

WH STENOGRAPHER: OBAMA TOOK BIG RISK IN DECIDING TO GO AFTER BIN LADEN

There's not all that much in this Bob Woodward piece on the raid to get Osama bin Laden that hasn't already been reported generally elsewhere: just some details about the surveillance leading up to the raid (which I'll discuss below) and a cute anecdote about how they measured bin Laden's corpse to make sure it was taller than six feet.

When bin Laden's corpse was laid out, one of the Navy SEALs was asked to stretch out next to it to compare heights. The SEAL was 6 feet tall. The body was several inches taller.

After the information was relayed to Obama, he turned to his advisers and said: "We donated a \$60 million helicopter to this operation. Could we not afford to buy a tape measure?"

So it's fair, I guess, to take the article's selected emphasis as the narrative the White House wanted told. And that narrative focuses on what a risky decision it was to approve the raid.

The [phone call between Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti and a friend, from which Woodward includes direct quotes] and several other pieces of information, other officials said, gave President Obama the confidence to launch a politically risky mission to capture or kill bin Laden, a decision he took despite dissension among his key national security advisers and varying estimates of the likelihood that bin Laden was in the compound.

To communicate what a difficult decision it was, Woodward provides the competing estimates of the chances that they had really discovered OBL.

Several assessments concluded there was a 60 to 80 percent chance that bin Laden was in the compound. Michael Leiter, the head of the National Counterterrorism Center, was much more conservative. During one White House meeting, he put the probability at about 40 percent.

When a participant suggested that was a low chance of success, Leiter said, "Yes, but what we've got is 38 percent better than we have ever had before."

To back that up, Woodward provides details about the limits of the US intelligence. Of note, Woodward describes that the US was never able to positively ID OBL, in spite of the fact that a man—presumably OBL—paced around the compound for an hour or two every day. While Woodward doesn't say whether the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency was able to get a view of his face (the implication is it was not), he does say that the absence of any information about the size of windows or walls in the compound made it difficult to even measure the height of the pacing man.

So we can take two lessons from the story President Obama's top advisers leaked to Bob Woodward. First, Obama took a pretty big chance when he ordered SEALs to jump into a compound in the middle of a Pakistani garrison town. And second, if you want to evade our surveillance, keep your battery out of your cell phone until you're at least 90 minutes away from your stationary location and build that location such that any outside space offers no features to allow the NSA to get a good read on you.