'Justice Has Been Done'

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

Last Sunday, the Lady Friend and I were staying in a cabin in Inverness close by the Point Reyes National Seashore and watching "60 Minutes" when the program was interrupted with the news that Osama bin Laden had been killed. Some anxious minutes followed. Finally President Obama came on the screen with the news that the nearly 10-year hunt for the al Qaeda mastermind of the 9/11 attacks had ended with bin Laden's death in a firefight with U.S. forces

I thought the president's presentation was masterful. "The world is safer; it is a better place because of the death of Osama bin Laden," he said. In a pithy epitaph, he declared, "Justice has been done."

The skirmish took place at a $1 million compound where bin Laden was living. It is not in the caves of Afghanistan, but in a city of 100,000 near two Pakistani military installations and an hour's drive from Islamabad, Pakistan's capital.

Until Sunday it seemed that the Republican argument that Obama was not up to the job had traction. A New York Times/CBS News poll in April reported "the worst foreign policy rating of his presidency." Forty-six percent of those interviewed disapproved of his handling of foreign affairs.

Another Times/CBS poll in the same month reported that seventy percent of Americans said "the country was on the wrong track." A stubbornly high unemployment, sputtering recovery, and rocketing gas prices were often cited.

What a difference a death makes. Republicans are heaping praise on President Obama for the successful operation that cornered and killed bin Laden on Sunday. Former vice president Dick Cheney said the administration "clearly deserves credit." The Republican wizard, Karl Rove, said that aspirants for the president's job would be smart not to be mean-spirited. Another Republican strategist said "the president deserves and will receive credit" for bringing the world's most wanted criminal to justice on his watch. Donald Trump wanted "to personally congratulate President Obama." I'm told that even Rush Limbaugh said, "Thank the Lord for President Obama!"

In the short run, Obama should get a sizeable boost in the polls from bin Laden's death. It is a question what he will do with his political capital. He may choose to continue to act the part of conciliator between the right and left. Given the conservative cast of the country and the approaching election, it may not be realistic to expect more, at least for now.

Nonetheless, because of his leadership and daring a terrible villain was brought to justice, and for once his enemies are stunned. That's a big deal.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.