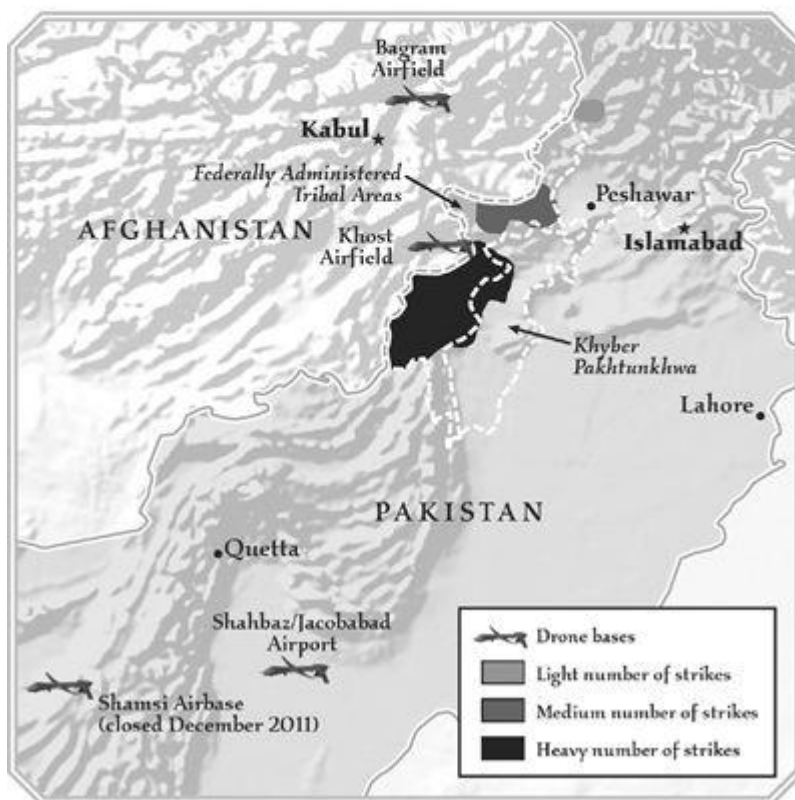


PART III  
DRONES AND CYBER



THE REMOTE-CONTROL WAR



great odds. But it was “the best evidence we’ve had since Tora Bora.”

Leiter’s own view was that it was worth waiting for stronger confirmation of bin Laden’s presence in Abbottabad. While Panetta had privately told Obama that it was impossible to collect better intelligence without risking exposure of what the United States suspected, Leiter believed others in the intelligence agencies who thought there was more that could be tried.<sup>32</sup>

As one senior administration official told me, “It was always a question of risk. Is it worth the risk? One of the arguments was that it’s not worth the risk unless we have greater certainty that bin Laden was there.... So Leiter wanted to wait and do more collection. Biden was a little bit in that camp too.”

Vice President Biden’s own account confirms his qualms. In late January 2012, Biden recalled that Obama “went around the table with all the senior people, including the chiefs of staff, and he said, ‘I have to make a decision. What is your opinion?’ ”

He started with Donilon, then Clinton, then other senior officials, including Panetta, who was closest to the details. “Every single person in that room hedged their bet except Leon Panetta,” Biden later said. “Leon said go. Everyone else said, forty-nine, fifty-one.” Obama ended the meeting, at seven p.m., saying that he would sleep on it.

“I’m not going to tell you what my decision is now—I’m going to go back and think about it some more.... But I’m going to make a decision soon.”<sup>33</sup>



JUST SIXTEEN HOURS later, at 8:20 a.m. on a Friday morning, Obama met with Donilon and Denis McDonough, Donilon’s chief deputy and Obama’s longtime aide from the Senate, in the Diplomatic Room of the White House. Obama was in a windbreaker, headed to his helicopter.

“It’s a go,” Obama said. “We are going to do the insertion. Write the orders.” For those who knew Obama best, it was a surprise. He was usually cautious to the extreme, especially when it came to inserting ground troops. He knew the evidence was still circumstantial. He also knew that he could

be betting his presidency. If bin Laden wasn't in the compound, he would be Jimmy Carter without the peanut farm.

