Spontaneous celebrations of pride, where people pour into the streets to embrace the flag and each other, have mostly become the stuff of sports victories or Twitter-fomented revolutions in the Middle East.

For American celebrations with any equivalence to what resulted from the news of the death of Osama bin Laden, you have to go back to 1945, to V-E and V-J days.

The exultation and pride that was seen in Times Square and ground zero and outside the White House gates Sunday night and Monday is similar to what can be seen in Alfred Eisenstadt’s unforgettable image of a clinch on Times Square, or in the black and white newsreel images of frantic joy marking the end of World War II and the death of Adolf Hitler.

The comparison is inexact because the comparisons only go so far. Sept. 11 may well have been this generation’s Pearl Harbor, but bin Laden killed thousands while Germany and Japan killed millions.

But those who both made and study history recognize the parallels. The sudden, entirely welcome demise of bin Laden is a sort of closure signifying that America remains a defining agent in the game.

"It's fairly distasteful to celebrate death," says Christopher Strain, a professor of history and American studies at the Honors College of Florida Atlantic University in Jupiter. "But I'm not mourning bin Laden's passing, and I certainly understand the celebrations. I think there's a kind of catharsis. People feel relief; perhaps some free-floating anxiety and angst will subside a little bit.

"Certainly, it's an enormous coup for President Obama; nobody can accuse him of being soft on terrorism. Bin Laden's death does not mean the end of terrorism or even the end of Al Qaeda, but it might help to close a painful chapter in U.S. history."

In the long run, the news that bin Laden was taken out after almost 10 years during which his crimes may have receded but had not been forgotten reaffirms an American commitment for restitution and justice that goes back as far as the Nuremberg trials.

As with Nuremberg, justice has to transcend politics.
What makes it even sweeter is our recent doubting of ourselves, our standing and even our national will, which has been forgotten, at least temporarily, in the wake of what the U.S. Navy's Seal Team Six pulled off.

"It's a momentous thing," says George Fisher of Palm Beach, a veteran of the Battle of the Bulge. "They've been chasing him for years and they finally got him. For those who lost people on 9-11, it can't be much comfort, but it can be a conclusion."

Not every veteran agrees.

Gerry Shaw, who lives in Jupiter and fought in the Korean war, says, "I must tell you frankly, I'm looking at young kids in the streets yelling 'USA, USA!', and they're out there with bottles of beer and signs. It's like somebody hit them over the head and told them it's time to party. I don't think it's sincere, and I find that sad. If those same kids had ever showed any kind of sympathy for our troops and what they go through, it would be fine, but you only hear that from adults or people who serve or have feelings."

There's one thing everybody agrees on. Someday, when the young people that are chanting "USA!" today are old, the name Osama bin Laden will become a dusty artifact of the past, just as, say, the Battle of the Bulge is for so many today.

"I was 18 when I joined the Army right after Pearl Harbor," Fisher says. "But a lot of the younger generation doesn't realize that. Academic indifference and cut budgets means that history isn't taught any more. I do presentations about the war at elementary schools, but most kids don't know anything about World War II or what I'm talking about. They think the Battle of the Bulge is a diet plan."