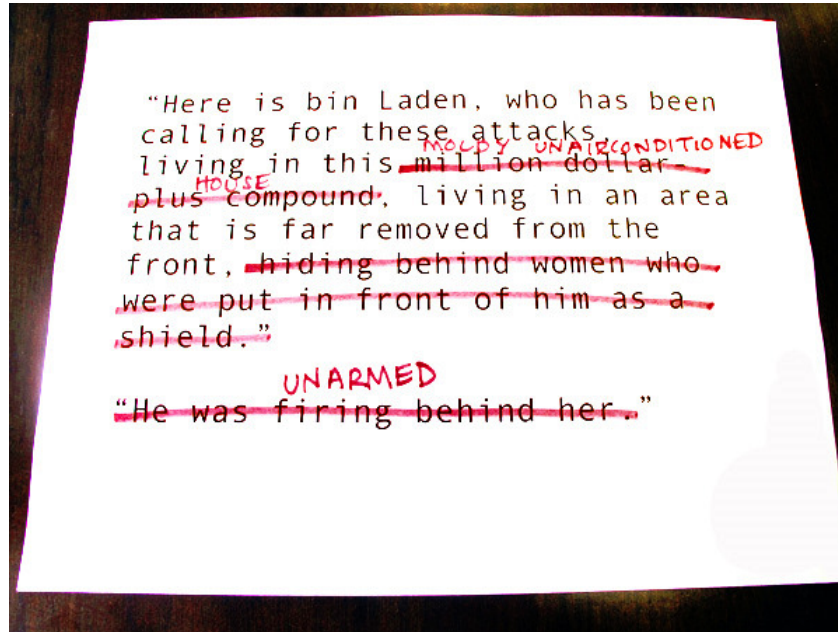


The Slippery Story of the bin Laden Kill

By Garance Franke-Ruta

The early narrative of the assault on Osama bin Laden had him using his wife as a human shield and firing from behind her. Now we learn he wasn't armed.



The White House Tuesday blamed "the fog of war" for conflicting statements in its recounting of the events surrounding the Abbottabad raid that killed Osama bin Laden, but the history of misstatements from U.S. government officials about various combat operations raises questions about whether briefers also were subjecting us to a counterterrorism strategy and not just completely confused in their initial statements.

Consider the narrative put forward by John Brennan, the assistant to the president for homeland security and counterterrorism, in a televised briefing the Associated Press [described](#) as an "uncharacteristically candid exchange with reporters."

"Thinking about that from a visual perspective, here is bin Laden, who has been calling for these attacks, living in this million dollar-plus compound, living in an area that is far removed from the front, hiding behind women who were put in front of him as a shield," Brennan told the world from the White House podium Monday. "I think it really just speaks to just how false his narrative has been over the years."

There was a firefight and the al-Qaeda leader was "killed in that firefight," Brennan said. There was a woman who was used "to shield bin Laden from the incoming fire." The woman killed in the raid was bin Laden's wife, Brennan said: "She was positioned in a way that indicated that she was being used as a shield."

And bin Laden was killed because he resisted capture. "If we had the opportunity to take him alive, we would have done that," Brennan told reporters at the briefing.

"Looking at what bin Laden was doing hiding there while he's putting other people out there to carry out attacks again just speaks to, I think, the nature of the individual he was," Brennan said.



And that's the message our counterterrorism officials would, I expect, like the world -- and especially any potential followers of al-Qaeda's anti-American ideology -- to get about our newly vanquished enemy, responsible to the single deadliest attack on American soil. The leader of the terrorist group was soft, a coward in the end who hid behind a woman's skirts like a little girl, having grown accustomed to living in luxury in a mansion. Almost everything about this narrative seemed calculated to diminish any possible perception of strength or masculinity in bin Laden's reaction to the raid by an elite team of U.S. Navy Seals -- men who are in contrast among the most mythic and valorized in our armed forces, [known for slogans](#) like "pain is just weakness leaving the body."

