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The bin Laden kill plan

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WASHINGTON - A pivotal moment in the long, tortuous quest to find Osama bin Laden came years before U.S. spy agencies discovered his hermetic compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

In July 2007, then Senator Barack Obama's top foreign policy advisers met in the modest two-room Massachusetts Avenue offices that served as his campaign's Washington headquarters. There, they debated the incendiary language Obama would use in an upcoming speech on national security, according to a senior White House official.

Pakistan was a growing worry. A new, highly classified intelligence analysis, called a National Intelligence Estimate, had just identified militant safe havens in Pakistan's border areas as a major threat to U.S. security. The country's military leader, Pervez Musharraf, had recently cut a deal with local tribes that effectively eased pressure on al Qaeda and related groups.

Days after the Washington meeting, candidate Obama told an audience at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: "If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won't act, we will."

It was the most carefully crafted sentence in the speech, a statement no U.S. leader had ever made. (Text of Obama's speech: <http://link.reuters.com/weg59r>)

In the two weeks since President Obama made good on that threat -- in fact, bested it by declining to give Pakistan a chance to act first -- reams have been written about the painstaking detective hunt that led to bin Laden.

But Reuters interviews with two dozen current and former senior intelligence, White House and State Department officials reveal another side of the story.

The 13-year quest to find and eliminate bin Laden, from the November 1998 day he was indicted by a federal grand jury for his role in the East Africa embassy bombings, was filled with missteps, course adjustments and radical new departures for U.S. security policy. It ultimately led to a fortified compound in a little known Pakistani city named after a long-dead British major.

Even with bin Laden buried at sea, the changes to U.S. security policy could linger for years, or decades.

The mission to destroy bin Laden, and his network, sparked the creation of a chillingly bureaucratic process for deciding who would be on "kill lists," authorized for death at the hands of the CIA. It revolutionized the use of pilotless drones to find and attack militants; drove the controversially brutal treatment of detainees in U.S. custody; and brought the United States and Pakistan closer together, then wrenched them apart.

(Even in ordering the risky Navy SEAL raid on May 1, Obama made allowances for Pakistan's sensitivities. The raid was carried out by the U.S. military but under CIA legal authorities and command, partly for deniability if something went wrong and partly because the United States is not at war with Pakistan, a U.S. official said.)

But there was one constant in the search for bin Laden. On September 17, 2001, six days after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush issued a still-classified "finding" that gave the CIA "lethal authorities" to deal with the al Qaeda leader and his top lieutenants. Ever since, there was an expectation -- even a preference -- that bin Laden would be killed, not captured, Bush and Obama administration officials said.

The same day that Bush signed the directive, he publicly declared bin Laden was wanted "dead or alive."

Numerous officials said they knew of no explicit command that bin Laden was not to be taken alive. When he ordered the SEAL raid, Obama had on his desk a written protocol for what would happen if the al Qaeda chief were captured and removed from Pakistan to an unnamed U.S. military installation, the senior White House official said.

But it was vaguer than the rest of the operational plan, and the expectation among most of the people who planned and executed the mission was that bin Laden would be killed. If bin Laden had surrendered, Obama's senior advisers "would have to reconvene and make a decision about what to do with him," said one official, who like many requested anonymity to discuss sensitive national security matters. "It was intentionally left to be decided after the fact."

Richard Armitage, who was deputy secretary of state in Bush's first term, voiced the view that prevailed through two presidencies. "I think we took Osama bin Laden at his word, that he wanted to be a martyr," Armitage told Reuters.

The U.S. government, he said, would do all it could to help bin Laden realize that goal.

RABBIT HOLES AND WRONG TURNS

The hunt for bin Laden turned out to be riddled with dead ends, wrong turns and long, desolate periods of frustration.

The 9/11 attacks would push the Bush administration into a war in Iraq that critics -- including candidate Obama -- denounced as a dangerous diversion from al Qaeda and its Afghanistan/Pakistan nexus. Interrogation techniques such as "waterboarding," a form of simulated drowning, were used on a handful of suspects deemed most dangerous, sparking a debate -- it erupted again on May 2 -- over the best way to fight terrorism.

In Afghanistan's Tora Bora mountains in December 2001, U.S. special forces came close to bin Laden -- perhaps within 2,000 meters, according to the published recollections of a former U.S. Army special forces commander who uses the pseudonym "Dalton Fury."

Opting to rely on local Afghan allies, the United States declined to send in the 1,500 U.S. Army Rangers needed to block bin Laden's escape route.

It would be more than nine years before U.S. special forces would get that close again.

