Book review: Hunt for Bin Laden is a page-turner

Article by: GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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In the summer of 2010, CIA officials briefed President Obama about a compound just outside Abbottabad, Pakistan, owned by an Al-Qaeda courier, "Ahmed the Kuwaiti." Eight times larger than other residences in the neighborhood, the compound was surrounded by high walls, topped by barbed wire, had windows made of reflective glass, no Internet or phone connections, and trash was burned on-site. No member of the large family living on the third floor ever left the grounds. The CIA thought it might be the hideout of Osama bin Laden.

For months, experts gathered intelligence and developed options for an attack on the compound. In "The Finish: The Killing of Osama bin Laden" (Atlantic Monthly Press, 264 pages, $26), Mark Bowden, a former reporter for the Philadelphia Inquirer and author of "Black Hawk Down," draws on interviews with Obama, national security, CIA and White House staffers to provide an informative, on-the-ground account of the mission.

Adept at maintaining suspense even when the outcome is widely known, Bowden also makes judicious assessments of how much credit Obama deserves -- and the impact of the assassination on Al-Qaeda.

Since 9/11, Bowden reveals, the United States has developed effective tools to destroy a terrorist network in an approach called "F3EAD" (Find, Fix, Finish, Exploit, Analyze, Disseminate). The most important decision made by Obama, he suggests, was whether to take out the whole compound with a drone strike; use a small guided missile to kill the tall man, dubbed "The Pacer," as he took his daily constitutional; or give the green light to "the ground option."

Acutely aware that any unilateral action would infuriate the Pakistani government, the president ordered a raid by Navy SEALs. A raid, he thought, would minimize civilian casualties, and, even more important, was the only option that could verify that Bin Laden had been killed. The compound, moreover, might contain a trove of information that would assist the United States in finishing off Al-Qaeda.

Although Bowden chides the White House for "massaging the facts" to magnify Obama's role, he observes that the effort paled in comparison with President George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" appearance on the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003. And Bowden credits Obama for making the attempt to find Bin Laden a high priority -- and supervising the planning and execution of the mission.

Before his death, Bowden concludes, Bin Laden was already out of touch, sending messages to rally his followers to "run headlong into withering fire" with plans that were "wildly unrealistic, even screwy." Undercut by its own tactics, and
superseded by the Arab Spring, Al-Qaida was “already reeling” when its founder was buried at sea. What Bowden does not -- and cannot -- tell us is what comes next.

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.