

The Millennials have a moment

The millennials' reaction to the death of Osama bin Laden was characterized by a generational narcissism and a generational need to be part of history, especially when it's easy.

Where were you when you found out about the death of Osama bin Laden? Or, a better question: What did you do next?

Here's what Yale University did. Last Sunday night, as the news spread through the libraries and dining halls, students gathered around TVs to watch Barack Obama's speech. After the president finished, they headed outside to one of Yale's quads and began celebrating. Students cheered and chanted ("U-S-A" and "Yes we did!"), waved American flags, blasted vuvuzelas, took pictures with their arms raised or draped around each other. The whole time, the group was bellowing "The Star Spangled Banner," along with stadium standbys like "We Are The Champions" and "Na Na Hey Hey Kiss Him Goodbye." A couple of students circled the scene on a moped. If you didn't know better, you would have thought America had just won the World Cup.

It wasn't too long before the media certified these scenes as an important trend and started analyzing what they said about Young People Everywhere. "For 9/11 generation," USA Today claimed in a front-page headline, "a turning point."

This generation is often called the Millennial generation, which includes anyone born between 1980 and 2000—and in which I, born in 1985, am a grumpy old man. I know I'm grumpy because my generation's response to bin Laden's death troubles me—for its opportunism, for its self-centeredness, and, most of all, for its turning the death of a person, however despicable, into the reason for a very public celebration.

In that USA Today article, and others like it, a narrative has quickly congealed. Because of their youth, the thinking goes, Millennials experienced September 11th in a unique and transformative way. After the tragedy, they became more serious and civic-minded. But they also became more anxious and self-aware. More than anything, the Millennial generation couldn't shake the specter of Osama bin Laden. "We're the 9/11 generation, and we all remember it," Matthew Segal, the 25-year-old president of a nonprofit that represents Millennials, told USA Today. (There's nothing more Millennial than an organization representing Millennials.) "Now, literally, the villain of our time was captured and killed," Segal continued. "It was clearly a defining moment for our generation."

This idea keeps getting repeated by the media and by Millennials themselves—in part because it provides a defense for their shared exuberance. But several things about it don't add up.

Let's start with the media's attempts to establish bin Laden's impact on Millennials. In addition to Millennial sound bites and expert testimonials, newspapers turned to some quasi-sociological evidence. To show how 9/11 inspired Millennials to pursue public service, USA Today cited the

increase in applications for nonprofit jobs. (Last week, this would have been proof of our struggling economy.) To show how 9/11 left Millennials in a state of perpetual distress, the newspaper cited a Pew survey claiming that 83 percent of young people sleep with their cellphones on. (Last week, this would have been proof of our declining attention spans.)

Notice what USA Today didn't cite: data on Millennial opinions of bin Laden from before his death. That's because these data don't support the narrative of a generation defining itself in the shadow of the Twin Towers. Not too long ago, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation ran a series of focus groups on college students' attitudes toward 9/11. The Foundation asked students to name the most important social or political event of their lifetime. The most common answer was not 9/11—in fact, it was one of the *least* common—but the rise of the Internet.

Even data that support the media's Millennial ideas stop well short of suggesting a generational revolution. In 2000, for example, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute reported that the number of freshmen who considered keeping up with political affairs to be "essential" or "very important" hit an election-year low: 28 percent. After 9/11, that number did bounce back—but only to 39 percent in 2008, which remains well below the 60-plus percent who answered affirmatively in 1966, the first year of the annual poll.

These statistics, I think, better capture my generation's relationship to bin Laden than do the celebrations over his death. It would be too much to say we had forgotten about bin Laden, but it would also be too much to say he haunted or defined us in any real way.

This too you could see on Yale's campus. In the previous year, the *Yale Daily News*, a student newspaper that, most days, includes more content than your average metro daily, ran only two articles mentioning bin Laden by name. And yet, at Yale and other campuses around the country, Millennials did try to claim bin Laden's death as a turning point. One senior told me that "the only other time campus went this crazy was the night of Obama's election." It's fair to wonder why.

Several explanations come to mind, starting with the media. Do you blame the reporter or the subject for quotations like this: "We carry the weight of it more because our entire adult lives have been during a time of war" (that's one student talking to the *New York Times*); "We didn't know a time when you could bring shampoo on an airplane" (that's another talking to this newspaper).

These quotations also hint at two broader explanations for the Millennial reaction: a generational narcissism and a generational need to be part of history, even when they've done little of the hard work behind it.

Let's take the last one first. Millennials love to hurl themselves in the path of history. This isn't exclusive to 9/11—think of how Millennials voted for Barack Obama by record margins, then disappeared when the real work of politics began—but it's easiest to spot in examples involving the military. Obviously, the students celebrating bin Laden's death did not feel compelled to serve in Afghanistan. (Here's one last recent survey, conducted by American University: 12

percent of Millennials said 9/11 made them more likely to enlist in the military, but 26 percent said it made them less likely.) Also, without submitting to stereotypes—Keith Urbahn, the guy who broke the news of bin Laden’s death on Twitter, is both a Yale Millennial (class of ‘06) and a member of the Navy Reserve—we can safely say that, for a lot of reasons, the Millennials who do enlist don’t often come from places like Yale.

On the day of bin Laden’s death, though, most Millennials didn’t seem worried about other people. And this brings us to the second explanation. Millennials didn’t think about how their celebrations might look to the rest of the world. They didn’t remember how Americans felt when Arab Millennials celebrated the fall of the Twin Towers. They didn’t even seem to recognize that 9/11 affected every American—we’ve all lost some shampoo in line at the airport.

Instead of considering all that, Millennials decided to join America’s latest, greatest flash mob. The best way to understand Millennials, I submit, is not in their relationship to bin Laden, but in their reaction to his death. We should all be happy that bin Laden was brought to justice. But the Millennials didn’t make bin Laden’s death about an evil man, the nation he attacked, or what either entity stood for. They made it about themselves.