



## The Schmidle Muddle of the Osama Bin Laden Take Down

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A special guest post by C. Christine Fair on 8/4/2011

<http://www.registan.net/index.php/2011/08/04/the-schmidle-muddle-of-the-osama-bin-laden-take-down/>

On Monday, August 1, the *New Yorker* ran a piece by Nicholas Schmidle, a young freelance journalist, which proffered a breathtakingly detailed account of the Bin Laden Take-down in May of 2011. I have known Schmidle since the summer of 2006, when we met at my office at the United States Institute of Peace. He explained that he had a fellowship from the [Institute of Current World Affairs](#) that would allow him to live in Pakistan and write about his experiences for two years.

Mr. Schmidle had one serious problem: he was not an accredited journalist, which meant the Pakistani government was disinclined to give him a journalism visa. He sought my advice. I explained to him that visa issues are not my bailiwick but I outlined some of the key issues he could consider if and when he sets out upon his newfound adventure. Though he didn't know much about Pakistan, Mr. Schmidle struck me as a fast study.

In the end, Dr. Shireen Mazari (an outspoken, anti-American polemicist) agreed to host Mr. Schmidle at the think-tank she ran at the time. However, it was a bargain with the devil: he still was not a journalist and he got his visa at the behest of a dubious shill for Pakistan's intelligence agency.

Over the next few years, I watched Mr. Schmidle's reporting. He had an eye for the key issues and he covered many important stories that others overlooked. I met him episodically in Islamabad when I came to Pakistan. In January 2008, Mr. Schmidle published a piece in the *New York Times Magazine* called the "[Next-Gen Taliban](#)." In that article, he ventured into Quetta to attend an opening ceremony for the campaign office of the Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI), which he described in anodyne terms as a "a hard-line Islamist party."

Mr. Schmidle wrote that the men in attendance mostly spoke Pashto but "[knowing Urdu, I could understand enough \[of their Pashto\] to realize that they weren't rehashing the typical J.U.I. rhetoric](#)." That made the rest of the article immediately suspect. I knew Mr. Schmidle, and knew that his language skills in Urdu were functional at best and, even if he had superb Urdu skills (and he did not), this would not render Pashto comprehensible in the slightest. (It is not an Indo-Aryan language like Urdu and therefore has a grammar and syntax that is starkly different from Urdu.) While one may recognize some Urdu words, without grammar and syntax the *content* of the discussion would have been opaque to Mr. Schmidle. Indeed, Pakistanis who have spent their entire life in the country speaking Urdu cannot understand Pashto and would never make the absurd claim to do so. How could Mr. Schmidle understand, must less interpret, what was going on without knowledge of Pashto or a translator? It seemed to me that things were not as they were reported.

I had a similar feeling this week when I began perusing Mr. Schmidle's account of the [Bin Laden raid](#). The account was deeply detailed. He described how the commander of the team, whom he called James "sat on the floor, squeezed among ten other SEALs, Ahmed [the translator], and Cairo [the malimois]. (The names of all the covert operators mentioned in this story have been changed.) James, a broad-chested man in his late thirties, does not have the lithe swimmer's frame that one might expect of a SEAL—he is built more like a discus thrower."

Schmidle detailed "James'" apparel and personal effects: he was sporting "a shirt and trousers in Desert Digital Camouflage, [carrying] a silenced Sig Sauer P226 pistol, along with extra ammunition; a CamelBak, for hydration; and gel shots, for endurance. He held a short-barrel, silenced M4 rifle." He even inventoried the contents of this fellow's *pockets*.

Mr. Schmidle then recalls, in riveting detail, the harrowing movements of the helicopters and how "the interior of the Black Hawks rustled alive with the metallic cough of rounds being chambered." When the first helicopter encountered problems, Schmidle expositis how the pilot reoptimized his plans and aimed for "for an animal pen in the western section of the compound." He next tells his readers how the SEALs in the ill-fated bird "braced themselves as the tail rotor swung around, scraping the security wall. The pilot jammed the nose forward to drive it into the dirt and prevent his aircraft from rolling onto its side. Cows, chickens, and rabbits scurried."

