

THE HUNT FOR BIN LADEN

90-min investigative documentary, HDCAM, 2012

Brook Lapping Productions in co-production with gebrueder beetz filmproduktion
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***The Hunt for Bin Laden* is the inside story of the greatest manhunt in US history. It spans decades, sparks wars, and defines presidencies.**

Now, with interviews with those who were in the center of the action or in charge of the pursuit and the war on terror during three administrations, this film tells the definitive story of the twenty-year cat and mouse game, and the attempts to bring the world's most notorious terrorist to justice.

For the first time, America's intelligence chiefs, politicians, military leaders and diplomats come together in this psychological thriller to tell their story. Some of the best minds in the US government recall how they raced against time, to learn the methods of their enemy in an attempt to prevent attacks which could cause even more devastating losses.

It is the all-new story of political intrigue at the highest level of government, of bitter turf wars between different agencies, Presidents and the military.

The film uses rare and startling archive material, directly relevant to every specific moment in the story. This immersive approach takes the viewer on a journey from the mountain caves of bin Laden's Afghan hideout, through the corridors of power in Washington, to crime scene investigations of the terrorists attacks carried out by bin Laden around the world. The viewer will witness some of the defining moments of the 21st century to date: the raid at Abbottabad, the attacks on US Embassies in Africa, the USS Cole, and the war in Afghanistan, plus the chilling moment when the Twin Towers fell at the hands of 19 hijackers.

Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense:

"All the intelligence agencies focused on Al Qaeda and they focused on Bin Laden. And, and the task was to find him. And of course his task was to not be found."

The Story

We begin in the late 1980s, when Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden first establishes his terrorist organisation, al Qaeda or "The Base", in the mountain fastness of Afghanistan. There, he began to put together his plans to attacks the "Crusaders" in retribution for America's building of military bases in Saudi Arabia and for Israel's policies against the Palestinians.

Noman Benotman, a former Libyan freedom fighter, knew Bin Laden in Afghanistan:

“He was one of the masters you know in the Islamic movement in terms of branding. The most powerful tool he had it was the message itself.”

Sudan

Slowly, from his safe haven in Sudan, he develops a reputation as a notorious terrorist financier, encouraging and bankrolling as many terrorist activities as he can.

In the early nineties, attacks begin to emerge: the World Trade Center in New York, the Black Hawk Down Affair in Somalia, and other operations in Saudi Arabia. All will eventually be connected to Bin Laden and his vast riches.

Tim Carney, US Ambassador to Sudan:

“Did I see a missed opportunity in that the US could not figure out how to take control of Bin Laden? Yes of course I do. It was a huge missed opportunity.”

Richard Clarke, White House Counter-Terrorism Czar until 2001:

“The world’s only remaining super power didn’t have the ability to get one guy.”

Afghanistan

After being forced out of Sudan, bin Laden sets his base back in Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda as an organisation begins to sharpen its rhetoric and goals. He declares war on the United States. They hatch a succession of plans to apprehend him, but none are ever sanctioned. For President Clinton, it’s too risky: the cost of incurring civilian casualties would be too dear.

Richard Clarke, White House Counter-Terrorism Czar until 2001:

“They came up with a sort of goofy plan for a frontal assault on bin Laden’s walled compound – a walled compound that was defended by tanks and machine guns.”

Intelligence is patchy: whenever they think they know where is, the authorities hesitate. Before they can act he moves on, outwitting them at every turn.

Gary Schroen, CIA:

“I thought now this is a chance, we really have a chance to kill this guy. I’m convinced that he was there and we missed a good opportunity.”

Jack Cloonan, FBI:

“Does Bin Laden wear disguises, yes. Does Bin Laden ever dress as a woman, yes”

Soon, attacks escalate: al Qaeda strikes US embassies in east Africa in 1998, killing hundreds and wounding thousands. This is an unprecedented strike against the US. But retaliating against Bin Laden in Afghanistan is as hard as it gets.

Cruise missile strikes on bin Laden's compounds fail to have any effect. The US indicts bin Laden for his crimes, but still doesn't take him out. Meanwhile bin Laden, now Public Enemy Number One, continues to attack. His next target: the USS Cole. It is a direct strike at the US military, but again the response is inadequate.

Despite the escalating attacks, US top intelligence agencies are stuck in the midst of a turf war. Key information is withheld.

Mark Rossini, FBI:

"I had passed CIA information to the FBI without authorisation. And they wanted to remove me from the building that moment, take me, escort me out of the building, take my clearances away and have me taken out of the building."

