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Lies, Lies, and The Death of Bin Laden Why the Surprise?

by BINOY KAMPMARK

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“For a long time people have stopped trusting what comes out about bin Laden from the official mouths.”

– General Asad Durrani, quoted by Seymour Hersh in London Review of Books, Mar 21, 2015

Seymour Hersh’s article in the London Review of Books was meant to precipitate a harsh intake of breathe, and a range of murmurings from press gallery to blogosphere. The more measured would have been less surprised. While the unmasking by Hersh of the White House account of the Navy Seal operation against Osama bin Laden is welcome, it is fitting to note that little regarding accounts of the man’s life, be it his vocation as a terrorist, or his ultimate death, could ever be regarded as credible. All that he seemed to touch turned to myth.

The cult of mendacity has met the cult of the disingenuous, from the time the “War on terror” was declared to the pornographic violence of Zero Dark Thirty, a sort of haloing of the American effort against unmitigated evil that culminated in that fatal night in Abbottabad. This was Gunsmoke with torture, and it proved just as convincing.

It was fitting, then, that bin Laden would perish in circumstances he lived in: mystery, deception, an Alice in Wonderland variation of hobbled half-truths and discredited accounts. Alexander

Cockburn has called this a “volcano of lies,” though it just as aptly might be deemed a factory of dissimulation, reconstruction and fantasy. It was a factory that provided a barely plausible cover story over the Navy Seal mission that would end his life.

The main feature of the entire operation was that Pakistan’s two most senior military leaders – chief of the army staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, and director general of ISI, General Ahmed Shuja Pasha, were kept in the dark about it. Our only conclusion is that the White House lied, and did so with some enthusiasm.

Naturally, the responses to this account of purported cover-up have been frothily indignant. Max Boot, who tends to see the jackboot of freedom march with determination before the shackle of liberty, accused Hersh as being a fantasist, and a left-wing one at that. Presumably, the report on attempts to cover-up the My Lai atrocity perpetrated by US forces in Vietnam was another sterling effort of a fantasist.

One conspicuous note for the cognoscenti of investigative journalism lay in the forum Hersh ended up publishing in. His effort appeared in the London Review of Books, rather than his traditional home of The New Yorker, to which he has been a contributor since 1971. That, it was surmised, was largely because New Yorker’s Nicholas Schmidle had written a story in August 2011 hugging the official narrative spun by the White House. As Gabriel Sherman posed, “Was New Yorker editor David Remnick’s decision not to publish Hersh’s piece a sign that Hersh’s account couldn’t be trusted?”

All who sup from the bin Laden cup have been found wanting, largely because those who have been writing the history have been held on a tight leash. Peter Bergen of CNN suggested that Hersh’s piece “reads like Frank Underwood from House of Cards has made an unholy alliance with Carrie Mathison from Homeland to produce a Pakistani version of Watergate.” (Hersh himself makes the same accusation of the Obama administration’s story, though he prefers the inspiration of Lewis Carroll.)

Bergen’s sideswipe falls to the anonymous retired US intelligence source. He deems it a pretty tall order to go about accusing the American president and his top advisors of instinctive and calculated lying on the basis of just one source, though a careful reading will necessitate a dismissal of Bergen’s point. He argues, instead, for his own set of factoids, claiming that the Hersh account “is a farrago of nonsense that is contravened by a multitude of eyewitness accounts, inconvenient facts and simple common sense.” Fanciful stuff indeed considering that nothing about the “war” on terror has involved a shred of common sense.

He also happily puts in his diminished two-cents worth by telling readers that he “was the only outsider to visit the Abbottabad compound where bin Laden lived before the Pakistani military demolished it.” He saw a compound trashed and evidence of “many bullets fired the night of bin Laden’s death.” The point being that more bullets were fired than Hersh is willing to allow. Importantly for Bergen, he finds it impossible that American officials might have even countenanced the very idea of a cover-up. “What did US officials have to lose by saying that bin Laden was being protected by the Pakistanis, if it were true?”

Surely, the one with a smile, crooked as it may be, will be the late bin Laden, his spirit dancing on the narratives that have been springing up around him. Prior to his death, he had died a multitude of times, a body in pieces that seemed to be surviving one assault after another. He was said to be suffering from a host of ailments, yet could muster being the relevant totemic figure in the “war” on terror. He was spectral and dissimulative. He deceived US security forces by dressing up as a woman. He was, at one point, in several locations across the Middle East, suggesting that he had managed the remarkable saint’s feat of bi-location.

Even after his death, there was a debate about where bin Laden’s body should go. An ocean grave it became, but that was hardly the end of the matter. Hersh’s account simply continues a discussion of a myth that continues to enrage and distort.