Great Decisions May 10, 2011
Making Sense of Multilateralism

Has Bin Laden's death changed the situation in regard to terrorism, multilateralism, and the U.S.'s position in the Middle East?

Don't forget that Iraq and Iran were both police actions, not wars. The point is well-taken. The U.S. clearly is the over-all military power and its power is not suited for terrorism.

The operation with the Seals and the helicopters changed perceptions, if only militarily. It projected American military power differently and showed we don't need quite so many troops.

Joseph Nye has proposed that anti-Americanism has increased in recent years and that our soft power is in decline. [Soft power: the ability to attract others to the legitimacy of U.S. policies and the values that underlie them.] Maybe what we need is "smart power."

The word "war" seldom appeared in our culture until the 1960's, when everything became a "war": war on drugs, war on crime. How America frames problems affects the way we think about them. The war metaphor as a standard way of framing problems appeals to our basest instincts, to the black side of human nature.

The war metaphor started about the time we changed the Department of War to the Department of Defense.

How are we to understand the targeted killing of Bin Laden and the others? It wasn't justice, but revenge. Consider the way Obama phrased the operation: America is a fearsome country; look what we can do; we said we would do it and we did.

The death of Bin Laden is a setback; it showed that we play nice until you cross us. With 49 people we can launch an attack that does surprising, targeted damage.

There's a dichotomy between our actions in Bin Laden's death and our actions in Libya. The power in Libya is not predominantly U.S. That makes a smart attack extremely difficult. When NATO takes action, the munitions of various countries don't match. Europeans have the planes, etc., but can't keep them armed.

Osama Bin Laden's operation is multilateral.

One of our strengths is marketing and the media. We have the opportunity to portray him as weak.

We spent trillions of dollars to "get" Bin Laden. It's really frustrating. Couldn't we have captured him and kept him isolated? Maybe converted him?

The idea that you could change him is highly unlikely. The U.S. did everything they could to keep him from becoming a martyr. If that happened, it could cost us the world.

Could we reprogram Cheney and Rumsfeld from their shock and awe approach? They've killed many more people than Bin Laden. We've created a lot of our problems with our actions.

Although it makes us feel good, we have to change the way we're thinking.

The real reason they hate us is because they don't have what we have. We got what we have with international exploitation.

A profound question: Should our foreign policy be based on realpolitik? How do you suppress the violent urges of human nature?

Ours is the country of the rugged individual. Make your own way. We follow it under the guise of American exceptionalism. Slavery was always the snake under the table.

With Bin Laden, Obama sent the message: Don't tread on me.

There's a second message in the Bin Laden action. It's a denigration of Osama's image.

It also set the stage for the 2012 election.

Fareed Zacaria notes that Osama was a symbol, but he was also a terrific fund raiser. Al Qaeda will find it difficult to carry on. People are rising up all over the Middle East for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. They're not for Al Qaeda, but for opportunity.

Thomas Friedman said something similar.

You need a nuanced approach to world problems. If you take an ideological approach, you don't give enough consideration to all aspects, so you wind up with bad decisions.

In many ways all points of view are true.

Is it possible to change the U.N. to solve world problems?

We think of the U.N. as the Security Council and the General Assembly. It's much more. Its subsidiaries are where a lot goes on the world couldn't do without.

We need an extreme commonality of interest for any significant activity.

In the case of Bin Laden, what we get from the information gained may be due to the way it was carried out. That information may have been lost in a multinational operation.

The thinking that needs to be changed is the whole question of sovereignty. Without this change, multilateralism is not going to get very far.