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The search for Osama bin Laden was once at the forefront of the war on terror, but lately capturing him has become an afterthought.

President Bush has curtailed the global manhunt for bin Laden, yet is sticking doggedly to our costly occupation of Iraq, even though he recently admitted that Saddam Hussein had "nothing" to do with Sept. 11.

As Hussein faces a likely death sentence, a pared-back search for bin Laden continues without Alec Station, the elite CIA unit charged with tracking him that was shut down in July.

To be sure, our Big Noddy communications monitoring systems still listen for Osama's voice, and some military task forces known only by three-digit numbers continue the search for all "high-value targets." But the question remains: Why should the real perpetrator of the 2001 attacks on America -- and of outrages against others in many countries ever since -- have to face only a diminished dragnet?

The official government answer is that al Qaeda has become a much more dispersed and distributed network since being driven out of Afghanistan by American forces late in 2001. This reduces the importance of bin Laden to the day-to-day operations of the far-flung network he spawned, and suggests instead a focus on tracking individual terrorist nodes and cells all over the world.

There is a certain logic to this. Early in the war on terrorism, Washington rejected the idea that we should cast our manhunt more broadly, rolling up al Qaeda operatives and allies instead of focusing primarily on one man. A pity it has taken officialdom nearly five years to learn this basic lesson in how to fight a network, as al Qaeda and its affiliates have used this grace period to get back on their feet and mount strikes across a swath of the world from Britain to Bombay.

Beyond their befuddlement in fighting a new kind of adversary, American man hunters are also constrained by what they think they do know. That is, most counterterrorism experts say that bin Laden is being sheltered and moved about in Waziristan, a traditional tribal land along the mountainous Afghan-Pakistani border.

This belief is held, in part, because of intercepts of bin Laden's voice on radio transmissions during the battle at Tora Bora nearly five years ago, which was fought right on the edge of Waziristan. Further, exterior film footage shot since then by al Qaeda and released through Al-Jazeera shows bin Laden and his comrade-in-arms Ayman al-Zawahiri walking openly together in mountainous terrain that looks like Waziristan.

These films -- the latest made quite recently, judging by the topics bin Laden addresses -- confirm that the terrorist leader has not altered his appearance, reinforcing the notion he has sought shelter among the locals, many of whom revere him. If bin Laden were actually resettled somewhere else, or roved the world like a terrorist Flying Dutchman, he would almost certainly have done something about his beard, trimming it or shaving it off. But no, we see him again and again, as hirsute as ever. In a marketing sense, it's a big part of his "brand."
It is also thought that bin Laden brought many al Qaeda fighters out of Tora Bora with him, and that they have generally enjoyed the hospitality of the local tribes -- who have never, from the days of Alexander the Great to the present, come under direct rule by outsiders. So in this harsh, remote environment, bin Laden may move about like the elusive Chechen rebel leader Shamil in Tolstoy’s short story "The Raid," protected by concentric rings of hundreds of defenders.

Although Waziristan is not really under the central control of Pakistan’s government, it is believed that any American military operations undertaken there might so outrage the Pakistani public that a revolution would ensue, toppling President Pervez Musharraf, our friendly dictator in Islamabad. This concern is confirmed every time the Pakistani military itself tries to make an incursion there and meets with fierce resistance.

And when, some months back, an American missile strike aimed at al-Zawahiri missed him and killed many innocents -- along with perhaps a few al Qaeda operatives -- the outrage expressed throughout Pakistan further hammered home the point that we’re playing with fire by launching strikes in Waziristan.

In this respect, it makes sense for bin Laden to remain in the tribal zone, as his continued presence there might yet provoke an American action that would allow those sympathetic to his cause the chance to come to power in a nuclear-armed Islamic country. And even if there is no al Qaeda-friendly coup d’etat in Pakistan, there are still the benefits of possessing a haven from which to harass Western forces in Afghanistan. There is also the continuing reminder that the American call to democratize the Muslim world is a selective one that doesn’t apply to benighted peoples ruled by Washington-friendly authoritarians.

So the answer to the question, "Where's Osama?" is that we think we know roughly where he is but, for all our advanced technology, we have little ability to home in on his specific location. And any military actions we might take to flush him out or track him down would cause huge ripples in Pakistan, a country whose continuing stability is crucial to our cause.

The situation as described clearly demands a shift in our strategy, with two ideas coming quickly to the fore. First, we should start reducing the bounty on bin Laden, dropping it from the current $25 million by, say, $5 million per month. This action would be consistent with the closing of Alec Station, making the point that bin Laden is simply less important than he used to be.

It would also engage the psychological principle of "scarcity," which holds that people will be impelled to act before an opportunity disappears. Those familiar with retail closeout sales or limited-time offers know that they spur shoppers. Closing out the bin Laden bounty may impel a "buyer" to step forward. If not, we will lose little when the reward goes away, as it in some respects simply shores up bin Laden’s status, which is then shared around with all those who protect him.

A second approach to going after bin Laden would be to create a terror cell that looks like al Qaeda, give it a verifiable combat "legend" in the field, and eventually (after some months) send it over into Waziristan to rest and refit. Perhaps the first time over it wouldn't find bin Laden. Perhaps not the second. But at some point it would come into high-level contact, plant a beacon to guide an air strike, then head out to be extracted by helicopter.

If all this sounds a bit far-fetched, consider the British use of "pseudo gangs" half a century ago -- comprised of detainees who had been "turned" -- that looked and acted like Mau Mau terrorists, and which were highly effective in defeating that insurgency in Kenya. More recently, the Algerian government used a similar method to infiltrate and destroy the Armed Islamic Group, which had been terrorizing their country.

So there are ways to forge ahead in the war on terrorism that offer us a chance to take the fight directly to those who have struck at us. Nearly five years out from Sept. 11, wouldn't it be a nice change of pace to stop fighting those who had nothing to do with the attacks on America, and instead go more single-mindedly after those who did?