Ali Soufan, FBI:

"If information was shared with the FBI team investigation the USS COLE, nine eleven could have been intercepted on an early stage."

With American intelligence agencies in a mess, bin Laden continues to plot. He prepares for his largest operation to date.

9/11

President Bush must respond decisively to the 9/11 attacks. But the military is lagging behind.

Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense:

"There was no plan really for Al Qaeda. The military chiefs were asked for a quick set of ideas and they basically were the same set of ideas that had been used during the Clinton administration."

The US now declares all-out war on bin Laden and Afghanistan. Within three weeks, senior CIA agents and Special Forces commanders are sent to Afghanistan to hunt down Bin Laden once and for all.

Gary Schroen, one of the CIA's point men in the hunt for Bin Laden and the first CIA agent into Afghanistan after 9/11:

"I was told to find Bin Laden, kill him and cut off his head, put it on dry ice and ship it back to Washington, to show the President."

As the caves of Tora Bora begin to crumble, bin Laden makes his will, and records a final video message. CIA agents request more troops to finish the job, but they are turned down. Bin Laden slips through the mountains and into Pakistan. He is gone.

Gary Berntsen, Chief CIA agent at Tora Bora:

We could have ended it then. The Hunt for Bin Laden would have ended in Tora Bora had we had just eight hundred rangers.

The Dead Years

Those who missed bin Laden at Tora Bora had no idea that they would not come close to bin Laden again for another decade.

Michael Hayden. Former Director, CIA:

“Look when I say the trail was cold I really mean it, the trail was cold.”

Following bin Laden’s disappearance, the war in Afghanistan continues apace. But few new leads are forthcoming.

Fran Townsend, president Bush Counter-Terrorism Adviser:

“The President got to the point at every single intelligence briefing the first question was, “Where is Bin Laden and what are we doing to find him?”

Donald Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense:

“The press kept asking that question over and over again, they’d say are you close? Now if you’re trying to catch a chicken in the barnyard and you’re running after it are you close? Not until you’ve caught it and we haven’t.”

As energies are diverted from Afghanistan to the war in Iraq, efforts to hunt bin Laden take a back seat. Late in 2004 CIA’s dedicated bin Laden unit, which has been tracking bin Laden for more than 10-years, will be closed down.

But bin Laden, and the threat from al Qaeda, haunts those in charge of preventing another attack. While on the run, he continues to release video messages to the world. He even plays politics with the US electorate.

Fran Townsend, president Bush Counter-Terrorism Adviser:

“He’s standing at a podium in gold robes, looking the statesman and threatening the United States if they re-elect President Bush. The notion that Bin Laden would have the hubris to try and intimidate the American electorate and their choice in the election was – does not begin to get to it. And of course it was a horrible challenge to have to confront that week before the election.”

Still, intelligence chiefs have no leads on bin Laden’s whereabouts

Abbottabad

In August 2010, credible intelligence emerges. The CIA think they have found his hideout.

Michael Hayden. Former Director, CIA:

“This was painstakingly built up over the course of years and as the agency narrowed it down and got to that house and then built up both the agencies and the president’s confidence that that was Bin Laden, if it wasn’t Bin Laden it was somebody really important and you ought to take the chance operationally and politically, to go after the target.”

After 15 years of chasing bin Laden, the President's top counter-terrorism had a hunch his old colleagues in the CIA were on the right track.

John Brennan, President Obama's counter-terrorism adviser:

"We dug down in to the – the material very intensely, and over the next six months or so, the picture became clearer. More and more, it pointed to it being Bin Laden, there was nothing that was inconsistent with the thesis that it is in fact, a place where Bin Laden was."

But any meeting involving bin Laden's name is now highly classified. Slowly, White House staffers become more involved. Their job: prevent a leak at all costs.

White House insiders, alongside Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, take us inside the final mission to capture America's most wanted criminal, explaining how they manage to keep the mission secret in classified briefings for months on end.

John Brennan, President Obama's counter-terrorism adviser:

I remember when we got the word that we did get him, there wasn't any jubilation, or hand slapping whatever. It was like finally, this country was able to get the person who caused such devastation, not just the United States, but also the world. It was justice that finally had come to the person as well as to all the victims and their families.

The hunt for bin Laden has taken 20 years, 3 presidents, countless deaths and millions of dollars. President Barak Obama says 'Justice has been done'. But for intelligence chiefs, the question remains: if they had carried out their plans to capture him in the late 1990's, could the need for this rough justice have been avoided altogether?

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Partners: itv UK, Smithsonian Channel, NHK, ZDF/arte, BBC
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