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Professors examine ramifications of bin Laden's death

By Chelsea Caltuna

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Although the news of Osama bin Laden's death Sunday night invoked a celebratory mood among university community members, some experts are now questioning the response of U.S. citizens to the incident, as well as the future of international relations with the Middle East.

Political science professor Muqtedar Khan said the focus will now be on how bin Laden escaped detection during a 10-year manhunt. He said this issue could further complicate relations between the U.S. and Pakistan, where bin Laden was found living in a luxurious compound.

"At the moment there's a very heightened suspicion on both sides," Khan said. "How come this guy was living in such a palatial place, in a city where most Pakistani military people go to retire? What was he doing? Was he sitting in coffee shops and browsing the Internet at Starbucks?"

He doubts bin Laden's death will significantly impact U.S. relations with the Middle East, noting that the recent wave of pro-democracy uprisings has somewhat marginalized al-Qaida and other extremists groups.

"They're out of touch with their own people," Khan said. "Osama has now become more or less irrelevant in the Middle East."

He hopes bin Laden's death will open communication and understanding between the U.S. and the Middle East.

"I'm hoping this will, for a lot of Americans who have been hostile toward the Arab world, come as a closure, and be sort of a window for [President Barack] Obama to fix this complicated relationship further," he said.

Communication professor Ralph Begleiter, director of the university's Center for Political Communication, said he was not surprised by the student reaction to the news late Sunday night and early Monday morning. The 2008 presidential election was the turning point for many current college students, who are now more aware than ever about current events, he said.

"I don't think UD students have been politically apathetic for quite a few years," Begleiter said.

However, he said was caught off-guard by demonstrations at the university, as well as those outside the White House and around the country. He believes bin Laden's death should not have been a cause for celebration.

"Personally, I do not think this is an occasion to dance in the streets," Begleiter said. "When we as Americans dance in the streets over the death of anyone, I think it comes off in a very negative way."

Though Begleiter was not present at the campus-wide student rally that erupted after Obama's announcement of bin Laden's death, he said several students present at the demonstration expressed discomfort to him about the festive mood.

"I wish that the emotions had been a little more tempered by the reality of what 9/11 meant to a lot of people," he said. "It was very somber occasion."

Frank Farley, a psychologist at Temple University and former president of the American Psychological Association, said most current college students were approximately 10 or 11 years old at the time of the 9/11 attacks and were bombarded by images of destruction.

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"At age 10, this is a very scary thing," Farley said. "It's a very scary thing to think that your country was being invaded, and where would this happen next?"

He said bin Laden was portrayed as a villain and used as a figure to rally support for the war in Afghanistan.

"George Bush was very forceful about, 'We're going to hunt him down and kill him,'" Farley said. "Not capture him—kill him. And then Obama came along with the same kind of rhetoric."

He said with the most prominent face of terrorism gone, he hopes students who have lived in the post-9/11 world will feel less fear and anxiety.

"The terrorism issue won't go away, but this kind of archetype of terrorism has already gone away," Farley said. "I think that's kind of an uplifting thing for young people who have grown up with bin Laden."

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