He even describes how the translator Ahmed hollered in Pashto at the locals that a security operation was ongoing to allay their suspicions about the nature of the cacophony in the cantonment town. (This detail caught my eye as the majority of persons in Abbottabad, where the raid took place, speak Hindko rather than Pashto.) He account is replete with quotes and other minute details obtained from persons seemingly involved directly in the assault and presumably speaking to him in person.

The article was in fact so detailed that it left the unmistakable impression that Mr. Schmidle had interviewed at least a few of the SEALs involved in the raid. During an [NPR interview](#), Steve Inskeep explains that indeed Schmidle *had* spent time with the SEALs who were on the mission to get Bin Laden. NPR subsequently issued a [correction](#) for reasons noted below.

### **If not Navy SEALs, then perhaps he met some Navy Otters?**

All of this makes for a gripping read. Too gripping I thought to myself. As it turned out, there is one very serious problem with Mr. Schmidle's account: Schmidle *never* met any of the SEALs involved, as reported (with great tact and restraint) by [Paul Farhi](#) on August 3.

Farhi reached the same conclusion as I had: "a casual reader of the article wouldn't know that [he had not interviewed the SEALs]; neither the article nor an editor's note describes the sourcing for parts of the story. Schmidle, in fact, piles up so many details about some of the men, such as their thoughts at various times, that the article leaves a strong impression that he spoke with them directly."

Surely a journalist or an editor with a commitment to informing—rather than amusing—a public would understand that disclosing this simple fact is critical to allowing readers to determine how

much credibility they should put into this account. In the absence of such disclosure, we are left asking whether this was second or third-hand information? Who are the people that he spoke to and how credible is their information?

Such an egregious exercise of incaution raises a number of questions about the entire report.

Schmidle has demurred from tackling this serious issue of credibility, integrity and veracity directly. During a [“live chat” with Mr. Schmidle](#) on the New Yorker’s website yesterday, several persons including myself tried to ask Mr. Schmidle to explain this egregious oversight. (I posed the question four times throughout the course of the “live chat.” The moderator did not post a single one. (Earlier in the day, Schmidle and I exchanged emails wherein I expressed my dismay at his reportage.)

Many of us were following this in real time via twitter. I was not alone: others—including other journalists—tried to ask other tough questions but the moderator did not post them either. I also tried to post a comment to this effect along with [other readers’ comments](#). That comment has not yet been posted.

Finally, after a volley of fatuous queries to which Schmidle responded with a peculiar degree of detail, the moderator finally let one person raise the issue that he neither met any of the SEALS involved nor indicated as much in his report.

Unfortunately for the credibility of this exercise, this person was Erin Simpson—a friend of Mr. Schmidle. [Ms. Simpson](#) had earlier defended him during a twitter exchange with me wherein she responded to my vexed queries that [“he’s a good friend.”](#) She further intimated that someone involved in the operation may have spoken to him because he is a “GO’s kid.” The latter point references the fact that his father, [Marine Corps Lt. Gen. Robert E. Schmidle Jr., is the deputy commander of the U.S. Cyber Command](#).

[Schmidle answers Ms. Simpson in a familiar voice](#): “Hi Erin. Good question. I’ll just say that the 23 SEALs on the mission that evening were not the only ones who were listening to their radio communications.”

The response was risible and hardly addressed how he could have acquired such details of the operation through such means.

That the moderator passed on only softball questions and that this one question was posed by a “close friend,” raises more questions than the “live chat” could have answered.

### **What’s at Stake?**

One may ask at first blush why a feel-good story about the Bin Laden raid is problematic or even merits sustained critique. From an American point of view, the story reads like the film script Schmidle may well aspire to write. It confirms all that we wanted to know about the raid and the bravado of our SEALS. The shooter, who finally killed Bin Laden, even managed to mutter “For

God and Country” in the femtoseconds that his synapses took to pull the trigger, according to Schmidle.

