

No Good Options

by Glenn-David Daniel

President Barack Obama's Decision to Bring Usama bin Laden to Justice



"Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Usama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaida..."

With these 30 words spoken by President Barack H. Obama from the East Room of the White House in Washington, May 1, 2011 our country breathed a sigh of relief. Some celebrated and outright cheered. Not quite 10 years and 10 days after the most terrifying and tragic attack on American soil was witnessed on national television during what for me was a normal commute hour (for me on the West Coast). America was stunned. We stayed in shock and horror for days. We watched helplessly as our economy shut down within hours. Ports closed, no air traffic. The bizarre vignette I witnessed from my office of a F-15 fighter jet "escorting" a Boeing 747 to a landing at San Francisco International Airport. The sickening feeling, I had as I realized the fighter's task was not to protect the airliner but to prevent it from changing course and plowing into the City of San Francisco's large collection of iconic skyscrapers. I had no doubt that, if necessary, the 747 would be destroyed before the fighter pilot would let that happen. What a decision for that fighter's commander to have to make.

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I like my fellow American's wanted revenge. I wanted the culprits brought to justice. Many a night I offered a prayer for the souls of the lost and the loved ones they left behind. Little did I know that it would take a decade and a different president to satisfy our national need for resolution. It was the wound that could not be closed by any other means.

I have often wondered what it took to make the decision to apprehend such a well-funded and elusive terrorist. The Bush administration failed to do so. Perhaps out of lack of commitment, incompetence, conflict of interest or all three. It was left to his successor, Barack Obama to accomplish it. This course in decision-making prompted me to think more deeply about the subject and perhaps answer some of my questions:

- 1) What process did President Obama use to make the series of decisions to locate, apprehend and ultimately kill bin Laden in a sovereign state (Pakistan) with a team of Navy Seals, without notice to its government? Did he operate by a defined process or "gut feel"?
- 2) What were the choices and recommendations of his advisors and how did he choose a course of action?



When problems reached him in the White House, he [Obama] said, it was because they were unsolvable. He generally was being asked to choose between two bad options. "By definition, if it was an easily solvable problem, or even a modestly difficult but solvable problem, it would not reach me, because, by definition, somebody else would

have solved it," he said. "So, the only decisions that came were the ones that were horrible and that didn't have a good solution. They said, 'Let's send this to Obama, I don't know what to do.'" That way, he joked, "when things got all screwed up," people could blame him.ⁱ In this case it was a 50/50 decision and there were no good options:

Option 1: A massive bombing raid that would level the compound. If bin Laden was in an underground bunker, innocent women and children would invariably be killed with no guarantee that bin Laden would be hit. This was morally unacceptable to the

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president. Also, there would be no opportunity for positive identification or immediate confirmation of success.

Option 2: Target bin Laden with a single very precise bomb while he is out in the open. Our military has this capability but, in this case, it was going to be difficult. There was a risk of collateral damage as well. Using a smaller weapon would have allowed more surgical targeting but systems with that capability were not battle proven. And this was a one-shot opportunity. A miss could drive bin Laden into hiding and not seen for more years.

Option 3: Send in a Special Forces strike team to capture or kill bin Laden. While avoiding the pitfalls of the other options this one presented new logistical, tactical and political risks: How to contain leaks, legal issues of conducting a military operation inside sovereign borders without invitation/permission, higher risk of American casualties and loss of equipment, etc.

Obama's Decision-making Process

In contrast with the previous president, George W. Bush, President Obama eschews gut instinct. He told Steve Kroft in a 60 Minutes interview: “The thing about gut instinct is if it works, then you think, “Boy, I had good instincts.” If it doesn't, then you're gonna be running back in your mind all the things that told you maybe you shouldn't have done it. Obviously, I had enough of an instinct that we could be right, that it was worth doing.” This is in keeping with what we learned from Schoemaker and Russo in “A Pyramid of Decision Approaches”, intuition (a.k.a. “gut instinct”) has two common flaws: 1) random inconsistency and systematic distortion.ⁱⁱ This president is a disciplined thinker who believes in facts, reason and logic. President Obama summarizes his decision process with these key points:



- *Make sure you have a team with a diversity of opinion sitting around you.”*

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- *“The other thing that’s helpful is not watching TV or reading social media. Those are two things I would advise, if you’re our president, not to do. It creates a lot of noise and clouds your judgment,”*
- *“Then what you have to do is create a process where you have confidence that whatever data is out there has been sifted and sorted,” Obama said. That means putting together teams of people who can sort through the minutiae and present the most important parts to him.*
- *Obama also warned about wasting time and energy on “opinion wrapped up as fact,” clickbait, and polls.* ⁱⁱⁱ

