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The Trial that Still Must Come — The Death of Osama bin Laden and the Limits of Human Justice

As is always the case, we are left with a sense that a higher court is still needed. Christians know that Osama bin Laden escaped the reach of full human justice and a trial for his crimes, but he will not escape the judgment that is to come. Bin Laden will not escape his trial before the court of God. Until then, sober satisfaction must be enough for those still in the land of the living.

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Osama bin Laden is dead. President Obama spoke with clarity and resolution when he addressed the American people last night: “Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, and a terrorist who’s responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children.”

That single sentence, delivered in a nearly unprecedented late-night Sunday address by an American president, encapsulates the moral context of the action. First, the President took responsibility for the act that ended bin Laden’s life. Osama bin Laden did not die an accidental death, nor a death by natural causes. The United States “conducted an operation” that resulted in his death. Second, the operation ended the life of one who was “a terrorist who’s responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children.”

In his short and historic address, the President justified the military action in terms of an act of war. In reality, the operation was a stunning affirmation of the effectiveness of American military expertise, combined with a remarkable intelligence achievement. Bin Laden was killed even as he was within a highly-guarded, encircled compound with walls and defenders. The act was fully justified by the demands of just war theory, the historic Christian means of moral reasoning that measures the justification for acts of lethal force.

Osama bin Laden was the one human being most responsible for a series of terrorist attacks, including the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States — attacks that left more than 3,000 civilians dead. He claimed such responsibility and pledged future attacks. The death of Osama bin Laden means that all people of the world should sleep more soundly in their beds, even as those who plot their own acts of terror should sleep less soundly in their own.

The death of bin Laden was fully justified as an act of war, but not as an act of justice. The removal of a credible threat to human life — a clear and present danger to human safety — is fully justified, especially after such an individual has demonstrated not only the will, but the means to effect murder on a massive scale.

One interesting dimension of this moral context is the fact that American military and intelligence forces had identified bin Laden as such a threat long before the September 11, 2001 attacks. Furthermore, our forces had ample intelligence that would have allowed a lethal strike against him prior to the September 11 attacks. However justified such an action against bin Laden might have been then, this action after his massive attacks was more than justified.

And yet, there are two troubling aspects that linger. The first is the open celebration in the streets. While we should all be glad that this significant threat is now removed, death in itself is never to be celebrated. Such celebration points to the



danger of revenge as a powerful human emotion. Revenge has no place among those who honor justice. Retributive justice is sober justice. The reason for this is simple — God is capable of vengeance, which is perfectly true to his own righteousness and perfection — but human beings are not. We tend toward the mismeasure of justice when it comes to settling our own claims. All people of good will should be pleased that bin Laden is no longer a personal threat, and that his death may further weaken terrorist plans and aspirations. But revenge is not a worthy motivation for justice, and celebration in the streets is not a worthy response.

Should we be glad that forces of the United States military have the means, the will, and the opportunity to remove this threat? Of course we should. Should we be hopeful that such an action will serve as a warning to others who might plan similar actions? Of course. Should we find some degree of moral satisfaction in the fact that bin Laden did not die a natural death outside the reach of human justice? Yes, of course.

But open patriotic celebration in the streets? That looks far more like revenge in the eyes of a watching world, and it looks far more like we are simply taking satisfaction in the death of an enemy. That kind of revenge just produces greater numbers of enemies.

The second troubling aspect is just part of what it means to live in a world in which true justice is always elusive. Osama bin Laden is dead, but we never had the satisfaction of seeing him arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced. We were robbed of the satisfaction of seeing the evidence against him laid out, and seeing him have to answer the world about his murderous actions and plans. We were robbed of the moral satisfaction that comes by means of a fair and clear verdict, followed by a just and appropriate sentence.

We have been robbed before. History is filled with examples of opportunities lost because events did not allow. Bin Laden said he would never be taken alive. He was true to his words, and he died in the midst of a firefight. It was the best we could hope for under these circumstances, and there was more than adequate justification for his death. But we still should feel the loss of the greater satisfaction of human justice.

Once again, Christians are reminded of the inherent limitations of justice in a fallen and sinful world. At our very best, we can achieve only a small proportion of adequate justice. We can convict the murderer and put him to death, but we cannot bring the dead back to life. We can put an end to Osama bin Laden, but we are robbed of the satisfaction of seeing him answer for his crimes.

We did the best we could do, and that is often where we are left. We are left with a sense of sober satisfaction. This is no small comfort to all those who are still grieving the loved ones who lost their lives on September 11 and while wearing the uniform of the United States fighting bin Laden and the forces of terror.

But, as is always the case, we are left with a sense that a higher court is still needed. Christians know that Osama bin Laden escaped the reach of full human justice and a trial for his crimes, but he will not escape the judgment that is to come. Bin Laden will not escape his trial before the court of God. Until then, sober satisfaction must be enough for those still in the land of the living.

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