

Manhunt, the Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad¹

Reviewed by Major Jonathon H. Cody*

*The leaders of the U.S. military seemed to have convinced themselves that the American public could not tolerate casualties—even in the pursuit of Osama bin Laden.*²

I. Introduction

The author of *Manhunt*, Peter L. Bergen, is a national security analyst for *CNN*, as well as a fellow at both the New America Foundation and New York University's Center on Law and Security.³ Bergen stands out from other Bin Laden authors because he personally interviewed the terrorist mastermind.⁴ Bergen journeyed to Afghanistan in 2007 to meet with Bin Laden,⁵ forming the basis of his critically acclaimed works *Holy War, Inc.*, and *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*. Unfortunately, *Manhunt* fails to replicate the deep analytic prose of Bergen's previous books.

Manhunt is a narrative overview of the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, detailing the search for the world's most wanted, starting with President Clinton's unsuccessful air strikes in 1998, followed by the failure of the Bush Administration to take decisive action to capture Bin Laden at Tora Bora in 2001,⁶ and ultimately ending with the decision by President Obama to raid his Abbottabad compound in 2011. The story is presented in a simple timeline form, guiding the reader from event to event through the eyes of the various analysts, decision-makers, and strategists involved in the manhunt. Bergen obviously used his journalistic talents and skills when writing *Manhunt*, as the structure of the book mimics that of a lengthy news article. However, that is not necessarily a compliment, as presenting such an encompassing story in the same simplistic style as a recap of yesterday's Red Sox-Yankees ballgame detracts from the serious nature of this work.

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¹ PETER L. BERGEN, *MANHUNT, THE TEN-YEAR SEARCH FOR BIN LADEN FROM 9/11 TO ABBOTTABAD* (2012).

² *Id.* at 49.

³ Simon and Schuster Author Page, <http://authors.simonandschuster.com/Peter-L-Bergen/1782915/biography> (last visited Sept. 7, 2012).

⁴ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at xix.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Mary Anne Weaver, *Lost at Tora Bora*, N.Y. TIMES, Sep. 11, 2005, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/magazine/11TORA-BORA.html?pagewanted=all&r=0> (detailing how Bin Laden and his forces were cornered in the mountains of Tora Bora, a region of Afghanistan. In this battle, the United States relied primarily on U.S. Special Forces and CIA personnel to coordinate local Afghan and Pakistani forces to cut off Bin Laden's escape, rather than risk substantial U.S. Forces. The decision ultimately failed and Bin Laden escaped).

II. Critique of *Manhunt*

Manhunt reads like a lengthy news article: first it gives the reader a basic history of the event in question, then it provides various quotes from witnesses and key players, and finally ties the story together with heavy flashes of alliteration. Although *Manhunt* is 359 pages, the book is a quick read. Large typeface, a detailed set of reporter's notes, and a lengthy bibliography are the primary reasons for that length. As a result, despite its high number of pages, the average reader can read this book quickly.

There are two main flaws with *Manhunt*. First, Bergen relies too heavily on the statements of interviewees and other journalists' work to piece together the story of the hunt for Bin Laden.⁷ While Bergen did cross-reference when possible, he admits that he was forced to rely upon selectively furnished documents or a single person's memory, viewpoint, or hearsay to complete the narrative.⁸ The astute reader will quickly identify two deficiencies with his methods: Bergen relays self-serving statements of interested parties as prima facie evidence of what actually transpired,⁹ and he describes what various actors were thinking or feeling, when it is clear this is merely conjecture on his part.¹⁰

The second area where Bergen fails is a lack of substantive analysis. For an author with such impressive credentials, *Manhunt* is surprisingly devoid of the scrutiny and analysis of events beyond their role in the basic narrative of the hunt for Bin Laden. For example, Bergen piques the reader's interest with a socially relevant area of discussion specifically, the expanded role of female analysts at the CIA following the debacle at Tora Bora,¹¹ but then inexplicably dismisses it with little fanfare. Such quick dismissal is maddening, particularly when Bergen notes how these expanded responsibilities were a sharp departure from the culture within the CIA before 9/11,¹² and was apparently a result of the perceived or actual multi-tasking capabilities

⁷ Michiko Kakutani, *Bin Laden's End, From the Beginning*, N.Y. TIMES, May 4, 2012, at C23.

