

Reward Not Paid

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By Timothy W. Maier

Nearly one week after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, President George W. Bush promised Americans that "evildoer" Osama bin Laden would be hunted down like the outlaw he is. "I want justice," Bush vowed to millions of television viewers. "There's an old poster out West, as I recall, that said, 'Wanted: Dead or Alive.' All I want, and America wants, is [to see] him brought to justice."

Shortly afterward, the Justice Department placed a \$25 million bounty on bin Laden. The Air Line Pilots Association and Air Transport Association added another \$2 million to make it the single largest reward ever offered for a fugitive. The United States then dropped what appeared to be "Dead or Alive" posters of bin Laden in Afghanistan, while airing broadcasts worldwide to publicize the \$27 million bounty. Even though this sum is equal to 10 percent of the U.S. humanitarian assistance targeted for Afghanistan this year, criminologists say it may have zero impact.

"It was a nice public-relations move for Bush to put the \$25 million on bin Laden, but it is not going to have any effect because his supporters are ideology-driven," says Dennis Jay Kenney, a criminology professor at the City University of New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice and author of *Organized Crime in America*.

"It's done for a big splash and a headline," adds Gilbert Geis, a criminology professor at the University of California-Irvine. "It doesn't matter how much you offer because people generally are going to give them information anyway."

"Big money rarely talks," says Jeffrey Fryrear, executive director of the National Crime Prevention Institute at the University of Louisville in Kentucky. "More money means more tips, but it also means more mismanagement and more room to mess it up. Offering rewards can be counterproductive."

Many in law enforcement despise rewards and complain that valuable resources are wasted to chase crackpot and false leads, says former homicide detective Steven Egger, now a criminologist at the University of Houston. "I hated it when rewards were offered when I was a detective. It brings out poor eyewitness testimony that has been frequently proved unreliable in court," he says. In fact, a majority of the 100-plus inmates found innocent through DNA testing while on death row were convicted wrongfully because of mistaken eyewitness testimony.

Offering cash incentives for information about alleged criminals hardly is a new approach. The IRS collects an additional \$100 million from tax cheats annually by paying out to snitches anywhere from \$2 million to \$5 million. The FBI claims to have captured 140 suspects through its 53-year-old "Most Wanted" program as a result of offering millions in cash. And police recently nabbed the kidnapers of Elizabeth Smart, who was returned safely to her parents after the TV program *America's Most Wanted* aired the case again with a \$250,000 reward.

Rewards paid by authorities date back to the Bible when Judas was paid 30 pieces of silver to betray Jesus. They were common in England in the 18th century when thieves were paid for police tips, and they continued to be popular in the Wild West where bounties routinely were offered and paid to gunmen such as Bob Ford, who for \$10,000 shot the notorious outlaw Jesse James in the back on April 3, 1882. Today, rewards even are announced to try to throw off police or deceive the public as

O.J. Simpson may have done when he offered \$1 million to find the "real killers" of Nicole Simpson and Ronald Goldman.

The United States isn't alone in offering financial incentives. For example, Saddam Hussein has offered a \$14,000 reward for downing any U.S. or British jet patrolling the no-fly zones in northern and southern Iraq. This followed offers of a \$5,000 reward for any Iraqi air-defense unit that downs a hostile missile and \$2,500 for any Iraqi citizen who arrests the captain of a hostile jet.

There is no evidence to indicate Saddam would pay these bounties even if Iraqi aims were to improve. But some also wonder if the U.S. government will honor its reward contracts or become a welscher. Don't be surprised if Washington finds a way to weasel out of paying, on the grounds that some intelligence agency was more crucial to cracking a case than a tipster or informant. "If that happens," Fryrear says, "no one is going to care or get upset about someone not getting paid. People look at it as someone trying to cash in on bad news. We offer these rewards in a rush and what we end up doing is really cheating people."