However, there are implications that go well beyond Mr. Schmidle’s limits of journalism integrity and his own personal aggrandizement and professional aspirations.

First, many Muslims across the world fundamentally doubt the events of the Bin Laden raid. Some believe Bin Laden is still alive. Others believe he died long ago. Others believe that the events of May 2 were staged to allow the Obama administration to make an exit from Afghanistan. As Mr. Schmidle’s is the first (and so far only) account of the drama, these problems cast a pale of doubt upon the events that transpired that evening.

Second is the simple fact of Mr. Schmidle parentage. His father, as noted above, is the deputy commander of the [U.S. Cyber Command](#). Given the conspiratorial propensities of many within and beyond the Muslim world, Schmidle’s ties to this organization by virtue of his father would recast any serious inaccuracy in his report as a U.S. military psychological operation to deliberately misinform the world about the operation.

The reasons for this are at least two-fold. First is the charge of U.S. Cyber Command itself, which in it the lexicon of the U.S. Department of Defense is “[pulling together existing cyberspace resources, creating synergy that does not currently exist and synchronizing war-fighting effects to defend the information security environment.](#)” While the organization appears dedicated to protecting cyber infrastructure, others may interpret its role as using cyberspace to spread disinformation. Second, cynics may justifiably wonder what influence if any his father had in the article. Schmidle explains this to Farhi “[‘He knew I was working on it,’ the younger Schmidle says, ‘but we both decided it was best not to discuss it in advance. We wanted to maintain distinct lines of operation.’](#)” I have no reason to not believe this. However, given that questions that now hover about his report will other readers be so inclined?

Finally, whether or not the shooter actually said “For God and For Country” is another important question that affects the way in which the United States and its citizenry are seen across the world. The conflict with Bin Laden has been waged in lamentably civilizational terms focusing upon the clash of Islam and the presumably non-Islamic west. Since 9/11, countries with Muslim minorities have been gripped by Islamophobia with some states outlawing headscarves and minarets and others seeking to restrict the erection of new mosques. Anti-immigration concerns in Europe are thinly disguised efforts to deter future Muslims from migrating. Success in the war of terrorism seems to be equated with success in turning back the spread of Islam. Several states in the United States have even introduced ludicrous and shameful [bills](#) to outlaw Sharia.

How would a proclamation that Bin Laden was killed “for God and for country” be read in a place like Pakistan where the war on terror has been largely seen as a war on Islam and Muslims? If this was in fact uttered, as an American, I am saddened that eliminating the world’s most notorious killer was done “for God” first and country second. If it wasn’t uttered, such a gratuitous detail hardly helps the United States make its case that it opposes terrorists not Muslims.

## **A Story Too Good to Check?**

Whether Americans and our allies like it or not, Pakistan and Pakistan's populations are critical to U.S. interests. This will be true for the foreseeable future. Journalists have an important function: informing our publics. Journalists' reportage shapes how Americans see their country abroad and understand the countries with which the United States engages. It shapes our support for war, for foreign aid, for particular bilateral relations. The U.S. experience with the Iraq war illustrates the extreme limits of how a supine and incompetent press became the vehicle to mobilize an angry public for an ill-conceived and unjustifiable war of choice. The United States will long pay the price for strategic error.

Journalists have an equally important, if less appreciated, role in shaping how the outside world sees us. With the internet, the entire world reads our press, watches our television and hears our radio broadcasts. Media hype and hysteria, xenophobia, Islamophobia and more quotidian issues of inaccuracy and incaution with handling sensitive pieces of information are for the whole world to see and to judge us.

With stakes this high, should not the standards of journalistic integrity be even higher? I should think yes. The New Yorker should immediately right this wrong by publishing an editor's note disclosing the simple fact that he never interviewed the SEALs involved in the raid.

*[C. Christine Fair](#) is an assistant professor at Georgetown University and the author of *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States*.*