He advised that uncertainty is the norm so learn to become comfortable with probabilities. According to Psychologist David Dunning dumb people see the world in black and white, smart people think in probabilities. Moving forward, and fairly quickly, with impossible decisions about wars or a global financial crisis required, he [Obama] said, “being comfortable with the fact that you’re not going to get [a] 100% solution, and understanding that you’re dealing with probabilities, so that you don’t get paralyzed trying to think that you’re going to actually solve this perfectly.”

The president advises to get the smartest people in the room:

"I'm old fashioned. I believe in these Enlightenment values like facts and reason and logic..."

"...If I had set up a good process in which I could get all the information, all the data, all perspectives, if I knew that I had around the table all the angles ... then I could feel confident that even if I didn't get a perfect answer, that I was making the best decision that anybody in my situation could make,..."

"having the confidence to have people around you who were smarter than you, or disagreed with you," was "critical."

This is President Obama’s application of the principals of avoiding confirmation bias. This approach protects him from falling into the Confirming-Evidence Trap described by Hammond, Keeney and Raiffa in their article “The Hidden Traps in Decision Making”^{iv}

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"I always would say to somebody, if they're talking about a really complicated issue, 'I don't understand what you're saying. Explain it to me in English,'" Obama relates. "I think one of the problems with people who are in big jobs is they start feeling as if they have to project that 'I have every answer' when, in fact, most of the time, you may not."

"Probably the last piece of this that was most critical was having the confidence to have people around you who were smarter than you, or disagreed with you, or have perspectives that were different than yours," he said. This helped keep him from wasting time thinking he had reached solutions when he hadn't.

Ask Dumb Questions

President Obama believes in gathering as much information as possible from intelligent sources:

"If I had set up a good process in which I could get all the information, all the data, all perspectives, if I knew that I had around the table all the angles...then I could feel confident that even if I didn't get a perfect answer, that I was making the best decision that anybody in my situation could make," Obama explained.

"Probably the last piece of this that was most critical was having the confidence to have people around you who were smarter than you, or disagreed with you, or have perspectives that were different than yours," he said. This helped keep him from wasting time thinking he had reached solutions when he hadn't.^v

"Asking dumb questions" might be characterized by Garvin and Roberto at Harvard Business School as in Inquiry process (as opposed to Advocacy). In their article "What You Don't Know About Making Decisions" the authors state: "an inquiry-focused group carefully considers a variety of options and works together to discover the best solution...The implicit assumption is that a consummate solution will emerge from a test of strength among competing ideas rather than dueling positions."^{vi}

In the context of this topic, the president is the primary inquisitor. He believes asking questions until he clearly understands the fundamentals and can draw some conclusions about the merits of one course of action over another. Again, he does not rely on intuition nor does he believe he

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knows better than the experts he surrounds himself with. He also believes in the collective wisdom of his team and sees disagreement and debate as a healthy part of the decision-making process: “You know one of the things that we've done here is to build a team that is collegial and where everybody speaks their mind. And there's not a lot of snipin' or back-biting after the fact. And what I've tried to do is make sure that every time I sit down in the situation room, every one of my advisors around there knows I expect them to give me their best assessments.”^{vii}

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ⁱ “Barack Obama shares his approach to handling tough decisions” by Lila MacLellan, [Quartz at Work, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 7, 2019](#).

ⁱⁱ “A Pyramid of Decision Approaches”,

Paul J. H. Schoemaker and J. Edward Russo, California Management Review, p.10.

ⁱⁱⁱ “Obama details his presidential decision-making process – and it’s the exact opposite of Trump’s” [by David Badash / The New Civil Rights Movement, – September 18, 2019, AlterNet](#)

^{iv} “The Hidden Traps In Decision Making” by John S. Hammond, Ralph L. Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, Harvard Business Review, 2006.

^v “Barack Obama shares his approach to handling tough decisions” by Lila MacLellan, Quartz at Work, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 7, 2019.

^{vi} “What You Don’t Know About Making Decisions” by David A. Garvin and Michael A. Roberto, Harvard Business Review, September 2001, p.3.

^{vii} Killing Bin Laden: The President’s Story, 60 Minutes (CBS News), May 8, 2011.