But it was a situation he had been thinking about for a long time. During the presidential campaign, a woman from Nashville had asked the young senator from Illinois in a debate with the Republican candidate John McCain if he was willing to pursue al-Qaeda leaders inside Pakistan, even if that meant violating the sovereignty of an ally. He replied, "If we have Osama bin Laden in our sights and the Pakistani government is unable, or unwilling, to take them out, then I think that we have to act and we will take them out. We will kill bin Laden. We will crush al-Qaeda. That has to be our biggest national security priority."

Now, confronted with the reality, everything looked far murkier than it was on the campaign trail. Obama knew that the only way to figure out whether bin Laden was "in our sights" was to send commandos in to look. When they gamed it out, though, the possible reactions in Pakistan were pretty grim. In the Situation Room, Donilon, Brennan, and Obama had discussed whether crowds in Islamabad might overrun the American embassy, or whether Pakistan might break diplomatic relations with the United States—and fully sign up with the Taliban. Now it was up to Donilon—the careful lawyer and perpetual worrier—to issue the orders with rules of engagement that Obama hoped would limit the risk of any of those outcomes. By late Friday morning, the SEAL team was ready to go.

But the weather had other ideas. Later that day, Donilon had to call the president and tell him that cloud cover would force a delay. And Obama could not exactly sit in the Situation Room and guide preparations: he was scheduled to speak that Saturday evening at the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, a scripted annual event in the jammed ballroom of the Washington Hilton where reporters strain their necks to see what celebrities their competition brought to dinner. The president is supposed to laugh at his own foibles, pretend to enjoy himself, and score a few political points.

President Obama opened his speech with the words, "What a week." The audience broke into laughter, thinking he was talking about what was arguably the stupidest moment of the presidential campaign to date: Donald Trump's continued questioning about whether Obama was born in the United States. Obama had just produced his "long-form" birth certificate,

but that kept the cable television channels distracted, full of drivel. Obama used the evening to skewer Trump for his buffoonery, which dominated the headlines as the SEAL teams were getting ready to go.

The president's national security team was nothing if not disciplined that night. At the *Vanity Fair* after-party at the grand French embassy, Donilon and other key players were out until midnight, mingling with reporters. When Donilon finally excused himself, he turned to a reporter who had known him for years and said he had to get some sleep. "I've got this thing tomorrow."

In retrospect, there were a few hints. The following day, May 1, all West Wing tours were canceled so that no one would ask why the vice president or secretary of state was wandering around on a Sunday afternoon. Rather than risk having a large staff of cooks around, a staffer was sent to Costco for pita wraps and potato chips, a menu that seemed more fitting for a baseball game than a targeted assassination. Obama went to play golf that morning at Andrews Air Force Base.

While he was still on the course, his advisers gathered in one of the large conference rooms in the Situation Room complex. The room was connected via video link to Panetta at CIA headquarters in Langley and McRaven in Afghanistan. Next door, in a much smaller room, Brig. Gen. Marshall Webb, an assistant commander on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, took a seat at the end of a long table and turned on his laptop. He was looking at the only video feed in the White House showing real-time footage of the target, which was being shot by an unarmed Stealth RQ-170 drone flying more than fifteen thousand feet above Abbottabad.<sup>34</sup> Obama entered the Situation Room just after two p.m. as Panetta was going over the operation one last time.

UNDER THE COVER of a moonless and cloudless evening, two MH-60 Black Hawk helicopters lifted off from Jalalabad Airfield in eastern Afghanistan. Aboard the aircraft were two pilots and a crewman from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment known as the Night Stalkers, twenty-three Navy SEALs, a Pakistani-American translator, and a dog named Cairo, a Belgian Malinois. The SEALs aboard were in their thirties, seasoned veterans who were not likely to be trigger-happy. Cairo was there to check

for explosives and booby traps and sniff out secret rooms like the ones Saddam Hussein kept in his compounds. For the translator, however, all of this was new—he had been pulled from a desk job before the mission and had learned from the SEALs how to descend a fast rope from the helicopter.

