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Teaching the Intelligence Process: The Killing of Bin Laden as a Case Study

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Introduction

Intelligence is an important component of a variety of other disciplines including Political Science, Criminal Justice, and the nascent field of Homeland Security. Unfortunately, many academic programs in these fields do not offer courses in intelligence, leaving students without a firm understanding of the intelligence process. The case of the killing of bin Laden is one that most students from other disciplines are familiar with and is unique in its ability to bridge this gap and educate them on the importance of the intelligence process. The clandestine nature of intelligence makes using case studies to teach intelligence problematic; however, a large amount of information on the hunt for bin Laden and the role of the intelligence process are available from open sources. The nature of this case allows for inclusion of a variety of important topics related to the intelligence process, such as the roles of various members of the intelligence community, various collection methods, as well as the various steps of the intelligence cycle and how it can be used against non-state actors.

The historical importance of 2 May 2011, as the end of the two decade long manhunt for the World's most wanted man is undeniable. The death of Osama bin Laden had significant benefit in both the fight against global terrorism as well as the psyche of those both directly and indirectly affected by al Qaeda attacks. Beyond these strategic and psychological benefits; this event, or rather the events leading up to his demise, have given those who teach intelligence a unique opportunity. These events serve as an excellent case study to illustrate the various complex concepts, methods and process related to the collection, analysis and dissemination of intelligence to both students and professionals unfamiliar with the topic. In addition, given the amount of information on the intelligence efforts leading up to the raid on bin Laden's compound that has emerged over the past two years, this case also have value to teach more complex concepts such as groupthink, competitive analysis, synergetic relationship of all source intelligence, and use of intelligence against non-state actors.

One of the greatest challenges to those tasked with teaching intelligence is the secretive nature of the subject. While, an instructor with a firm grasp of the subject can relate the various theories and concepts that form the foundations of intelligence studies, finding real world examples that illustrate or support this material can be problematic. Since the collections, analysis and disseminations of intelligence occurs clandestinely, those activities most relevant to the issues of the day usually come to light only if there are intelligence failures. When intelligence successes do come to light, it is often years or even decades later. This can be extremely problematic when trying to teach intelligence to undergraduate students who may only have been in the early grades of primary school on 11 September 2001 or have little use for history in a technology driven world. Many

students today do not recognize the name Mohammed Atta let alone Francis Gary Powers. While these deficiencies can be overcome when a student is enrolled in a robust intelligence or security studies program, this task is not easily accomplished in other related programs.

Challenges and Opportunities

The study of intelligence has relevance across many academic disciplines such as political science, international affairs, criminal justice, and the nascent field of homeland security to name just a few. Yet, despite the importance of students of these disciplines possessing a strong knowledge of intelligence, many undergraduate programs in these fields do not require intelligence studies courses as part of their core curriculum, or even offer electives in this area. For example, a 2012 study of the role of intelligence in homeland security education found that of the ninety-two homeland security programs examined, only 5 percent of the courses offered were intelligence specific, less than 44 percent program offered any intelligence courses, and only eight of these ninety-two programs had at least one intelligence related course as a core requirement.¹ As a result, the subject of intelligence must be addressed within other courses within the core curriculum of these various programs. Unfortunately, many students in these programs think of intelligence as nothing more than information that is secret, or relate it to covert action or espionage depicted in movies whose main characters are named James Bond or Jason Bourne. The challenge becomes, how overcome these perceptions and impress on the students that intelligence is actually much more. Specifically it is information that been collected, processed and narrowed to meet specific needs of policy makers, or other consumers, to assist in their decision making process. Presenting the events leading up to the death of bin Laden through of the lens of the intelligence process is one way in those who teach intelligence can meet this challenge.