It wasn't just Brennan, either. Politico's Josh Gerstein [reports](#):

At a Pentagon briefing earlier in the day, a senior defense official said bin Laden used a woman as a human shield so he could fire shots. "He was firing behind her," the official said.

In another background briefing early Monday morning, a senior administration official also said bin Laden put up a fight. "He did resist the assault force. And he was killed in a firefight," the official said.

By end of day, that narrative -- much like the narrative of [Jessica Lynch's heroism in 2003](#) -- was being picked apart. Reported Politico:

"A different guy's wife was killed," a different official familiar with the briefing for TV reporters said Monday night. Bin Laden's wife was "injured but not killed," the official said.

Another official familiar with the operation said it did not appear that any woman was used as a human shield, but that the woman killed and the one injured were hurt in the crossfire. The official said he believed Brennan had mixed up the episode involving bin Laden's wife with another encounter elsewhere in the compound.

"Two women were shot here. It sounds like their fates were mixed up," said the U.S. official. "This is hours old and the full facts are still being ascertained as those involved are debriefed."

Whether bin Laden was armed when he was shot also was initially unclear:

...during a background, off-camera briefing for television reporters later Monday, a senior White House official said bin Laden was not armed when he was killed, apparently by the U.S. raid team.

Another White House official familiar with the TV briefing confirmed the change to POLITICO, adding, "I'm not aware of him having a weapon."

As for the claim that bin Laden was living in a mansion, as opposed to just a big house, all that's needed to debunk that description is [some pictures of the house](#). A *Wall Street Journal* reporter went to the scene and gave [this eye-witness account](#), concluding there was [nothing mansion-like about it](#):

The size and fortress-like nature of the compound stood out in the area, though many of the houses in Abbottabad, built by ex-servicemen and business people, also have high walls. Homes are separated by empty plots where people grow crops like potatoes and wheat.

The top two floors of bin Laden's three-story house are visible above the high perimeter walls. The house, built in 2005, appears run-down. Grass grows off a ledge below the roof. The outside walls are scarred with damp and mold. A hand-painted advertisement for Jamia Girls College, in Urdu and English, decorates one of the outside walls of the compound.

One of the awnings on an outdoor window hung down at an angle, perhaps after being damaged during the attack. Otherwise, the house stood intact, with few signs a major firefight only two days earlier.

There were no visible airconditioning units to keep residents cool through the Pakistan summer. At the back of the house was a small, private triangular garden with a towering fir tree, where bin Laden could have gotten air without being seen by outsiders.

White House spokesman Jay Carney at Tuesday's briefing provided a fresh official "narrative" of the assault, noting "What is true is that we provided a great deal of information in great haste" yesterday "and obviously some of the information came in piece by piece and is being reviewed and updated."

As the U.S. assault team entered the room where bin Laden was with his wife, she rushed the "assaulter" and was shot in the leg, Carney said. Bin Laden was also shot as he resisted the "assaulter." He "was not armed" but "resistance does not require a firearm," Carney said.

"It was a highly volatile firefight. He resisted. The U.S. personnel on the ground handled themselves with the utmost professionalism," Carney said.

The special forces involved in the attack work under the aegis of the Joint Special Operations Command, which does not routinely provide accurate public information about its activities or "secret warriors," according to *National Journal's* Marc Ambinder. He [reported](#) Monday:

Several dozen JSOC operatives have died in Pakistan over the past several years. Their names are released by the Defense Department in the usual manner, but with a cover story -- generally, they were killed in training accidents in eastern Afghanistan. That's the code.

The new "narrative" laid out by Tuesday was written by the Department of Defense, Carney said.

I don't imagine that [many Americans](#) will care whether bin Laden was armed or not when he resisted the individual who confronted him in Abbottabad. His "nature" was revealed to us long ago.

But the "narrative" of his death remains of significance to those who might seek to follow in his foot-steps. That's why its worth looking at these early reports with a skeptical eye.

Image credit: Alexis Madrigal

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