In the intervening years, "there were a lot of empty rabbit holes down which we pursued and ultimately didn't find any results. It was very frustrating," said Juan Zarate, a top White House counter-terrorism aide from 2005-2009. "I always had a mantra that I used for myself, both not to get too discouraged and also with the counter-terrorism community, which is: these guys are not ghosts. They are flesh and blood and can be found and we'll find them."

With virtually no hard knowledge, U.S. counter-terrorism officials said they assumed bin Laden was hiding in the mountainous, lawless Afghan-Pakistan border region. But it's now believed that after Tora Bora, he spent some time in Afghanistan's eastern Kunar province, crossed the border into Pakistan in late summer or fall 2002, moved to a Pakistani village in 2003 for a couple of years, and hid in plain sight in Abbottabad beginning in 2005 or 2006.

Yet even in deadly U.S. failures, there were small breakthroughs.

On February 4, 2002, a Predator drone struck a group of men in Arab dress in the Zawar Kili area of eastern Afghanistan. Among them was a tall man to whom others were acting deferentially, U.S. officials said at the time.

It turned out not to be bin Laden. Reports quoted local residents saying it was a group of villagers collecting scrap metal. But before the episode was over, U.S. intelligence agencies had

received, with help from the Saudi government, a DNA sample from bin Laden's extended family that would clinch identification if he were ever found.

FROM CAPTURE TO KILL

It was President Bill Clinton who launched the hunt for bin Laden. After the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, Clinton signed what some former U.S. officials called a "covert action finding" authorizing CIA operations against al Qaeda, then regarded as a marginal Islamic militant faction with an eccentric, Saudi-born leader.

But some Clinton aides, led by attorney general Janet Reno, were concerned about the legality of killing bin Laden, former top intelligence and counter-terrorism officials said. Clinton's orders permitted U.S. forces to kill bin Laden in self-defense, but the prime directive was to capture him and bring him to justice in the United States.

The September 11, 2001, attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania instantly made such scruples seem anachronistic.

Bush's September 17, 2001, order, which is still highly classified, authorized the CIA to use all methods at its disposal -- explicitly including deadly force -- to wipe out al Qaeda and its leaders.

Presidential covert action findings never expire unless a president issues a new written order suspending or revoking them, current and former U.S. national security officials told Reuters. So Bush's nine-and-a-half-year-old order remained a key legal authority under which Obama launched the commando raid that led to bin Laden's death.

It was perhaps inevitable, then, that partisans of both men and their political parties would claim the lion's share of credit for bin Laden's demise.

Bush's order was both sweeping and general in the powers it granted to the CIA to launch operations against al Qaeda.

As Armitage and others recalled, 9/11 rapidly accelerated a program that had progressed only fitfully in the Clinton administration thanks to CIA-Pentagon turf battles: a scheme to arm increasingly sophisticated remote-controlled drone aircraft with missiles that could launch precision strikes.

In Bush's last months in office, and even more under Obama, the drone strikes expanded dramatically, rattling relations with Pakistan. But when it came time to attack the Abbottabad compound, Obama rejected an option for using drones, fearing civilian casualties and that proof of bin Laden's demise would never be found in the wreckage. (For similar reasons, the president also rejected an option which would have sent B-2 "Stealth" bombers to destroy bin Laden's lair.)

In the months after 9/11, the CIA forged ahead with three other major initiatives to eradicate bin Laden and company:

* A program in which militants captured by U.S. or allied forces were detained and interrogated either in special U.S. military facilities or in a network of secret CIA prisons, where some were subjected to harsh physical interrogation tactics dreamed up by agency contractors.

* Another program where captured militants were subjected to what the agency called "extraordinary rendition" and delivered without judicial proceedings into the custody of often-brutal security agencies in their native countries.

* A troubled effort to create a secret U.S. capability that would be similar to the "hit squads" deployed by Israel's Mossad and other spy agencies.

To guide the CIA's new activities, the Bush administration began drawing up a list of "high value targets," who were the top priority for intelligence gathering and who could be captured or killed depending upon the circumstances in which they were found.

There had been nothing quite like it before in U.S. history. Initially, according to former officials familiar with the process, the lists were compiled and approved by an interagency committee of lawyers and bureaucrats based on recommendations from the CIA and other intelligence agencies.

The U.S. spy agencies would propose a name for the high-value target list and prepare a dossier explaining who the suspect was and why he ought to be on the list, they said. This dossier would then be circulated to the interagency committee, whose members, including lawyers from the Justice Department, Pentagon and CIA, would review it. If the lawyers deemed the dossier adequate, the committee would then approve the individual's name for inclusion on the "high-value target" list -- subject to capture or death by American spies or soldiers.