One of the many aspects about the location and killing of Osama bin Laden that was unique was the speed at which information regarding the events leading up to his death became available. This phenomenon can be contributed a number of factors. First, the significance of the event created an environment where many of those connected to the event wanted their involvement and contributions to be known. This was not limited to individuals but also the various agencies involved in the process. Second, the public, not just within the United States, had an insatiable appetite for any information related to the event, and the world media aggressively tried to supply any information it could. Finally, the U.S. military had crossed into a foreign nation's territory to carry out a covert activity against a specific individual without that country's consent. It was in the U.S. Administration's best interest to release what information it could in order to show not just the information it had but also how it was collected and the rigor with which it was analyzed. Within days of his death, details about the raid and the events leading up to it found their way into the media. In the days to the 10th anniversary of the 11 September attack numerous documentaries about bin Laden's death aired, many with that active participation of administration members involved in the process of locating bin Laden

¹ Jeffery P. Grossman, "The Role of Intelligence in Homeland Security Education: A Brief Study and Commentary, (paper presented at the 8th annual conference of the International Association for Intelligence Education, Washington, DC, May 21-24, 2012).

and the decision to attack his compound, including the President. In less than two years after the raid on the Abbottabad compound, a major motion picture based on the assault and the events leading to it was nominated for several Academy Awards. This wealth of information has allowed intelligence educators to provide their students with timely real world examples highlighting a success rather than dissecting failures in order to teach the relevant material in the field.

Using bin Laden's death as a case study has particular value as an excellent opportunity to fill in the knowledge gap related to intelligence in students from other disciplines. First, it is a topic that most all students are familiar with regardless of discipline or background. The instructor need not worry about dedicating significant time providing the back-story or historical relevance of the events. Next, the case highlights numerous issues that can form a strong foundation for a basic understanding of a variety of topics necessary to appreciate the complexity of the intelligence process. Some of these issues include: the roles and responsibilities of various members of the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC); the concept of collection requirements to meet the consumers' needs; the various collection disciplines employed to gather information, the exploitation and processing of material into raw intelligence; the analysis and production of intelligence, the dissemination of a finished intelligence product; and finally, how feedback from policy makers turns the intelligence process into a cycle.² Third, the events used to illustrate the various steps in the intelligence process occur mostly in a clear chronological order that allows the material to be presented in a clear and organized manner. Finally, the amount of information available in a variety of open sources allows teachers to customize the material to meet their time constraints and students' needs.

The example below illustrates how a case study of the death of Osama bin Laden was used to teach the intelligence process to students who were enrolled in a course where intelligence was not the main focus but an important topic within the overall framework of the class material. This particular example was used to explain the intelligence process to graduate students enrolled in either the Criminal Justice or Global Affairs program at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ. The title of the course was "Modern Political Terrorism." This method was also used to instruct undergraduate students enrolled in the Homeland and Corporate Security Program at St. John's University in Queens, NY in a course titled "Terrorism and Emergency Management." In both courses, the material took approximately two hours to deliver and appeared to give the students a basic understanding of the intelligence process and the related issues and concepts.³

Policy Makers and Intelligence Requirements

The hunt for Osama bin Laden highlights many of the challenges of employing the intelligence process to achieve strategic goals against non-state actors. These actors have

² While the author recognizes that there are a variety of interpretations of the intelligence cycle, he has decided to defer to the version adopted by the Central Intelligence Agency, available at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/additional-publications/the-work-of-a-nation/work-of-the-cia.html>.

³ This conclusion is based on students' answers to questions related to the material in course exams and other assessments.

networks that are fluid and ever changing. Compared to states, whose locations and the locations of their strategic assets are much easier to locate and monitor, non-state actors' locations may change often making it difficult to locate or monitor them. The location of bin Laden had been a standing collection requirement well before 11 September 2001, and a variety of intelligence methods were utilized to try and locate him and to launch an operation to capture or kill him. Following the invasion of Afghanistan and bin Laden's subsequent escape from Tora Bora the trail went cold. The reason for bin Laden's disappearance for nearly a decade was due in no small part to his reliance on a system and network of trusted couriers to communicate with the outside world. Ironically, it was this network that, through a synergetic use of all-source intelligence collection techniques, and the hard work and dedication of intelligence officials, that bin Laden was eventually located and killed. The key to this success was the identification of bin Laden's most trusted courier, Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti.