⁸ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at xx.

⁹ *Id.* at 205.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 11.

¹¹ *Id.* at 77.

¹² *Id.* at 78.

inherent among women.¹³ To offer evidence of how much the culture at the CIA did change, Bergen provides examples of misogynistic comments about the role of women at the CIA spoken by senior CIA officers.¹⁴ Yet, Bergen disappoints by refusing to provide deeper context. Rather, he simply moves on with his narrative of Bin Laden's death.

In this instance, the result of Bergen's desire to emphasize the narrative deprives the reader of any analysis on the culture change within the CIA and how such a change was representative of the entire nation. Additionally, the reader is robbed of the comparison between Bin Laden's beliefs on the role of women and the end result of how inclusiveness in America ultimately led to his downfall.¹⁵ While the author recognizes this and other key issues raised during the search for Bin Laden, he fails to more fully probe them to the reader's satisfaction.

III. Analysis by the Author

A. Contrasting Tora Bora and Operation Neptune Spear

Where Bergen does succeed is in his analysis of the circumstances surrounding the manhunt for Bin Laden, and in this realm he does yeoman's work. First, Bergen demonstrates how the key decision-makers in *Operation Neptune Spear*, the air-assault operation into Bin Laden's compound at Abbottabad, differed from their Tora Bora counterparts. Specifically, Bergen shows how Obama and the other decision-makers asked the hard questions of the analysts and military planners, in sharp contrast to the analysts and military planners at Tora Bora, who were free to rely upon various assumptions and rosy scenarios.¹⁶ Examples of some of these hard questions Obama asked revolved around various "what-if" scenarios about Pakistani involvement,¹⁷ as opposed to the incongruous beliefs regarding the capabilities of Pakistani and Afghan forces displayed at Tora Bora.¹⁸

The result of President Obama's hard questions asked by President Obama was the requirement for a backup quick-reaction force with additional air assets.¹⁹ Though he did not specify what the exact requirements would be, Obama defined the outlines of a backup plan, and let the military

experts make specific determinations.²⁰ These hard questions asked by Obama, and his subsequent reliance on experts to make the right determinations, led to mission requirements that saved the operation.²¹ Bergen explains why the hard questions were so important and such a dramatic departure from previous operations.

B. *Operation Eagle Claw*: Where the Analysis Needs to Begin

Just as World War I and World War II are inextricably linked, and the study of either war requires a look at what happened before 1914,²² a serious analysis of the hunt for Bin Laden, to include its failures and eventual success, must be studied within the context of several seemingly unrelated operations that preceded it. Decades before Bin Laden was cornered in the mountains at Tora Bora and long before his eventual death in Abbottabad, a single military operation, *Operation Eagle Claw*, would be responsible for the outcome of each operation targeting Bin Laden: both in what decision-makers learned, and what they did not.

Operation Eagle Claw was the code name for the unsuccessful attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980.²³ The political fallout from the failed operation was immediate, likely providing the necessary push to sweep the Carter administration out of the White House.²⁴ However, the shortcomings of the failed joint operation were identified in the Holloway Commission and addressed in 1987 as part of the Cohen-Nunn amendment to the 1987 National Defense Authorization Act.²⁵ The resulting changes led to the successful integration of regular and special operations forces, spurring some of the greatest advancements in joint tactics.²⁶

While the tactical and strategic partnerships between the services developed, however, Bergen notes that the shadow of *Operation Eagle Claw*'s failure continued to loom large in the hunt for Bin Laden, effectively tying the hands of those who advocated bold, decisive action to find and

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 77.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 14.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 181.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 46–47.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 182.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² JOHN KEEGAN, *THE SECOND WORLD WAR 10* (Penguin Books 2005) (1990).

²³ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at 148.

²⁴ Jimmy Carter, *Iran Hostage Rescue Should Have Worked*, USA TODAY, Sept. 17, 2010, http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2010-09-17-iran-hostages-jimmy-carter_N.htm.

²⁵ Charles T. Kamps, *Operación Eagle Claw: La Misión de Rescate de los Rehenes Americanos en Irán*, AIR & SPACE POWER J. INT'L. 3, 18 (2006).

