

A former CIA officer recalls the almost decade-long search for Osama bin Laden

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Jahi Chikwendiu/ THE WASHINGTON POST - Michael Hurley at his home in Falls Church, Va. Hurley spent much of the past 10 years tracking Osama bin Laden, in one government capacity or another, and the search for this guy has defined a chunk of his life. (May 6)

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He turns on the TV for news about [Osama bin Laden](#) at 7 a.m. and keeps it playing until long after midnight, because this is a relationship that has always bordered on obsession. Michael Hurley sits in his Falls Church condominium and watches images repeat across the flat screen just as they have repeated inside his head for [almost a decade](#).

Here is bin Laden standing inside a tent with an assault rifle at his side. Here is a map of the Middle East, detailing some of the very places Hurley went searching for him. Here are blurry images of the CIA classified files he helped create. Here is a former co-worker being interviewed as an expert on counterterrorism.

“The whole thing just feels surreal,” says Hurley, a former CIA officer who now does consulting on counterterrorism. “It’s like watching a video of this big part of my life.”

For Hurley and so many others in the Washington area, last week’s [killing of bin Laden](#) counted less as a historic milestone than as a personal one. Ever since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, thousands of government employees like Hurley have reshaped their careers and restructured their lives around the search for one man — a quest they sometimes referred to simply as “[the hunt](#).” It was by turns maddening, exhausting, expensive, exhilarating and all-consuming. Now, finally, it is over — and so is a definitive phase for the U.S. government and many of its employees.

“Our whole world inside the government fundamentally changed because of him,” Hurley said. “There was the before. And then there was the after.”

For Hurley, 56, the after looks like this: a spotless, two-story bachelor pad in Falls Church, a few blocks from the highway at the midpoint between Washington’s two major airports, so he can “jet off to anywhere I need to go at less than a minute’s notice.” The fridge contains only nonperishables. The dishwasher is practically unused. Two crystal glasses and an unopened bottle of Hennessy cognac are displayed on a coffee table in the living room, even though he doesn’t drink.

For the past decade, Hurley’s place has been mostly a way station between layovers and 18-hour days — between three deployments to search for bin Laden with the CIA in Afghanistan followed by stints in counterterrorism for the 9/11 Commission, the State Department and now his own consulting company. The walls of his condo are decorated with personal relics from the war on terrorism: a promotional brochure for the [al-Qaeda](#) support group he helped take down in 2001; a photo of his team burying a small piece of twisted metal from Ground Zero in the hard Afghan desert; an American flag that flew over the U.S. Embassy in Kabul; a picture of the World Trade Center towers taken on a clear day in New York, given to Hurley by a victim’s family to serve as a constant source of inspiration.

Eight days ago, after Hurley learned about bin Laden’s death from an old CIA friend [just before the news](#) went public, his brain kept turning until almost 4 a.m. He thought about his connection to the CIA operatives and [Navy SEALs who helped execute the mission](#), believing that some tiny piece of their success had been built on a decade of groundwork done by people like him. He thought about the [victims of the terrorist attacks](#). He thought about how his own life had been affected by bin Laden in so many ways, with a career that earns him awards and time on TV, and a schedule that keeps him single and away from his extended family in Minnesota.

“I had bin Laden somewhere on my mind every day for the last 10 years, at least in some small way,” Hurley says. “Maybe now I won’t have to.”

Like so many others in Washington, he found his career was forever altered during the course of one horrific September morning. He was already an 18-year veteran of the CIA, busy managing a staff of about 200 people in the basement of the agency’s building when the attack began. He sent his employees home — their work was not directly related to terrorism — and walked upstairs to the counterterrorism center. He knocked on the office door of an old friend who was helping coordinate the immediate response. “Do you need any help up here?” he asked.

For a few months before the attacks, Hurley had been caught in a mid-career crisis, trying to make a choice. He had considered retiring and moving back to Minnesota, where he would be able to attend his nephews’ hockey games, return to his first career practicing law and seek out a serious relationship. His last one ended in a breakup over a secure phone line. Or he could immerse himself in meaningful work — like his time spent stationed in the “intervention areas” of Haiti, Bosnia and Kosovo — to culminate his career. His decision became obvious on Sept. 11, he said.

“I want to be a part of this,” he told his friend in the counterterrorism center. “I want to go to Afghanistan.”

He changed jobs the next day, working first in the counterterrorism center, then for Alec Station — a CIA unit focused exclusively on bin Laden — and finally leading a team into Afghanistan late that fall. He set up a station in the eastern part of the country, near the Pakistani border, cultivating local spies, developing intelligence and meeting with warlords. He had no military training, and he went without sleep for days at a time, fueled on fear and adrenaline. “Bin Laden was everybody’s main target, and in the early days it felt like we were close,” he said.

The first deployments for the CIA were supposed to last a maximum of six weeks, but [the search dragged on](#) — and on, and on — and so did Hurley’s time abroad. He went to Afghanistan three times for at least three months each, coming home to eulogize a father, an older brother and a close friend but always returning to the search.

Even when he finally came back to the United States for good at the end of 2003, to join the 9/11 Commission as director of counterterrorism policy and later to work for the State Department, it was because he remained absorbed in [bin Laden and al-Qaeda](#), he said. He spent the next several years digging through classified documents and interviewing dozens of government officials about the terrorists involved in the attacks on Sept. 11. “You want to know what drives these people — who they are, what underlies their actions,” he said.

He never found all the answers — never found bin Laden — but the search itself defined parts of his life. A job that was once obscure and secretive came to be glorified. He conducted interviews and offered his insights on TV, prompting ex-girlfriends to send congratulatory text messages and a brother to send a six-pack of Minnesota beer. He was inducted into his high school's hall of fame. He retired from the CIA in his mid-50s and now has a thriving consulting business that deals with counterterrorism strategy and a regular gig lecturing to audiences in London and Palo Alto, Calif. Many of his closest friends are Washingtonians who also have devoted their careers to — and made good livings from — the decade-long search for one man.

During the past week, as he continued to watch the news, Hurley thought about what he would say at his next lecture. How, he wondered, could he neatly summarize bin Laden and the world he had left behind?

“He’s gone, and that’s wonderful,” Hurley says. “But evil is still out there. If we’re looking for a respite, this isn’t it. Our world has still been changed, permanently. Our lives have still been changed, permanently.”

Staff researcher Julie Tate contributed to this report.