The identification and location of al-Kuwaiti is an excellent opportunity to introduce students to the concepts and issues related to the collection disciplines of human intelligence (HUMINT) and signals intelligence (SIGINT). The identification of al-Kuwaiti by al-Qaeda operatives in custody illustrates how valuable intelligence can be elicited from human sources. However, it should be pointed out that HUMINT includes a variety of sources, some of which will emerge later in this study. When talking specifically about the case of al-Kuwaiti, it is important to note that while several sources discuss his importance to al-Qaeda, several key al-Qaeda figures such as Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and Abu Faraj al Libi claimed that al-Kuwaiti was either no longer with the organization or down played his importance.⁴ Clearly the reliability, credibility, and denial and deception are all important topics when dealing with HUMINT that could be discussed at this point, so to is the fact that it is often necessary to apply "Gertrude's Law" as the forceful denial is often more important than an admission.⁵

Even after al-Kuwaiti's importance came to light, it was still several years before he was located. The event that led to his identification serves as an excellent example to highlight both the role of the National Security Agency (NSA) within the IC and the importance and challenges of SIGINT. This event was the interception by the NSA of a phone call between a known al-Qaeda sympathizer in the Persian Gulf and an individual in northwestern Pakistan. During the conversation, the man in Pakistan, whom those listening believed to be al-Kuwaiti stated, "I'm back with the people I was with before," confirming that he was back working for al-Qaeda.⁶ While this call is an example of the value of SIGINT, the ability to detect and listen in was aided by that fact that several phone numbers possibly linked to al-Kuwaiti was provided to the United States by a third country.⁷ This type of intelligence windfall and cooperation does not always occur. This provides an opportunity to discuss the challenge of "noise versus signals" of SIGINT

⁴ Peter L. Bergen, *Manhunt, The Ten-Year Search for Bin Laden from 9/11 to Abbottabad*, (New York: Crown, 2012), 95-107.

⁵ "Gertrude's Law" is a reference to the character Gertrude in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* who is famous for her quote "The lady doth protest too much, methinks,"

⁶ Bergen, *Manhunt*, 123.

⁷ *Ibid*, 122.

where the important information is often embedded in a great deal of noise.⁸ Regardless of how the call was intercepted, the event, as one official familiar with the process leading up the Abbottabad raid stated, “This is where you start the movie about the hunt for bin Laden.”⁹ It is also the starting point for teaching of intelligence using the bin Laden case study to illustrate the intelligence cycle and the importance of feedback to the intelligence cycle.

Bin Laden and the Intelligence Cycle

The Intelligence Cycle begins with *planning and directions*, and in the case of al-Kuwaiti, the requirements were to determine if he was a trusted courier for high value al-Qaeda targets, was one of these target bin-Laden, and could he lead them to his locations? In order to answer these questions, a massive *collection* effort began including: HUMINT in the form of sources on the ground, SIGINT and Geospatial Intelligence (GEOINT) collected from satellites and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). The introduction of GEOINT into the collections fray not only offers the opportunity of explaining this collection discipline but also illustrates the use of new collection methods such as UAVs. The result of this all-source approach was that al-Kuwaiti eventually led those watching his movements to the compound in Abbottabad, which now also became a target of collection efforts. The information collected on the compound through HUMINT, SIGINT and GEOINT was *processed and exploited* and revealed that this compound had no Internet or phone access, twelve-foot high walls, and many of the windows blocked out. When this raw intelligence was *analyzed* along with other factors such as al-Kuwaiti driving miles out of his way to make phone calls or use Internet cafes and the residence of the compound burning their trash, the conclusion was made that al-Kuwaiti is linked to a high value target living in the compound.¹⁰ This analysis was *disseminated* to the highest level of government. The *feedback* received back from policy makers was probably best summed up by the words of CIA Director Leon Panetta who stated, “I want to know what is going on in that compound.”¹¹

