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Republican Perspective

By John Littig

Taking Credit

Six and one-half years apart, Presidents Bush and Obama addressed the nation concerning the capture of Saddam Hussein and the killing of Osama bin Laden.

Bush's speech was 500 words, Obama's was 1,387 words. Both speeches gave some background on why the successful operations were important, as well as some view of the future. And within each speech was a part dealing with the operation itself. Let's see how the two men handled that.

Here is President Obama, on Sunday May 1, 2011: "And so shortly after taking office, I directed Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA, to make the killing or capture of bin Laden the top priority of our war against al Qaeda, even as we continued our broader efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat his network.

"Then, last August, after years of painstaking work by our intelligence community, I was briefed on a possible lead to bin Laden. It was far from certain, and it took many months to run this thread to ground. I met repeatedly with my national security team as we developed more information about the possibility that we had located bin Laden hiding within a compound deep inside of Pakistan. And finally, last week, I determined that we had enough intelligence to take action, and authorized an operation to get Osama bin Laden and bring him to justice. Today, at my direction, the United States launched a targeted operation against that compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan. A small team of Americans carried out the operation with extraordinary courage and capability. No Americans were harmed. They took care to avoid civilian casualties. After a firefight, they killed Osama bin Laden and took custody of his body."

Here is President Bush, on Sunday Dec 14, 2003: "Yesterday, December the 13th, at around 8:30 p.m. Baghdad time, United States military forces captured Saddam Hussein alive....

"The success of yesterday's mission is a tribute to our men and women now serving in Iraq. The operation was based on the superb work of intelligence analysts who found the dictator's footprints in a vast country. The operation was carried out with skill and

precision by a brave fighting force. Our service men and women and our coalition allies have faced many dangers in the hunt for members of the fallen regime and in their effort to bring hope and freedom to the Iraqi people.

“Their work continues, and so do the risks. Today, on behalf of the nation, I thank the members of our armed forces, and I congratulate them.”

Clearly, the central figure in the bin Laden raid was - in President Obama’s mind - President Obama. And the remainder of his lengthy speech was similarly laden with references to himself.

President Bush used the first-person pronoun only to thank and congratulate those who carried out the mission. If he had any part in directing or approving the operation, he didn’t claim it.

A key attribute of a leader is to give credit for success and to accept blame for failure. President Bush exhibited that attribute. President Obama did not. Why is that? Let’s look at some factors.

President Bush had at least five opportunities in his life that gave him valuable exposure to leadership lessons. He spent two years on active duty as a lieutenant in the National Guard. He earned an MBA, for which the curriculum includes leadership principles. He had owned and operated two private sector enterprises. He had been the governor of Texas. And he had the leadership example set by his father as an entrepreneur and, eventually, as vice president and then as president of the United States.

President Obama had no such exposure. He had no military experience. He studied law rather than business. He never managed a private sector enterprise. He had not been an executive. And his father was not present to provide an example of leadership.

So President Bush’s developmental experiences clearly gave him a better chance than President Obama to understand the principles of leadership. But there’s possibly another factor - admittedly speculative. President Bush’s gregarious “frat-boy” personality may have made it essentially intuitive for him to recognize the value in praising others rather than tooting his own horn. In President Obama’s case, even if he understood the need to credit others rather than himself, his narcissism probably would have trumped that need.

In any case, whatever the reasons, President Bush credited others for success; President Obama credited mostly himself.

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