Egger, author of *The Killers Among Us: An Examination of Serial Murder and Its Investigation*, blames the press for the continuing failure to pay. "The press is not asking the hard questions, such as, 'What happened to the reward?' They are real good with splashing the reward in a headline, but tracking the reward is another story."

For example, ever wonder what "hero" Kentucky truck driver Ron Lantz did with the \$500,000 reward money he earned helping to capture John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo, the alleged snipers who last year terrorized the Washington metropolitan area? He didn't do anything with the money because he never was paid. Worse, he might never get it.

And how happy are those Pakistani neighbors who believed they had hit the \$25 million jackpot when they alerted authorities to suspicious behavior in the two-story house in Rawalpindi where Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the suspected mastermind of the Sept. 11 terror attacks on the United States, was captured? Apparently an Egyptian radical soldier who squeezed information out of a witness will be the one to get the reward, along with another \$2 million to relocate. But it is all but impossible to discover whether so much as a dime has been paid because there is no oversight tracking. As far as the neighbors go, criminologists say, they'd have had better luck if they had won a lottery. Unlike the reward system, the lottery pays every winner who comes forward.

The U.S. Rewards for Justice Program is fond of finding ways not to pay. It claims to have paid out \$9.5 million to 23 tipsters in the last decade, but do the math. That comes to about two people per year who were paid. And most of the time some of the money is withheld, Geis says, because the value of a tip leading to arrest and conviction is regarded as discretionary. "Rarely do you see that one lump-sum payment," he adds.

Prior to the Sheikh Mohammed claim, the Rewards for Justice Program's largest payment was a \$2 million reward handed over to an unidentified Muslim informant who in 1995 helped the government find and prosecute 1993 World Trade Center bomber Ramzi Yousef. Another \$2 million was paid to the informants who helped bring down Mir Aimal Kasi, who was executed in Virginia for gunning down two CIA employees in 1993. The program also doled out \$1 million to the brother of "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski.

Critics point to the thousands of other tipsters who provided instrumental information that helped authorities track down wanted fugitives. Remember these bounties: \$5 million for former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic; \$2 million for those responsible for the Oklahoma City bombing; \$1

million for the alleged 1996 Olympics bomber Eric Rudolph; and \$1 million for former Panamanian general Manuel Noriega. With the exception of Rudolph, who slipped through the FBI's manhunt despite reliable tips that should have led to his apprehension, these former fugitives now are in custody because of confidential informants. But the file jackets of every one of them can be stamped: Reward Not Paid.

Law-enforcement officials argue that these cases were solved by good detective work, not by informants or tipsters who led them to the criminal. "It's part of the difficulty," Kenney says. "We have a variety of people providing information about a case, and law enforcement usually argues the people responsible for solving it are their own investigators. The bigger the case, the bigger the problem."

Geis has called for the federal government to step up to the plate and develop independent review boards to monitor reward programs and evaluate who should be paid and how much. Many of the nation's crime-stopper programs employ such boards, for instance, but even they tend to be heavily influenced or controlled by law enforcement. Geis also would like to see written contracts to prevent authorities from manipulating to whom the reward should be paid, how much should be paid, and how the offer and acceptance should be administered. "We really need a whole structural setup where we put the money in escrow," he says.

Egger agrees there should be an independent board, but says the rules need to be spelled out clearly to determine who should be paid. "Rewards need to be very specific," as they were in the Old West when you brought in a fugitive, "either dead or alive," and collected on a binding contract, he says.

The contract is the thing, requiring an offer and acceptance. Rewards long have been enforceable in U.S. and English contract law. But the United States may do a better job of paying informants than the British tabloid press, which frequently offers flashy cash rewards to boost circulation but seldom pays. Research on these tabloids by MediaGuardian.co.uk shows the last big payout was in 1993 when the News of the World handed over about \$280,000 in a kidnapping case. Most of the offers have small, vague print that gives the editors discretion over whether to pay and rules that don't always exclude police.