The feedback received from policy makers clearly outlined new *planning and directions* for the next turn through the intelligence cycle; determine the identity of the high value target living in Abbottabad compound. Again, a massive *collection* effort continued to focus on the compound from both the sky and the ground. On the ground, the CIA set up a safe house in Abbottabad to watch the compound and log all activities they could observe without arousing suspicion. These observations lead to the identification of one particular person who stood out because he did not participate in daily chores and rarely left the buildings other than short walks on an obscured balcony or in the garden. This individual’s behavior earned him the nickname “the pacer,” and became the center of attention as a possible candidate for bin Laden.¹² This boots on the ground approach to

⁸ Lowenthal, Mark M., *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012), 75.

⁹ Bob Woodward, “Death of Osama bin Laden: Phone call pointed U.S. to compound — and to ‘the pacer’,” *The Washington Post*, May 27, 2011, available at: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2011-05-06/world/35232344_1_lines-or-internet-service-abbottabad-osama-bin-laden.

¹⁰ Smithsonian Channel, *The Hunt For Bin Laden*, April 29, 2012.

¹¹ Bergen, Manhunt, 125.

¹² History Channel, *Targeting Bin Laden*, September 6, 2011.

collection is important for not just identifying “the pacer;” but also as a teaching tool as it highlights another type of HUMINT-case officers carrying out covert in foreign countries. Once “the pacer” was identified, he became the focus of collection efforts, especially through the use of GEOINT methods. The photographs and other images were *processed and exploited* by the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA). The imagery never provided a clear view of “the pacer’s” face, however the NGA did estimate his height was somewhere between 5-foot-8 and 6-foot-8.¹³ While this did not lead to the positive identification of “the pacer” as bin Laden, it does offer an opportunity to provide examples of how GEOINT is *processed and exploited* and the role of the NGA. Though the raw intelligence did not specifically identify bin Laden, when *analyzed*, the conclusion was that there was a high probability that “the pacer” was in fact bin Laden. When this information was *disseminated* to policy makers, the *feedback* that was received was that “the pacer’s” identity had to be confirmed before an operation on the target could move forward.

Once again the feedback received from policy makers reset the intelligence cycle with clearly set *planning and direction* objectives. Confirm if “the pacer” was Osama bin Laden. In an attempt to meet these *collection* requirements, The CIA organized a fake vaccination program in Abbottabad in an elaborate attempt to obtain DNA from the children inside the compound and confirm they were bin Laden’s. The agency recruited a senior Pakistani doctor to organize the vaccine drive to gain access to the compound and collect DNA samples.¹⁴ While the collection efforts were unsuccessful and the doctor recruited by the CIA was ultimately arrested, it does offer some important teaching points. First, it can be used to introduce another type of HUMINT-intelligence officers recruiting foreign nationals to spy or engage in covert activity. Second, it demonstrates the danger that is inherent with the collection efforts. Finally, it shows that no matter how many resources are utilized to clandestinely collect information, or how valuable a target may be, operational success is not guaranteed. This is not to say that the operation was a complete failure. The information gathered regarding the difficulty of gaining access to the compound was *processed* and forward for *analysis*. The result, the security precautions being taken at the compound strengthened the likelihood that “the pacer” was bin Laden. The information *disseminated* to policy makers placed the probability that he would be found in the compound at about 60-70 percent.¹⁵ Given the potential value of the target and the possible fallout of carrying out covert operation in a foreign country, was that a high enough probability to order such an operation to get this target?

One final analysis of all the information was conducted by a “Red Team” assembled to come up with alternative explanations for the intelligence gathered up until this point. This action was taken despite the fact the raw intelligence was already analyzed by the CIA for alternate hypotheses. The reason for this decision was the thought that the analysts who had been involved up until this point were too invested in the outcome and

¹³ Woodward, “Death of Osama bin Laden.”

