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Op-Ed

Osama bin Laden's death: The millennials have a moment

The millennials' reaction to Osama bin Laden's death is characterized by a generational narcissism and a generational need to be part of history, especially when it's easy.

By Craig Fehrman

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Where were you when you found out about the death of Osama bin Laden? Or, a better question: What did you do next?

Here's what students at Yale University did. After President Obama finished his speech, they headed to the quad to celebrate. They chanted "U-S-A!" and "Yes we did!"; they waved American flags, blasted vuvuzelas, took pictures with their arms raised or wrapped around one another. They bellowed "The Star-Spangled Banner," along with stadium standbys like "We Are the Champions" and "Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye." A couple of students circled the crowd on a moped. If you hadn't known better, you would have thought the U.S had just won the World Cup.

It wasn't too long before the media certified scenes like this as an important trend, and journalists started analyzing what the scenes said about Young People Everywhere. "For 9/11 generation," USA Today claimed in a front-page headline, "a turning point."

That generation is often called the millennial generation, which includes anyone born between 1980 and 2000 — and in which I, born in 1985, am a grumpy old man. I know I'm grumpy because my generation's response to Bin Laden's death troubles me — for its opportunism, for its self-centeredness and, most of all, for its turning the death of a person, however despicable, into the reason for a very public celebration.

In that USA Today article, and in ones like it in this newspaper, the New York Times and other outlets, a narrative has quickly congealed. Because of their youth, the thinking goes, millennials experienced 9/11 in a unique and uniquely transformative way. After the tragedy, they became more serious and civic-minded. But they also became more anxious and self-aware. More than anything, millennials couldn't shake the specter of Osama bin Laden.

"We're the 9/11 generation, and we all remember it," Matthew Segal, the 25-year-old president of a nonprofit that represents millennials, told USA Today. (There's nothing more millennial than an organization representing millennials.) "Now, literally, the villain of our time was captured and killed," Segal continued. "It was clearly a defining moment for our generation."

This idea keeps getting repeated by the media and by millennials themselves — in part because it provides a defense for their shared exuberance. But several things about it don't add up.

Let's start with the media's attempts to establish Bin Laden's impact on millennials. In addition to student sound bites and expert testimony, newspapers turned to sociological evidence to support their theories. To show how 9/11 inspired millennials to pursue public service, USA Today cited the increase in applications for nonprofit jobs. (The week before, this would have been proof of our struggling economy.) To show how 9/11 left millennials in a state of perpetual distress, the newspaper cited a Pew survey claiming that 83% of young people sleep with their cellphones on. (The week before, this would have been proof of our declining attention spans.)

Notice what USA Today didn't cite: data on millennials' opinions of Bin Laden from before his death. That's because these data don't support the narrative of a generation defining itself in the shadow of the Twin Towers. Not too long ago, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation ran a series of focus groups on college students' attitudes toward 9/11. The foundation asked students to name the most important social or political event of their lifetime. The most common answer was not 9/11 — in fact, it was one of the least common — but the rise of the Internet.

Even data that support the media's theories stop well short of suggesting a millennial reboot. In 2000, for example, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute reported that the number of freshmen who considered keeping up with political affairs to be "essential" or "very important" hit an election-year low: 28%. After 9/11, that number did bounce back — but only to 39% in 2008, well below the 60%-plus who answered affirmatively in 1966, the first year of the annual poll.

These statistics, I think, capture my generation's real relationship to Bin Laden. It would be too much to say we had forgotten about him, but it also would be too much to say he haunted or defined us in any real way.

And yet, at Yale and other campuses around the country, millennials did try to claim Bin Laden's death as a turning point. One senior told me that "the only other time campus went this crazy was the night of Obama's election." It's fair to wonder why.

Several explanations come to mind, starting with the media. Do you blame the reporter or the subject for quotations like this: "We carry the weight of it more because our entire adult lives have been during a time of war" (that's one student talking to the New York Times); "We didn't know a time when you could bring shampoo on an airplane" (that's another talking to this newspaper).

But these quotations also hint at two broader explanations for the millennial reaction: a generational narcissism and a generational need to be part of history, especially when it's easy.

Let's take the last one first. Millennials love to hurl themselves in the path of history. This isn't exclusive to 9/11 — think of how they voted for Obama by record margins, then disappeared when the real work began — but it's easiest to spot in examples involving the military. In another

recent survey, conducted by American University, 12% of millennials said 9/11 made them more likely to enlist, but 26% said it made them less likely. And, without submitting to stereotypes — Keith Urbahn, the guy who broke the news of Bin Laden's death on Twitter, is both a Yale millennial (class of 2006) and a member of the Navy Reserve — it's safe to say that the millennials who do enlist don't typically come from places like Yale.

Which brings us to narcissism. Millennials on Yale's quad, at the White House and at ground zero didn't think about how their celebrations might look to the rest of the world. They didn't remember how they felt when Arab millennials celebrated the fall of the Twin Towers. They didn't seem to recognize that 9/11 affected all Americans — we've all lost some shampoo in line at the airport.

Instead of considering this, the millennials decided to join history's latest, greatest flash mob. We should all be happy that Bin Laden was brought to justice. But the millennials didn't make Bin Laden's death about an evil man, the nation he attacked or what either entity stood for. They made it about themselves.

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