The Obama White House approved adding American-born Anwar al-Awlaki, based in Yemen, to the target list in 2010 because officials believed the English-speaking Muslim cleric had gone beyond inspirational rhetoric and become involved in terrorism operations.

At any one time, the list would contain between 10 and 30 names, the most obvious ones being bin Laden and his Egyptian deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the former officials said. At one point, Bush's advisers prepared for him a rogues' gallery of about 20 top suspects on the list, which was laminated in plastic. Bush kept it in his Oval Office desk. When militants on the chart were captured or killed, Bush would take it out of his desk and mark them off.

But bin Laden's name stayed on the list while the young orphans of 9/11 grew into teenagers.

THE TRAIL BACK

The plan to create CIA hit-squads proved another dead end. The original concept was to create surveillance and "lethal" teams under the agency's paramilitary wing, staffed by former military commandos and coyly named the Special Activities Division, according to two former officials familiar with internal government debates at the time.

That plan was put into cold storage by CIA director George Tenet, then revived by his successor Porter Goss with a twist: the agency would use outside contractors for the hit teams, to give it more deniability. Erik Prince, founder-owner of the controversial private military contractor then known as Blackwater and a former Navy SEAL, was invited to participate in brainstorming sessions. At some point, a former senior official said, the agency conducted training exercises in the field.

As one of his first acts, Obama's CIA chief Leon Panetta killed the hit squad idea for good, and informed congressional oversight committees, which had never been told of it.

The trail back to bin Laden began with the militants detained and interrogated by the CIA. That's the crucible of the debate over whether the United States veered badly off track in its war with al Qaeda, or was on the right course all along.

Did waterboarding, sleep deprivation and other "enhanced interrogation techniques," a phrase critics call a euphemism for torture, ultimately work? Or did such tactics muddy the search for bin Laden? Did old-fashioned, persistent investigation prevail in the end?

The debate is unlikely ever to be settled. But multiple U.S. intelligence officials told Reuters the real breakthrough that led to bin Laden came from a mysterious CIA detainee named Hassan Ghul. Ghul, who was not captured until 2004 at the earliest, was not subjected to waterboarding, the CIA's roughest and most controversial interrogation technique. It had already been phased out by the time he was captured. But two U.S. officials acknowledged he may well have been subjected to other coercive CIA tactics, possibly including stress positions, sleep deprivation and being slammed into a wall.

It was Ghul, the officials said, who after years of tantalizing hints from other detainees finally provided the information that prompted the CIA to focus intensely on finding Abu Ahmed al Kuwaiti, pseudonym for the courier who would lead them to bin Laden.

Much about Ghul remains obscure, including his nationality. Two U.S. officials told Reuters, however, that at some point the CIA turned him over to authorities in Pakistan. The officials said their understanding is that in 2007, Pakistani authorities released him from custody. The officials said the U.S. government now believes Ghul has once again become a frontline militant fighter.

Leaving Ghul aside, it remains unclear whether the brutal interrogations -- which Obama banned upon taking office -- were effective or not.

The available facts, bolstered by evidence from secret Guantanamo detainee files made public by the WikiLeaks organization, suggest that some of the first information U.S. intelligence received about Abu Ahmed al Kuwaiti surfaced in 2002, when the harshest elements of the CIA interrogation program were still in force.

Two high-ranking al Qaeda operatives, alleged 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed (who was waterboarded repeatedly) and Abu Faraj al-Libbi (who was not), were questioned about the courier, current U.S. officials familiar with the intelligence said. Both tried to steer

interrogators onto a different track, which only piqued the CIA's interest further, the officials said.

While Ghul's information brought tighter focus to the hunt for bin Laden's most important courier in 2004, it would be another two to three years before the agency discovered his true identity and more about his activities. A new president would take office before the Abbottabad hideout that Abu Ahmed and his brother are believed to have built for bin Laden was discovered.

RENEWED FOCUS ON PAKISTAN

To outsiders, it sometimes seemed as if the hunt for bin Laden languished in Bush's final years in office. That was not the case, aides said.

Former CIA director Michael Hayden told Reuters that each time he went to the White House for his weekly meeting with Bush, the president would always ask him, "Where are we, Mike?" Hayden always knew Bush was referring to bin Laden.

But Bush had expended huge resources -- military, financial, diplomatic and political -- in Iraq. Obama was intent on shifting the focus of U.S. counter-terrorism efforts back to South Asia, specifically to Pakistan.