As the Black Hawks crossed the border into Pakistan, they were not picked up by Pakistan’s radar system. “It was a little like us on Pearl Harbor Day—they had their radar off,” one of Obama’s aides told me later. “It was the first of several examples of incompetence that broke our way.” Just in case, the helicopters had been modified to mask heat, noise, and movement; the Hawks’ exteriors had sharp, flat angles and were covered with radar-dampening “skin.”<sup>35</sup>

Forty-five minutes after the Black Hawks took off, four MH-47 Chinooks left from the same runway to provide the backup that Obama had insisted on. All headed toward Abbottabad, but two peeled off, staying on the Afghan side while the other two landed on a dry riverbed in a wide, unpopulated valley in northwest Pakistan—still unbeknownst to the Pakistanis. Once on the ground, they kept their engines going so they could provide additional support if the Pakistanis scrambled fighter jets.<sup>36</sup>

Around four p.m., Panetta signaled that the Black Hawks were approaching the compound. The plan was for the national security team to stay in the large conference room and receive updates—so that there was no perception that the White House was running the operation. But that lasted only until the president said, “I need to watch this,” and walked across the hall to the smaller room, taking a seat on a collapsible chair next to Brigadier General Webb.<sup>37</sup> The rest of the group quickly followed him: Vice President Joseph Biden, Defense Secretary Gates, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Then everyone else poured in—nobody wanted to be left behind. This standing-room-only crowd soon became the most famous image of the raid.

They sat in virtual silence—Obama in an open-neck shirt and jacket, leaning forward to catch every flicker of movement. But little could be seen, and the sound transmissions were a confusing babble. Panetta narrated: “They’ve taken off ... they’ve crossed into Pakistani airspace ... they’re thirty minutes out ... they’re twenty minutes out.” Obama later said that the forty minutes that followed were the longest of his

life, except for when his infant daughter was ill with meningitis. On his right sat Biden, fingering his rosary. Crammed around the table were far less familiar faces—counterterrorism czar John Brennan; Denis McDonough, the deputy national security adviser; and one of the analysts who had been central to finding and following the courier's car.

MORE THAN SEVEN thousand miles away, the first Black Hawk was preparing to land in the courtyard of the compound in Abbottabad. Almost immediately, things began to go wrong. As the pilot descended, the downwash of his helicopter bounced off the compound's walls and shot back up, forcing the helicopter to lose its lift. McRaven said later they had planned for that possibility, but the result was that the commandos could not rappel to the roof of the main building from the chopper. "The pilot told us he struggled just to get over to the animal yard to land," said one official who later met the SEALs. He wedged his controls forward and told everyone to brace for a hard landing. But then he clipped the wall, leaving a broken rotor on one side and the main body of the chopper on the other. He bounced hard into the compound's animal pen.

The pilot of the second Black Hawk watched helplessly. He landed in a field just outside the compound. It was not exactly a textbook operation—the element of surprise was gone. In the Situation Room, visions of Desert One danced in the heads of many. Biden, remembering what Gates had said at one of the earlier meetings about Murphy's Law and helicopters—whatever can go wrong will—declared, "Murphy just showed up."

For the next couple of minutes, the president and his advisers sat in silence—waiting. If Obama saw the end of his presidency unfolding in the animal yard, he never let on. "It was silent, but people were making nervous eye contact," one participant said. "There wasn't a lot of talking as people were waiting to hear from these guys."

"The suspense was not visual; it was what McRaven was going to say," the official reported. "He would only speak in increments of minutes, so there were long stretches when you didn't really know what was going on."

After what seemed like a lifetime, McRaven's voice came across the speaker: "Everyone is accounted for." For the time being, the worst-case

scenario had been averted. McRaven, one NSC official told me, was instantly “the coolest guy in the room.”

The SEALs now had to blast their way out of the animal pen and into the main section of the compound. Using C-4 explosives, they blew the door off the metal gate of the pen and a second locked gate. The team outside the courtyard was about to blow a hole in the wall as well when one of his fellow SEALs saw there was an easier way: he opened a door. They streamed into the courtyard facing the guesthouse, then split into two teams.<sup>8</sup>

What followed could hardly be called a firefight. Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, dressed in a white *salwar kameez*, ran into the guesthouse and emerged with a gun. He was killed on the spot. The other team headed for the inner courtyard and the main house. Abu Ahmed’s brother—a stocky, mustachioed man in a cream-colored *salwar kameez*—appeared with an AK-47 at the front door of the house with his unarmed wife, Bushra.<sup>38</sup> The SEALs shot both of them dead.

