

Wanted Dead or Alive: Manhunts from Geronimo to Bin Laden

Benjamin Runkle

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But At What Cost...?

Benjamin Runkle's meticulously researched account of eight strategic manhunts conducted by the United States government makes for engrossing reading. Runkle turns dry historic detail into compelling page-turning prose. Runkle's recipe for success lies in mixing dusty historic detail with operational context and just the right dash of biographic detail. Under his pen, long forgotten manhunts take on renewed vigor as he sorts through the details of each operation looking for relevant lessons learned. In the end his efforts produce useful insights that policy makers and individual citizens alike would do well to heed.

Runkle begins by drawing a careful distinction between strategic manhunts and decapitation strikes. "...decapitation strikes are a means to achieve the end of battlefield victory. In a strategic manhunt, the neutralization of the individual is an end in itself." And he goes on to further refine his focus by observing that, "Strategic manhunts are also distinct from retaliatory attacks, or attacks whose primary purpose is to deter an enemy leader rather than capture or kill him." And he sums up his clarifying and defining remarks with, "Finally, and perhaps most importantly, strategic manhunts are not assassinations. ...the essence of assassination is its treacherous nature, which includes the use of violent force during peacetime by covert personnel. Conversely, strategic manhunts use at least some overt deployment of uniformed forces acting under an established chain of command.'

With these careful distinctions drawn, Runkle launches into eight tightly crafted and well told tales of US efforts to capture or kill individuals deemed enemies of the state. What is not clear from Runkle's entertaining prose is where and when the designation of a strategic manhunt is made. It's not clear if he has cherry picked manhunts that fit his criteria or if the manhunts he describes were at some specific point in time designated strategic. Nor does he make it clear whether it is national civilian command authority or senior military commanders who designate a manhunt as 'strategic'. This seems an important distinction but Runkle never addresses the issue directly. It may simply be that the records don't address this point in sufficient detail to make this observation possible.

The dramatic difference in the detail available for the post Villa manhunts provides deep insight into how the technology and record keeping have changed during this roughly hundred year window of record keeping. Runkle does a fine job of making the key personalities involved in the searches come alive. The men involved in the Geronimo, Aguinaldo, and Villa efforts, some long forgotten, some striking historic figures, all seem to leap off the page. Gatewood and Lawton, Lawton and Funston, Pershing and Patton, their individual heroism and decision making vital elements of the manhunts.

But in the latter manhunts, while some of the names are extremely well known, the value of the individual decision making and risk taking at the point of attack seems subsumed in the complex coordination of men and material now possible with advanced technology. This is not meant as an observation about the lack of courage of our men and women in uniform today as compared to their predecessors. Rather it seems only that the importance of their courage and decisions seem to be lost

in the scale and complexity of the overall efforts. In addition, the fact that the national command authority is now involved in almost every decision leading to the culmination of the effort tends to overshadow the individual soldier's work, no matter how audacious.

The last two chapters of Runkle's book focus on lessons learned and policy implications. His recommendations are solidly supported by the material at hand. There are two insights that deserve further comment. First Runkle cautions against placing too much emphasis on the technology now available to prosecute these efforts. He advocates small teams and increased emphasis on understanding the human terrain in which the individual hides. Given the time and cost associated with mounting the operations to kill or capture the eight individuals in this book his caution deserves careful attention.

Perhaps Runkle's most interesting and insightful observation is that these kind of strategic manhunts will likely become increasingly common in the future. For the foreseeable future traditional force-on-force confrontations seem unlikely. Insurgent strategy and tactics provide the best return on investment for those who consider themselves politically or economically disadvantaged. The spectacular tactical, operational, and strategic success of the IED suggests that this type of warfare will proliferate. But insurgencies, by their very nature, are personality driven. Thus capturing or killing charismatic leaders in a timely fashion may become increasingly important. On another level, prosecuting an insurgency involves a host of complex issues that are difficult, if not impossible to summarize in the public domain. Strategic manhunts that simplify and personalize complex issues may become an increasingly important tool for maintaining national support.

If this last observation is true then the dangers of personalizing a conflict cannot be overemphasized. How do we guard against national assets being used to pursue personal ends? How do we ensure the national command authority uses military assets to pursue appropriate national interests rather than petty personal disagreements? There are no easy answers to these questions. Perhaps one answer is to codify the requirements for a strategic manhunt so that there are strict guidelines to ensure proper employment of military assets.

Another consideration raised by the observation that strategic manhunts may become the norm is, "At what cost?" Runkle's analysis, as interesting and useful as it is, does not address this issue. There are of course two costs to consider, the cost of our national treasure, the other the operational costs incurred. The risk of putting our men and women in uniform at risk can only be assessed on a case-by-case basis. But the operational costs to pursue a single individual should be calculated and made public. A first step would be to calculate the cost of these eight manhunts to provide a benchmark for future efforts as well as a wakeup call for national command authorities on the financial impact of their policy decisions.

All in all, Runkle's book provides useful policy insights and is a great read to boot. Nice job.