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Obama, bin Laden, and Mitt

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The partisan squabbling over the killing of Osama bin Laden is a typical election-year distraction, effectively squelching discussion of more important matters one year after the execution of the al-Qaeda chief executive.

Aided by cable-TV talking heads, Americans are spending too much time speculating over whether presumptive Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney would have given the order to get bin Laden, and also issuing paeans to President Obama's "courage." (We have a strange notion of courage. Did Obama risk his own life? Of course not. He was safe in the White House Situation Room. Perhaps he "risked" his political career, but even that isn't certain. A failed operation might have won him sympathy for a good try. On the other hand, the men under his command were ordered to risk *their* lives and the lives of others.)

While the commentators are engaged in trivialities, big foreign-policy questions are ignored.

For instance, although bin Laden is dead, his strategy of sucking the United States into bloody, expensive imperial wars in the Muslim world has worked like a charm. In a video released in 2004, bin Laden said, "We are continuing this policy in bleeding America to the point of bankruptcy. Allah willing, and nothing is too great for Allah." He compared what was happening in Afghanistan then to the previous Soviet debacle there. "We, alongside the mujahideen, bled Russia for 10 years until it went bankrupt and was forced to withdraw in defeat."

Ironically, President Jimmy Carter's national-security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, has bragged that he helped draw the Soviet Union into Afghanistan in 1979 precisely to mire the Russians in their own "Vietnam." That experience failed to deter President George W. Bush from blindly following in the Soviets' footsteps; nor did it keep Obama from redoubling this futile effort, including a major expansion of drone attacks in Pakistan, which have killed at least 1,400 people since Obama took office. The U.S. government has been fighting the same people it helped fight the Soviets.

"All that we have to do is to send two mujahedeen to the furthest point east to raise a piece of cloth on which is written al Qaeda, in order to make generals race there to cause America to suffer human, economic and political losses without their achieving anything of note other than some benefits for their private corporations," bin Laden said.

Right he was. The Obama administration ruthlessly drone-bombs Yemen and Somalia to eradicate the "threat" from real or potential al-Qaeda affiliates in those countries. Even [American officials are aware](#) that this policy *creates* anti-American militants. This is not rocket science. Bomb people, and they will dislike you — and perhaps seek revenge.

Bin Laden got his wish. America's fiscal house couldn't be more disorderly. The debt is over \$15 trillion, larger than the GDP. The [Congressional Research Service](#) says that from 2001 to 2011 the Afghan war cost \$443 billion. Tens of thousands of civilians have been killed, and many more maimed. American deaths total more than 1,800, with well over 15,000 wounded. The number of survivors whose lives have been effectively destroyed is uncountable. And that leaves the Iraq war out of the account. Al-Qaeda wasn't even in that country until George W. Bush invaded in 2003.

The point is that we let bin Laden take our eyes off the ball. He and al-Qaeda were creatures of American policy, though not in the sense that U.S. agents funded him or set up his organization. Rather, he turned his wrath toward America (and away from U.S.-backed Middle Eastern oppressors) as it became apparent that so much of the misery inflicted on the Muslim world had its origins in Washington, D.C.

The sources of misery include the decade-long economic sanctions on Iraq, which killed half a million children — a price pronounced "worth it" in 1996 by President Clinton's then-UN ambassador and later secretary of state Madeleine Albright; the stationing of U.S. troops near holy places in Saudi Arabia; and the continuing subjugation of Palestinians by U.S.-backed Israel. In the absence of those and related policies, bin Laden would have had no interest in seeing U.S. territory attacked.

To be sure, bin Laden is gone. But the abominable foreign policy goes on.