Then, the teams joined forces and they started to clear the floors of the main house. After checking the ground floor, they blasted their way through a gate on the stairs that blocked off the entrance to the second floor. At the top of the landing was Khalid, bin Laden’s twenty-three-year-old son, firing an AK-47. He was quickly shot.

The lead SEAL heading up the stairs was stepping around Khalid’s body when he spotted a man peering out from behind a bedroom door. He was tall, bearded, and wearing a tan *salwar kameez* and prayer cap. It certainly looked like “Crankshaft,” the code name the JSOC had given Osama bin Laden.



WHAT FOLLOWED NEXT will be a debate for the ages. When the team opened the bedroom door, bin Laden stood in the middle of the room, unarmed but shielded by two women. One was screaming in Arabic. Jay Carney, the White House spokesman, would later tell assembled press that she “rushed the US assaulter.”<sup>39</sup> One SEAL shot her in the calf and then in a moment of selflessness, wrapped his huge arms around both of the women to shield the rest of the room in case anyone detonated suicide vests. Nothing happened

—they were lucky. The team had caught the household by surprise—no suicide vests, no booby traps. It seemed that after six years of living inside the compound, bin Laden never expected the Americans to break down his door.

Within milliseconds, another shot was fired. A 5.56mm bullet hit bin Laden in the chest. In quick succession, a second shot hit his head above the left eye. As bin Laden collapsed onto the floor, the women screamed. The SEAL reported into his radio, “For God and country—Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo ... Geronimo EKIA.”<sup>[40](#)</sup>

McRaven relayed the message to the Situation Room. In approximately eighteen minutes, bin Laden had been found and killed. President Obama was self-contained to the extreme: “We got him,” was all he said.<sup>[41](#)</sup>

The SEALs still had much to exploit, and not much time. The helicopters and firefight had woken the neighborhood, and the Americans feared it would not be long before the Pakistani forces figured out what was happening. Without realizing the significance of what was under way, a consultant who was taking a break in Abbottabad began tweeting the events live. “Helicopter hovering above Abbottabad at 1AM (is a rare event),” he wrote. Then, “A huge window shaking bang here in Abbottabad Cantt. I hope its not the start of something nasty :-S.”<sup>[42](#)</sup> Neighbors approached the mysterious compound; the “translator” who had been posted outside in a *salwar kameez* and a flak jacket underneath pretended he was a plainclothes policeman. “Go back to your houses,” he said in Pashto. “There is a security operation under way.”<sup>[43](#)</sup>

The team had to move quickly. One group gathered the surviving women and fifteen children who were living in the compound. The SEALs bound their hands with flex cuffs and herded them to a safe place against the exterior wall facing the remaining Black Hawk. The translator questioned them but gained minimal new information.

Two other members of the team executed the much-rehearsed plan for bin Laden’s body. A medic from the support Chinook that had been scrambled in after the crash of the Black Hawk took two bone-marrow samples, which were shipped out in separate helicopters so that if disaster struck, the administration could still prove they got bin Laden.



Meanwhile, a third group of commandos swept up a huge trove of the CDs, DVDs, flash drives, and hard drives pried from bin Laden's computers. These were the documents—equal to “a small college library,” Donilon later said—that told the story of an ailing, isolated bin Laden who struggled to get his junior commanders to execute orders, fretted that his organization had a growing public-relations problem, and took solace watching videos of himself. They were immediately leaked by the Obama administration to portray bin Laden as a diminished, sad figure—the washed-up jihadi. As Leiter later said to me, “Bin Laden really wasn't the CEO of a multinational corporation. He was the slightly out-of-touch coordinator of a broad, dysfunctional family who were frankly operating more on their own agendas than his agenda.”<sup>44</sup>

The immediate problem was to make sure that the stealth helicopter was not left in a condition where it could be useful to the Pakistanis—or, more to the point, their friends in Beijing. The pilot of the downed helicopter smashed up the instrument panel and radio with a hammer, and then, using explosives with extra C-4 charges, the team blew up the helicopter, much to the astonishment of the handcuffed women and children.<sup>44</sup> After thirty-eight minutes, with no American casualties and a dead Osama bin Laden, SEAL Team Six headed back toward Afghanistan, stopping briefly to refuel with the other Chinook before crossing the border. “We don't think the Paks saw us until we were over the border again,” one American official told me later. The whole process—in and out of the country—had lasted about three and a half hours, and the Pakistanis had still not scrambled any forces.