¹⁴ Saeed Shah, “CIA organised fake vaccination drive to get Osama bin Laden's family DNA,” *The Guardian*, July 11, 2011, available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/11/cia-fake-vaccinations-osama-bin-ladens-dna>.

¹⁵ History Channel, *Targeting Bin Laden*.

there was a need for a fresh set of eyes to review the material. In the end, the “Red Team” put the probability of Osama bin Laden being inside the compound at approximately 40 -60 percent.¹⁶ Despite this downgrade in the probably of bin Laden being in the compound, the President still ordered the assault on the compound to go ahead, successfully locating and killing the World’s most wanted man. The fact that a “Red Team was assembled allows for important topics to be discussed-the importance of a redundant analytical stricture. In the case of the “Red Team,” how competitive analysis works and where having analysts with different backgrounds provide additional perspectives can be used to combat the issue of groupthink, or forced consensus.¹⁷

As explained above, the case study of the hunt for Osama bin Laden offers a unique opportunity to explain the intelligence cycle as it relates to strategic intelligence. It also has value in terms of differentiating between Strategic and Tactical intelligence where information is collected, analyzed and disseminated in order to support a particular operation. While strategic collection efforts were attempting to confirm the identity of “the pacer,” simultaneously tactical intelligence was being gathered for using in planning a potential assault on the compound. For example, GEOINT collected from the sky was combined with HUMINT collected on the ground to determine the best method to launch such an assault. In fact, the information collected was processed and exploited in order to build a scale replica of the compound for the assault to be planned and rehearsed. The tactical intelligence side of the case also illustrated the value of open source intelligence (OSINT) even when dealing with something as sensitive as the location of bin Laden and the eventual assault on the compound. Readily available information including, weather reports, maps of Abbottabad, and even information on the phases of the moon all played a role in both the strategic and tactical side of this case. In fact, the value of this case to teach a variety of intelligence issues and concepts is limited only by an instructor’s imagination and lesson plan.

Conclusion

Rarely has a case been as timely, tailored, digestible and clear as the hunt for Osama bin Laden when it comes to its value on teaching the subject of intelligence. The amount of information related to the events leading up to the raid on the Abbottabad compound gives educators a wide array of examples to illustrate many of the complex issues, concepts and theories related to collection, processing and analysis of intelligence. It also highlights the way in which the intelligence process and covert activity can be utilized against the ever-increasing security threat from non-state actors and the value of emerging technology such UAVs on both fronts. In addition to the amount of open source information available on the hunt, the familiarity of both the event and the target makes this case especially valuable for teaching intelligence to students in other disciplines. Rather than concerning themselves with giving the back-story, educators can concentrate their efforts on the meaning of intelligence and the process of cycling from requirements to finished intelligence to aid policy makers in decision making.

¹⁶ Bergen, *Manhunt*, 191-4.

¹⁷ Lowenthal, *Intelligence: From Secrets to Policy*, 14.

The events leading to the death of Osama bin Laden as presented above give educators the opportunity to teach; the roles and responsibilities of various members of the IC, the concept of collection requirements to meet the consumers' need, the various collection disciplines employed to gather information, the exploitation and processing of material into raw intelligence, the analysis and production of intelligence, the dissemination of a finished intelligence product; and finally, how feedback from policy makers turns the intelligence process into a cycle.¹⁸ In particular, it highlights how this feedback resets the collection requirements in an attempt to fill in the information gaps needed to aid policy makers in making more confident decisions. Finally, and possibly most importantly, despite several turns through the intelligence cycle, and the use of competitive analysis by both the CIA and an assembled "Red Team," this case shows how decisions as critical as entering into a foreign country to engage in a covert action are often made without a definitive certainty of the actual situation. The goal of intelligence is not to prove a situation beyond a reasonable doubt, a term familiar to students in many disciplines outside intelligence studies, but rather to provide policy makers with the best possible picture of a situation at a particular time.

¹⁸ A copy of the presentation utilized by the author to use this case to teach the intelligence cycle can be request by contacting him at cozinek@stjohns.edu