Former aides to Bush acknowledge that while he took a tougher line on Pakistan toward the end of his term, the new Obama team displayed far less concern for fragile Pakistan's sensitivities.

"For a long time there was a strong inclination at the highest levels during our time to work with the Pakistanis, treat them as partners, defer to their national sensitivities ... There was some good reason for that," said a former top Bush aide, citing the need for Islamabad's help in countering terrorism, stopping nuclear proliferation and stabilizing Afghanistan.

Obama and his team "do seem more willing to push the envelope," he said.

Would Bush have handled the Abbottabad raid in the same way? "I really don't know for sure," the former aide said. "There's no doubt he would have ordered the assault in a heartbeat. But what would he have done regarding the Pakistanis? I'm not sure."

Vali Nasr, a senior State Department adviser on Afghanistan and Pakistan until last month, said: "Obama was fundamentally honest that the United States and Pakistan were on different trajectories in Afghanistan. Under Bush, there was this pretense that we were all in this war on terror together."

Obama had no close personal ties to Musharraf, who resigned shortly before the new U.S. president was elected. Obama's aides were increasingly skeptical of Pakistan's pledges that it would take care of al Qaeda, a senior White House official recalled. Most of all, Pakistan was a major player in Afghanistan, where Obama had pledged to turn around a war he acknowledged was going badly.

Those views hardened after Obama's first classified intelligence briefing in Chicago on a September day in 2008. He was now the Democratic nominee for president.

The briefing solidified Obama's view that "this guy was living inside Pakistan," the senior official said. "What I remember in terms of the aftermath of that briefing and into the transition was just how much the focus became on Pakistan." As Obama prepared to take office, Islamist militants rampaged in the Indian city of Mumbai. There were clear signs they had help from within Pakistan.

After taking office, Obama instructed CIA director Panetta to develop options for pursuing bin Laden and pour additional resources into the effort. While "a lot of good" had been done in the Bush years, the senior official said, resources for the CIA's bin Laden unit "fluctuated over time."

Obama wanted the effort revitalized and given a presidential imprimatur. With no public fanfare, the CIA escalated drone strikes on militants inside Pakistan.

ENDGAME

Obama was brought the lead about the Abbottabad compound in August 2010. Fewer than 10 people within the White House, and only a handful at the CIA, knew about it. By last month, that number had grown, as the CIA operators and military commandos who would execute a raid were read into developing operational plans.

At what would be a crucial, two-hour meeting on April 28, Obama, as is his custom, went around the room, asking each of his principal advisers for their views. At one point, laughter permeated the tension as each adviser prefaced his or her comments by saying, "This is a really hard call," the senior White House official said.

Obama was presented with four scenarios, some of which evoked the 1993 "Black Hawk Down" fiasco in Somalia: The team gets cleanly in and out with bin Laden. The team gets cleanly in and out, but bin Laden is not there. There's a messy situation on the ground, with fighting and casualties, and bin Laden is there. Worst of all was scenario four: the same as scenario three, but with no bin Laden in sight.

"There was discussion of catastrophic -- that was the word we used -- catastrophic outcomes where you had dead or injured U.S. personnel or a hostage-taking," the senior official said.

Obama left the room saying he had not yet made a decision, but a close aide knew that he had. "I knew with 100 percent certainty that he was going to decide to do this because I've worked for him for four years. I just knew. He said he'd do this."

Three days later, the group gathered in the White House Situation Room to monitor the raid as it unfolded. A mood of "tense silence" filled the room as Obama and the advisers waited for the next pieces of information. Then Panetta spoke the words U.S. officials had hoped to hear for years: "Geronimo" -- a code phrase meaning bin Laden had been found -- "EKIA." Enemy killed in action.

Amid a scramble to inform counterparts abroad, especially the Pakistanis, and to prepare for the release of the blockbuster news to the public, pizza and chips were brought in for fortification.

There would be tough questions ahead. Could U.S.-Pakistan relations be salvaged? Successful once, would Obama authorize similar raids against other leading militants? (Another top Obama aide would not "take that off the table.")

But now, there were at least a few moments for reflection. After years in the wilderness, literally and figuratively, the United States had got its man.

Obama walked along the White House colonnade to the East Room to deliver the news that many in the United States had by now guessed. He could hear the chants of "USA, USA" from a rally in Lafayette Park.

As Obama spoke, adviser and speechwriter Ben Rhodes turned to John Brennan, the president's top counter-terrorism adviser, and whispered: "How long have you been going after this guy?" Brennan immediately replied: "Fifteen years."