

Terminology / Well Done

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THE DEATH OF OSAMA BIN LADEN

Debunking myths about bin Laden

ANALYSIS | The slain al-Qaida leader inspired much mythology, which perpetuated in many misunderstandings about his life and background.

BY PETER BERGEN
Special to The Washington Post

Few individuals in recent history have exerted greater influence on world events than Osama bin Laden — and even fewer have inspired as much mythology. From the origins of the al-Qaida terrorist network to the devastation of Sept. 11, 2001, to the manhunt that came to an end with such drama last week, bin Laden's life has been shrouded in mysteries and misconceptions.

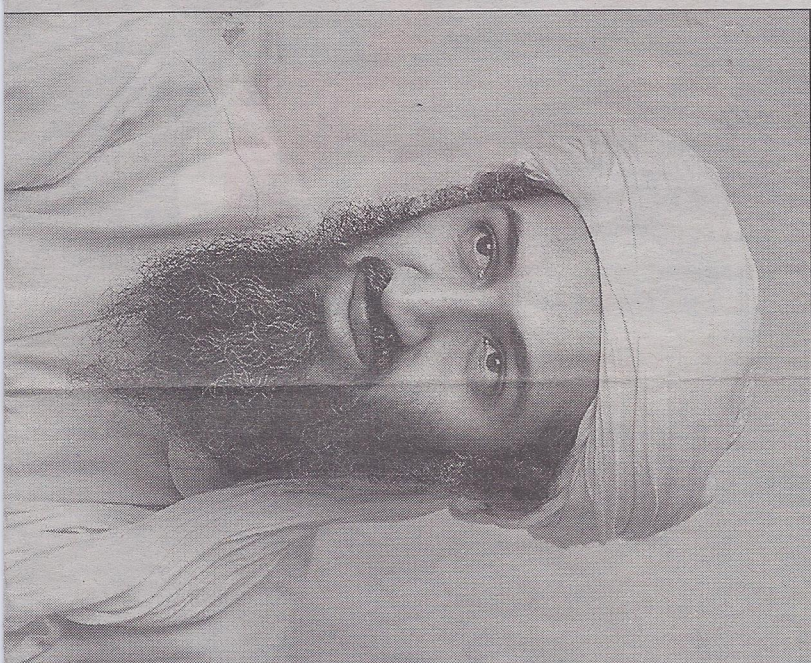
graphical "Knights Under the Banner of the Prophet," wrote, "The truth that everyone should learn is that the United States did not give one penny in aid to the [Arab] mujaheddin."

Similarly, Abu Musab al-Suri, long an associate of bin Laden's, explained in his history of the jihadist movement, "The Call to Global Islamic Resistance": "It is a big lie that the Afghan Arabs were formed with the backing of the CIA."

Very few things do al-Qaida and the CIA agree upon — except that they've never had any relationship.

2 Bin Laden attacked us because of our freedoms.

This was a common trope of President George W. Bush. Nine days after Sept. 11, Bush addressed Con-



the Prayers and give the obligatory alms-giving you shall let them go."

Of course, that is a selective reading of the Koran, but for believers, this is not a mere book — it is literally the word of God.

4 Ayman al-Zawahiri, not bin Laden, is the real brains of al-Qaida.

The conventional view is that al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian doctor and al-Qaida's longtime second in command, has been bin Laden's "brain." But in making the most important strategic shift in al-Qaida's history — identifying the United States as its key enemy, rather than Middle Eastern regimes — bin Laden brushed aside al-Zawahiri's obsessive focus on overthrowing the Egyptian government. Noman Ben-

have asserted in the past week that the death of bin Laden won't make much difference to the wider jihadist movement he helped spawn. There is some truth to that, but bal-

anced against this are the facts that al-Qaida was bin Laden's creation and he was the ultimate author of the 9/11 attacks. When new recruits joined al-Qaida, they pledged a personal oath of religious allegiance to bin Laden, rather than to the organization. Similarly, when affiliated jihadist groups have attached themselves to al-Qaida central, as al-Qaida in Iraq did in 2004, their leaders pledge their fealty to bin Laden personally.

Bin Laden is one of the few men in recent decades who truly changed the history of the world. With him gone from the scene, there

1 The CIA created Osama bin Laden