²⁶ Bryan Brown, *US Special Operations Command, Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century*, JOINT FORCES Q., 1st Quarter 2006, at 38, 40.

complete the kill.²⁷ Because the tactical lessons of *Operation Eagle Claw* were evident in improved joint operations, the political fallout from the failed mission would effectively handicap the nation's strategy.²⁸ The fear of political consequences resulting from the unsuccessful operation—which doomed one president, and also haunted two others, Bush and Clinton—retarded both administrations' actions in an attempt to limit individual liability.²⁹

Operation Eagle Claw embodied the politician's primary rule: first, do no harm. Following this rule, in an attempt to mitigate failure, both Bush and Clinton hunted for Bin Laden too cautiously. Clinton limited his response to Bin Laden's attack against the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya with missile strikes in Sudan and Afghanistan, rather than a more effective, but far more dangerous, human strike package.³⁰ In the same vein, the Bush administration hesitated against deploying a few battalions of Army Rangers to cut off Bin Laden's escape and press their advantage at Tora Bora, fearful of exposing those Soldiers to harsh conditions and enemy fire.³¹

In both cases, the Clinton and Bush administrations determined that the political costs associated with the loss of U.S. Soldiers were too high a price to be paid in the pursuit of one man.³² The difference between the situations, however, is that Clinton's fear was justified. While the bombings of the U.S. embassies were horrendous, in early 2001, Bergen himself noted there were few options for going after Bin Laden.³³ Combined with the still-fresh images of Army Rangers being dragged naked through the streets of Mogadishu and the political suspicion expressed by the limited missile strike itself,³⁴ the political will for Clinton to mount a larger attack was not present.

The situation for the Bush administration was far different. Overwhelmingly, the country supported Bush's initial invasion of Afghanistan.³⁵ Yet, the author details how,

when presented with the prospect of high casualties for U.S. Soldiers, the decision-makers on the ground of Tora Bora and in the Bush administration opted for the less risky strategy, relying heavily on local ground forces and U.S. air power.³⁶

Bergen suggests that part of what crafted Obama's departure from the previous administrations was a lack of personal influence from the war in Vietnam. The author correctly notes that Obama's relative youth left him free of the influence of the Vietnam War.³⁷ Bergen suggests that one of the reasons Obama has been so amenable to direct targeting and an expansion of drone strikes is his detachment from the Vietnam experience.³⁸ In contrast, both Clinton and Bush found themselves bound by the limitations on the use of hard power in Vietnam.³⁹

IV. *Manhunt* and the Principles of War

For the military practitioner, *Manhunt* provides multiple examples of how to conduct either a successful or a failed operation. *Manhunt* also unwittingly provides an excellent example on the state of incompatibility between the different branches of America's armed forces. This inconsistency, which was supposed to be rectified by the recommendations of the Holloway Commission, is identified by Bergen in a passage about the leadership qualities of Admiral McRaven.⁴⁰

In his interviews with Admiral McRaven and other military planners, Bergen demonstrates how, despite three decades of joint operations and training, the doctrine among the services remains miles apart. Specifically, Admiral McRaven identifies six factors that are necessary for the success of a special operations mission: repetition, surprise, security, speed, simplicity, and purpose.⁴¹ The descriptions of these six factors are surprisingly similar to the Army's Principles of War: Objective, Offensive, Mass, Economy of Force, Maneuver, Unity of Command, Security, Surprise, and Simplicity.⁴² Unwittingly demonstrating just how out of synch the different services are, Admiral McRaven describes the formulation of these six factors as being something

²⁷ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at 80.

²⁸ *Id.* at 160.

²⁹ *Id.* at 50.

³⁰ *Id.* at 201.

³¹ *Id.* at 49.

³² *Id.*

³³ *News Hour with Jim Lehrer Transcript*, PBS, (May 29, 2001), http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/jan-june01/bombing_5-29.html.

³⁴ James Bennett, *U.S. Cruise Missiles Strike Sudan and Afghan Targets Tied to Terrorist Network*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 21, 1998, <http://partners.nytimes.com/library/world/africa/082198attack-us.html>.

³⁵ David Moore, *Public Overwhelmingly Backs Bush in Attacks on Afghanistan*, GALLUP NEWS SERV., Oct. 8, 2001.

³⁶ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at 49.

³⁷ *Id.* at 112.

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 168.