In the United States, reward programs for missing persons often are offered by a victim's relatives. They tend to set up foundations or memorial funds in hopes of catching the criminal, but often bow to law enforcement when paying or not paying a bounty. An equally large problem, Fryrear explains, is that the money isn't always in real dollars, but pledges of funds that are hard to collect. "You got to ask, 'Is it real money or just words?' Because you can't take an offer to the bank," he says.

Consider the 1999 Yosemite National Park murder case that still baffles neighbors in the Wilton nudist resort who wonder why Jan Ronne Damant, 60, didn't get a dime for turning in the killer. When their daughter and granddaughter turned up missing, Francis and Carole Carrington initially offered \$250,000 for the safe return of Carole Sund, 42, her daughter Juli, 15, and family friend Silvina Pelosso, 16. After the remains of Carole Sund and Pelosso were found in their fire-gutted rental car inside Yosemite National Park, and Juli Sund's body was discovered a short distance away, the Carringtons put up \$50,000 for the arrest and conviction of the killer. A short time later, another woman, Joie Armstrong, 26, was found decapitated in the park.

Damant recalled speaking to handyman Cary Stayner, who was staying at the resort. "He told me he had to leave Yosemite National Park because there were too many cops," she tells Insight. Initially, she assumed he had been cleared by police because he had been questioned by authorities. She thought nothing more of it until Armstrong turned up dead and Damant ran into Stayner again. "I really messed things up. I am heading north," Damant recalls the handyman saying. She alerted the

FBI to Stayner's strange behavior, and under intense interrogation he confessed to all four killings. The FBI said Damant failed to connect Stayner to the triple murder, and since there was no reward for the Armstrong case, Damant was given nothing.

While Damant received public praise, she was disqualified arbitrarily for the reward. "They haven't given me a reward because I turned him in for the Armstrong case and not the Carrington kids," she says. "My point is if they offered a reward for the arrest and conviction, it should be a binding contract."

Kim Peterson, executive director of the Carole Sund/Carrington Memorial Reward Foundation, says it paid \$50,000 to a tipster who found the burned vehicle. Peterson says the FBI insisted Damant didn't deserve the reward because "only Stayner connected himself to the other women." So did the killer get the cash? "He tried to get it for his family," Peterson says. "The FBI told him, 'No.'"

So where's the outrage? Surprisingly, it doesn't come from Damant. She has refused to file a lawsuit because, she says, "I am not a suing person. I didn't do it for the money." Good citizens such as Damant often just walk away. Nor are tipsters in the underworld likely to do more than complain, because they know the unwritten street rule: Snitches end up in ditches.

The Damant case is far from isolated. For example, **what happened to the reward promised for finding Chandra Levy, murdered girlfriend of former congressman Gary Condit (D-Calif.)? It too can be stamped "Reward Not Paid." The anonymous dog walker who discovered the intern's remains in a park last summer got nothing. The reason? He didn't know those bones were those of Levy, explains Washington Metropolitan Police spokesman Kenneth Bryson. "This is still an open case," he says. "It went from a missing person to a homicide investigation. The dog walker didn't find her -- he found her remains."**

Indeed, there were some qualifiers in the Levy case, including that a reward would be offered for her "safe return." That's why Condit never had to pay his pledge of \$10,000 to a fund that grew to nearly \$250,000 as Washington searched for the missing intern. Most of the Websites that promised big rewards independent of the police reward program simply shut down -- and any cash that may have been collected or pledged will not be dispersed until Levy's killer is brought to justice, police say. As for Condit, he has fallen so far off the political radar screen that he has had to threaten lawsuits for libel to get attention.

The cases in which rewards actually are paid often involve low-profile cases from the files of the nation's 1,150 Crime Stopper programs. They have paid out \$60 million to tipsters since 1976 when they began offering a maximum \$1,000 reward. But even these programs have produced disputes.