McRaven and the CIA station chief met the team on the tarmac at the Jalalabad Airfield. Photos were taken of bin Laden. Because no one had a tape measure, a six-foot SEAL had to lie next to his body to assess his height. The absence of something quite that basic led Obama to give McRaven a plaque with a tape measure on it as thanks for the operation.<sup>45</sup>

Later the administration said it had been fully prepared to arrest bin Laden rather than kill him, had he not “resisted.” And in fact, there were two specialist teams on standby on a naval ship—one to bury his body at sea, and one composed of lawyers, interrogators, and translators in case he was captured alive.<sup>46</sup> But that seemed more a cover story than reality. Enormous planning had gone into the burial at sea to make sure that there

was no grave, like the one in Tikrit for Saddam Hussein, which has become a pilgrimage destination for admirers. And no one in the administration wanted to make bin Laden the most famous occupant of Gitmo and turn the question of when, and how, to put him on trial into a cable television soap opera.

But some formalities had to be observed. John Brennan, the former station chief in Riyadh, made a courtesy call to one of his friends in the House of Saud. Did the Saudi government have any interest in taking the body of the most infamous of the famed bin Laden family? Or should the United States proceed with its plan to give him a Muslim burial at sea? The question answered itself.

“Your plan sounds like a good one,” the Saudi replied.<sup>47</sup>

By then bin Laden’s body was already on a V-22 Osprey headed to the USS *Carl Vinson*, a thousand-foot-long nuclear-powered aircraft carrier sailing in the Arabian Sea, off the Pakistani coast.<sup>48</sup> Brennan would later say that after consulting with Islamic experts, “The disposal of—the burial of bin Laden’s remains was done in strict conformance with Islamic precepts and practices.”<sup>49</sup> Osama bin Laden’s body was washed, wrapped in a white sheet, and placed in a weighted bag. The White House later described a ceremony lasting fifty minutes, in which a military officer read prepared religious remarks, translated into Arabic by a native speaker. Then, according to the official account, “the body was placed on [a] prepared flat board, tipped up, and the deceased body eased into the sea.”<sup>50</sup>

The man who had terrorized America for a generation was gone. President Obama alone had made the risky decision to conduct the raid—imagine the reaction if the result was a dead Dubai prince. His decision and its result cemented his national security credentials. It also insulated him from the critique that he, and his party, is soft on terrorism; when one of the Republican presidential hopefuls charged him with a policy of appeasement, Obama shot back, “Ask Osama bin Laden and the twenty-two out of thirty top al-Qaeda leaders who’ve been taken off the field whether I engage in appeasement.”

But the cost was high: the problems with Pakistan were just beginning.

In the endless debates inside the White House about how the Pakistanis would react to the bin Laden raid, the administration got just about every

prediction wrong.

There was no attack on the American embassy in Islamabad. Some in the Situation Room guessed that the Pakistanis would sever diplomatic relations with the United States. That didn't happen either.

But perhaps the most important thing that the administration got wrong was the source of Pakistan's anger—and that would come to dominate the rest of Obama's dealings with the country. "We thought that Pakistan would be embarrassed because we discovered and killed bin Laden in a garrison town, the closest thing they have to West Point, and a short drive from the capital," one senior American official told me later. "We were half right: they were embarrassed, but it didn't have anything to do with bin Laden. It had to do with the fact that we were able to fly in and out, undetected, for a three-and-a-half-hour operation." And the ramifications of that ugly realization were just beginning.

AT FIRST, the shock in Pakistan was so great that it looked like Obama might get off easy. After hesitating a bit to work their way through their prepared script of calls—"Donilon was nervous," one participant recalled, "and wanted to go through what we were going to say one more time"—the outreach to the Pakistanis began.

"We could call this a joint operation," Admiral Mullen told his counterpart, General Kayani, in the first call. But Kayani demurred, offering a congratulations and urging Mullen to announce the news immediately so that the Pakistani government could begin managing the story at home. Kayani told Mullen, "You gotta get this out. The sun's going to come up here in a couple of hours, and I'm going to have a very hard time explaining this."