⁴¹ *Id.*

⁴² U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 100-5, OPERATIONS 2-6 (14 June 1993) [hereinafter FM 100-5]; *see also* U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 100-25, DOCTRINE FOR ARMY SPECIAL FORCES 1-3, 1-4 (1 Aug. 2009).

new.⁴³ Yet, the Principles of War have been the bedrock of Army doctrine since they were first published in 1923 in the *Field Service Regulations, United States Army*.⁴⁴

Army officers will recognize that among the Principles of War, one of the most important is Objective. Objective directs that “every military operation [be directed] toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective.”⁴⁵ Nowhere is the lack of focus on the Objective of an operation more clear than the operation to capture Bin Laden at Tora Bora.

While planners grappled with the problem of how to attack the heavily fortified defense of the mountainous area of Tora Bora, Bergen notes that rather than direct all available assets to the operation, the Bush White House directed a shift of resources from the Tora Bora fight in Afghanistan to planning for operations in Iraq.⁴⁶ By ignoring the objective of the most pressing operation, the subsequent shift in resources away from the manhunt for Bin Laden guaranteed the failure to seize the initiative at Tora Bora.⁴⁷ Coupled with an inability to seize the initiative, there was an inability to amass forces for a decisive engagement, and a lack of unity of effort—all key Principles of War.⁴⁸ By initiating the war in Iraq, the Bush administration denied analysts and war fighters the capabilities they needed to successfully hunt Bin Laden,⁴⁹ failing to maintain focus on the hunt for Bin Laden and the fight in Afghanistan.

In contrast, Bergen then explains how Obama’s winding down of the war in Iraq paved the way for *Operation Neptune Spear*. By reorienting forces back to Afghanistan, drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan were expanded ten-fold.⁵⁰ Additionally, repositioning assets from Iraq to Afghanistan resulted in an increase of special operations mission from 200 per year to 2000 by 2010.⁵¹ The drone strikes were so effective that Bergen wryly notes that the job of the Number Three-ranking member of Al Qaeda was quickly becoming the most dangerous job in the terrorist

organization.⁵² The end result of this amassing of assets was the successful identification of Bin Laden’s whereabouts.⁵³

However, the hunt for Bin Laden did not end with knowing where he was. At the time President Obama decided to execute the mission to kill Bin Laden, after years of analysis and resources poured into the mission, the certainty that the target was in fact Bin Laden could only be predicted with a fifty percent confidence level.⁵⁴ This low level of confidence is what makes Obama’s decision to send in a human strike package so audacious. In sharp contrast to the decisions made by Bush and Clinton, Bergen notes how Obama went with the most dangerous mission package available, rather than an unmanned strike of some kind.⁵⁵ It is at these times, when Bergen is uncovering and analyzing situations like this, when *Manhunt* is at its narrative best.

V. Conclusion

For the military lawyer, *Manhunt* is useful only as a primer for the historical background surrounding *Operation Neptune Spear*. The most important legal aspects of the hunt for Bin Laden—such as his status as a constant combatant, the legal implications of incursions into Pakistan’s airspace, and the killing of unarmed persons at the Bin Laden compound—are left without any context or enough information to make the tough legal calls.⁵⁶ Even aside from its lack of legal analysis, the book is of limited benefit to officers in the profession of arms due to the alliterative narrative detail, which replaces thoughtful analysis with panache and flair.

As a long news article detailing the hunt for Bin Laden, however, the book is mostly a success. While there is no bold thesis contained in this work, the author does note that Bin Laden failed to appreciate the kind of military response that would flow from the 9/11 attacks, and that politicians and senior military officers, seemingly disconnected from the nation’s psyche, initially felt it was not worth the cost of U.S. casualties to capture him. Further, *Manhunt* does provide the reader some context about the types of difficulties encountered by analysts and decision-makers at all levels. Finally, there are numerous pictures and maps to help keep the mainstream reader’s attention, just like a news article.

⁴³ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at 168.

⁴⁴ U.S. DEP’T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-90, TACTICS 2-6 (4 July 2001) [hereinafter FM 3-90].

⁴⁵ FM 100-5, *supra* note 42, para. 2-4.

⁴⁶ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at 50.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ FM 3-90, *supra* note 44, paras. 2-4, 2-5.

⁴⁹ BERGEN, *supra* note 1, at 120.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 142.

⁵¹ *Id.* at 165.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ *Id.* at 132.

⁵⁴ *Id.* at 205.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ *Id.* at 186.