For example, in Montgomery County, Md., police spokesman Derek Baliles runs the county's Crime Stopper program, which paid about \$3,000 last year. Baliles says, "We have had sticks shaken at us" for not paying rewards to citizens who thought they deserved them. One such case involved the murder of popular preschool teacher Sue Wen Stottmeister, 48, who in January 2001 was beaten to death on a jogging path by Albert Walter Cook. A witness who helped stop another assault by Cook by calling 911 to alert authorities was not considered instrumental enough in collaring this criminal to merit a payday.

The witness was praised for his life-saving action, but "because he didn't follow the publicly advertised procedure," which means providing information linking the suspect to the crime, he wasn't eligible to receive the reward, Baliles says. Never mind that, if the witness hadn't done exactly what he did, Cook likely would have claimed another victim. Cook subsequently was convicted of the earlier murder.

Says another tipster who helped Montgomery police crack a cold murder case but did not receive a dime of the reward, "What do they expect us to do, perform our own autopsies, do DNA comparison and interrogate suspects? What do they want -- all that and a box of doughnuts? It's absurd! If they don't pay they should do away with the reward programs and stop misleading the public."

Baliles says citizen informants get paid if they follow the rules and fill out the paperwork. But that's hard to do when the police constantly change the rules -- which happened in the Beltway sniper case. Montgomery County Police Chief Charles Moose initially offered a \$500,000 reward for the "arrest and indictment" of the sniper who terrorized the Washington metro area. After the arrest and indictment of Muhammad and Malvo, Moose changed the rules so that no one will be rewarded until every single case involving these alleged perpetrators is tried. Considering there are 19 incidents that left at least 13 people dead across Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Virginia and Washington, it may take years before all the cases are tried and appeals are exhausted.

Moose defended the policy change by saying he was trying to keep defense lawyers from undermining witness testimony by claiming that they are "paid witnesses." But criminologists tell Insight the tipsters probably will be neither needed nor called to testify because authorities have more than enough physical and ballistic evidence to convict the alleged snipers. Fryrear says, "They didn't have to offer money in the sniper case because the public already was coming forward with information."

In the meantime police now are sorting out some 67,000 of the related sniper tips. Authorities are questioning whether Lantz actually called 911 when he spotted the alleged snipers' car at a Maryland rest stop. The trucker says that after he called police he and several other truckers blocked the exit. Authorities claim to have doubts about what happened because they have no record of Lantz making that 911 call. They do, however, have a record of another truck driver, Whitney Donahue of Greencastle, Pa., making a 911 call.

Donahue might have to take a number to collect the reward because others also claim they deserve a piece. How about giving it to Robert Holmes of Washington state, who called the FBI and told the G-men the sniper was Muhammad? Or the Rev. William Sullivan, who claimed the snipers boasted to him about the killings? Then there is Larry Blank, who thinks he has a chance at the reward because he worked at the Frederick, Md., rest stop where the alleged snipers were caught and provided police with information. Perhaps none of these will get any part of the reward if police decide to argue that the forensic technicians are the ones who truly cracked the case.

Meanwhile Lantz, the truck driver who claims to have been first to spot the alleged perps and insists it was he who called 911, says in exasperation, "I don't care if I get the money or not. It should probably go back to the victims."

The only cash turned over in the sniper case so far has been to the families of victims, who have received about \$115,000. No one else has profited by so much as a penny in the case. That soon may change as Moose awaits the outcome of the county ethics probe to determine whether he can go forward with a book and movie deal. If Moose gets his payday prior to any doling out of the reward, expect a public-relations nightmare to erupt. "The public perception is going to be that the tipsters got a raw deal," Fryrear says. "Not only did the authorities not pay the money, but they threw the reward money out in the news to entice information -- and when they got the information, instead of paying the reward, they kept the money."

Until further notice, stamp the sniper case "Reward Not Paid."

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