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Bin Laden in Pakistan, potent but past his prime

By CALVIN WOODWARD

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WASHINGTON – Surrounded by the din of his multiple families within walls that were both his sanctuary and prison, Osama bin Laden pecked endlessly at a computer, issuing directives to his scattered and troubled terrorist empire. It's not clear who really listened.

Go big, he told al-Qaida operatives and affiliates.

They mostly went small.

The latest intelligence from the wealth of material found at bin Laden's last hideout paints a complicated picture of the fugitive, both deeply engaged in his life's violent mission and somewhat out to pasture.

Inside the Abbottabad, Pakistan, compound, he kept busy scheming plots, rehearsed and recorded propaganda and dispatched couriers to distant Internet cafes to conduct his email traffic, using computer flash drives to relay messages he would write and store from his shabby office. He dyed his gray beard black to keep up appearances for the videos.

To U.S. officials, who possess bin Laden's handwritten personal journal as well as an enormous cache of his digital documents, the still-unfolding discoveries show he was more involved in trying to plan al-Qaida's post-911 operations than they had thought possible for a man in perpetual hiding.

Even so, he was disconnected from his organization in real time, lacking phones or the Internet at his hideout and with loyalists hunted at every turn. Essential elements of a command and control function from Abbottabad appear to be missing.

A discovered video shows him channel surfing with a tiny TV while wrapped in a wool blanket, wearing a knit cap and looking anything but content. Toward its own propaganda ends, the U.S. released selective excerpts of these odd home movies, choosing clips that only show the Prince of jihad in an unflattering, even pathetic, light.

For a man working from home, there seemed to be many distractions.

The U.S. raiders who killed him, a grown son and others May 2 encountered 23 children and nine women on the grounds of the three-story complex behind walls stained with mold, including three of his wives, officials said afterward. The U.S. has questioned those widows, the Pentagon said Friday without revealing if anything was learned.

The compound is hardly the plush redoubt U.S. officials described in the immediate aftermath of the Navy SEALs assault. Yet the Saudi son of privilege, who long ago renounced wealth and creature comforts, had lived in far more Spartan circumstances even if he was not quite the cave-dweller of Western lore.

As bizarre as it might be to know he spent his last months surrounded by children, any thought of domestic tranquility is probably a stretch.

This was a man who forced his family to live without air conditioning or a refrigerator in stifling heat in pre-terrorist days, who beat them and let his fighters experiment on their pets with poison gas, and made his family dig and sleep in ditches on a desert camping trip, according to a son and another wife who collaborated on the book "Growing Up Bin Laden."

Such a harsh disposition with family was disputed by Ahmed Abdel-Fatah al-Sada, a father-in-law, who told The Associated Press in Yemen that bin Laden was a "kind and noble" man, "easygoing and modest, giving you the feeling that he was sincere." Al-Sada's daughter, Amal, 29, was shot in the leg during the raid as she rushed the Navy SEALs, U.S. officials said.

There is no dispute that bin Laden spent time in his lair dreaming up ways to kill Americans in great numbers again, for the terrorist believed that only mass casualties could move U.S. policy. Communicating both with his core group and al-Qaida affiliates, he advised plots against cities spared on Sept. 11, 2001, such as Los Angeles, and wanted to explore attacking trains.

Whatever the target, he sought a body count of thousands, the records indicate.

But not everyone was marching to his drum.

The Yemen branch of al-Qaida, which now overshadows bin Laden's central operation as the organization's top money-raising, propaganda and operational arm, has embraced the smaller-scale attacks that bin Laden thought were unsuccessful. Others in the network, too, have urged

the likeminded to kill Americans wherever and however they can, without coordination or elaborate planning.

So far intelligence officials have not identified specific targets or plots for coming attacks in their initial analysis of the 100 or so flash drives and five computers that the assault team took from the compound. Nor have they found that bin Laden was capable of coordinating the timing of attacks across the various al-Qaida affiliates in Pakistan, Yemen, Algeria, Iraq and Somalia.

Officials have seen no evidence that he was directly behind the attempted Christmas Day 2009 bombing of a Detroit-bound airliner or the nearly successful attack on cargo planes heading for Chicago and Philadelphia, as much as those operations seemed out of his playbook.

Indeed, it remains unknown just what bin Laden accomplished for his jihad after the attacks of 2001 other than to stay alive and at large for nearly a decade afterward. That itself was quite a feat but one that denied him a reprise of the American body count he wanted until the end.