The sovereignty breach would be a huge issue, Kayani predicted, but if the word got out fast "it would be easier for us to explain it to our people if they know it's bin Laden." In other words, don't let the conspiracy theories set in; don't let them wonder why there are black helicopters in the night. When Obama called President Zardari, the Pakistani president was "effusive in his congratulations," one official told me, and began recalling the moment of terror when his wife, Benazir Bhutto, was assassinated. But as news of the raid filtered through the almost feudal Pakistani elite,

attitudes changed. Never had the military, the strongest institution in the country, been so humiliated since it lost three wars to India. Many turned on Kayani, saying this is what he got for casting his lot with the Americans. “The officer corps was pissed,” one of Obama’s top aides said to me.

And they got even more pissed as the Americans, who had been so disciplined in the months leading up to the raid, made the situation worse with a series of triumphalist-sounding comments. There was a huge and understandable hunger among the media for a play-by-play of the hunt for, and demise of, the world’s most wanted man. As day broke in a stunned Washington, John Brennan was rolled out in the White House press room to describe events that he only understood in fragmentary detail—much of it, as it turned out, suffered from the inevitable wild inaccuracy of first reports. And so a White House that had conducted the raid itself with enormous discipline began to offer contradictory, uncoordinated descriptions of how it went down.<sup>51</sup>

Brennan gave the impression that bin Laden was armed and died in a firefight; almost as soon as the seventy-nine SEALs involved were debriefed, the world learned that only Abu Ahmed al-Kuwaiti, the courier, got off a shot. Brennan said bin Laden used a woman as a human shield; it turned out she actually rushed the SEALs. Brennan described the al-Qaeda leader as living a luxurious lifestyle in his Abbottabad villa. While he lived better than many in Pakistan, the pictures of his apartment actually revealed something closer to squalor. At the Pentagon, top officers fumed at Brennan’s blow-by-blow description of how the SEALs operated; they believed that the former CIA officer had given away operational secrets never shared outside the tribe. (In fact, it appears no real secrets were divulged.) No one was angrier than Mullen himself, who still fumed about that news conference nearly a year later.

The president’s spokesman later blamed these mistakes on the “fog of war,” as the White House responded in too much haste while “information came in piece by piece.”<sup>52</sup> That was understandable, but the reaction in Pakistan grew uglier and uglier with every revelation of how long the operation had been planned and how the country’s leadership was deliberately kept in the dark. The White House pushed back, arguing that the real violation of Pakistan’s sovereignty was committed by bin Laden,

who ran his terror syndicate from inside the country for nearly a decade. But it was to no avail. By Wednesday of that week, Gates went to see Donilon, offering up a barbed assessment of how the White House had handled the aftermath of the raid.

“I have a new strategic communications approach to recommend,” Gates said in his trademark droll tones, according to an account later provided by his colleagues.

What was that, Donilon asked?

“Shut the fuck up,” the defense secretary said.<sup>a</sup>

IT WAS GOOD advice, perhaps, but a bit late. With every new detail—how long the SEALs were inside Pakistan, how they refueled on Pakistani territory without being detected—the television commentators in Islamabad stoked the public anger. By the Friday after the raid, with emotions overflowing, the leaders of the two most powerful institutions in Pakistan—the military and the ISI—were called to their parliament for a humiliating dressing down by Pakistan’s politicians, a rare event in a country where no civilian leader has ever ruled without being overthrown by the military.

For nearly eleven hours, Kayani and his successor at the head of the ISI, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Shuja Pasha, faced a barrage of questions from more than four hundred members of the parliament as to how the American forces had entered Pakistani territory undetected, operated unimpeded, and left unchallenged. Kayani and his generals were ready with a PowerPoint presentation that included photographs of the members of al-Qaeda captured by the ISI since 9/11, to make the point that Pakistan had been deeply involved in the fight against al-Qaeda. But that wasn’t the issue—they were clueless about this operation.<sup>53</sup>

To spare Kayani the embarrassment, Pasha blamed an “intelligence failure” to detect the Americans. To any American who tuned in, it had the faint whiff of what American admirals said when they had to explain why the radar was off at Pearl Harbor, or what Bush administration officials told the 9/11 Commission about how America had been caught unawares that September morning.

Pasha said he had twice offered to resign, and twice been refused by Kayani. Then he gave the parliament what it hungered for: a rousing

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