

# The Abbottabad Documents: This is what the politicization of intelligence looks like.

Stephen Hayes writes in the [\*Weekly Standard\*](#):



On the penultimate day of the Obama administration, less than 24 hours before the president would vacate the White House, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper issued a press release meant to put to rest what had been a pesky issue for his office. “Closing the Book on Bin Laden: Intelligence Community Releases Final Abbottabad Documents,” the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) announced. “Today marks the end of a two-and-a-half-year effort to declassify several hundred documents recovered in the raid on Osama bin Laden’s Abbottabad, Pakistan, compound in May 2011.” Accompanying the press release were 49 documents captured during the raid, bringing the total number of documents made public to 571.

For anyone who had paid even casual attention to the long-running debate over the Abbottabad documents—a group that doesn't include many journalists—the ODNI announcement was cause for a chuckle. Closing the book on Osama bin Laden? The final Abbottabad documents?

In the heady days immediately after the May 2 Abbottabad raid, President Obama's national security adviser, Tom Donilon, had described the intelligence haul brought back from Pakistan by the Navy SEALs and CIA operatives as extensive enough to fill a "small college library." A senior military intelligence official who briefed reporters at the Pentagon on May 7, 2011, said: "As a result of the raid, we've acquired the single largest collection of senior terrorist materials ever."

Why would ODNI think it could get away with such an aggressive lie? Why would officials there believe that they wouldn't be asked to reconcile the fact that they were releasing just 571 documents with the repeated pronouncements that the Abbottabad collection was the largest haul of terrorist intelligence ever?

The answer: The self-proclaimed "most transparent administration in history" had spent more than five years misleading the American people about the threat from al Qaeda and its offshoots and had paid very little price for having done so. Republicans volubly disputed the president's more laughable claims—the attack on the Benghazi compound was just a protest gone bad, al Qaeda was on the run, ISIS was the terrorist junior varsity—but the establishment media, certain that Obama's predecessor had consistently exaggerated the threat, showed little interest in challenging Obama or the intelligence agencies that often supported his spurious case.

In this context, ODNI's bet wasn't a crazy one. No one outside of a small group of terrorism researchers and intelligence professionals had paid much attention to the fate of the bin Laden documents. The likelihood that these ODNI claims would

get much scrutiny in the middle of the frenzy that accompanies a presidential transition was low. ODNI dismissively swatted away questions about the absurd claims in the release with absurd claims about the document collection itself: The unreleased documents weren't interesting or important, just terrorist trash of little interest to anyone. The documents being withheld would do little to enhance our understanding of al Qaeda or the jihadist threat more generally, they said.

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In the spring of 2012, with the Republican presidential primaries nearing an end and shortly before the first anniversary of the successful raid on bin Laden's compound, Obama's National Security Council hand-picked 17 documents to be provided to the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point for analysis. (Obama's NSC would later hold back two of those documents. One of them, laying out the deep ties between the Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda leadership, would complicate Obama administration efforts to launch negotiations with the Taliban, according to an explanation the NSC's Doug Lute offered to West Point.) The West Point documents were shared with Obama-friendly journalists. Their conclusion was the only one possible, given the documents they were provided: At the time of his death, Osama bin Laden was frustrated and isolated, a relatively powerless leader of a dying organization. In the summer and fall of 2012, Obama would use this theme as the main national security rationale for his reelection: Al Qaeda was alternately "on the run" or "decimated" or "on the path to defeat."

"Thanks to the service and sacrifice of our brave men and women in uniform, the war in Iraq is over. The war in Afghanistan is winding down. Al Qaeda has been decimated. Osama bin Laden is dead," Obama said in Green Bay, Wis., on November 1, five days before his reelection.

Even the deadly attack two months earlier in Benghazi, conducted by jihadist groups with extensive ties to al Qaeda, didn't cause Obama to recalibrate his narrative. The president would tout the imminent demise of al Qaeda more than two dozen times between those attacks and Election Day.

In the weeks following the bin Laden raid, the documents went through an immediate interagency triage for actionable intelligence. That initial scrub yielded valuable information that led to the capture and killing of key al Qaeda associates. But then the documents sat, largely untouched, for months at a time. From that point on, the Obama administration's interest in the Abbottabad documents didn't extend much beyond their public relations implications. Simply put, a fuller release of the cache would have fatally undermined the message that al Qaeda had been decimated and that the war on terror was being reduced to a few mopping-up exercises.

As a result, some of the documents were never translated. Relevant intelligence agencies engaged in a protracted fight about who could have access to the information. The Defense Intelligence Agency was repeatedly denied full access by the CIA, which had "executive authority" over the collection and which was run throughout much of the bureaucratic infighting by John Brennan, an Obama crony who had predicted in April 2012 that al Qaeda would meet its demise by the end of the decade.

The U.S. intelligence community never conducted a full-scale review of its own intelligence collection on al Qaeda using the Abbottabad documents. "There was never any kind of evaluation of our work on al Qaeda based on the documents," says one senior U.S. intelligence official involved with the documents. Obtaining the documents presented an opportunity to check what the intelligence community thought it knew about al Qaeda and its leaders against what actually happened. Who were our good sources? Who was providing misinformation? Was there

a source who had better visibility into leadership decisionmaking than we'd assessed? Someone we relied on who wasn't as important as we'd thought? In some important respects, the bin Laden documents were like the answer key to a test you'd taken. It's telling that many in the intelligence community didn't want to review their work or revisit their conclusions.

After Obama's reelection, the administration repeatedly shut down requests from Republican lawmakers, led by Rep. Devin Nunes, for access to the documents. Then the 2014 Intelligence Authorization Act turned those requests into a demand backed by law. That's the only reason the 571 documents were released. And that's where matters stood through the early months of the Trump administration.

No more. On Wednesday, November 1, CIA director Mike Pompeo announced the release of "nearly 470,000 additional files" from the Abbottabad raid. From 571 to 470,000: The "most transparent administration in history," you might say, has just been trumped, by nearly three orders of magnitude.

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