his methods, but, in terms of achieving his goal of drastically weakening what he called the "Great Satan," one must, as Americans say, give the devil his due. 9/11 was horrific, but it was not the first time that history has paradoxically enabled a foul deed to produce a progressive outcome, in this case, the erosion of an oppressive imperial power.

Walden Bello, a columnist for *Foreign Policy in Focus*, is the author or co-author of 19 books, the latest of which are *Capitalism's Last Stand?* (London: Zed, 2013) and *State of Fragmentation: the Philippines in Transition* (Quezon City: Focus on the Global South and FES, 2014).

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