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Wars Should Be Hard to Start

Benjamin H. Friedman U.S. News & World Report

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[The New York Times](#)' report on Special Operation Command's proposal for more authority to deploy troops never quite says what new powers are sought. That vagueness, combined with the murky existing law on deploying special operations forces outside war zones, makes evaluating the proposal tough.

[[Pentagon](#) Budget Ends Post-[9/11](#) Era, Ushers in Pacific Era.]

What is clear is that it is already too easy to deploy special operations forces on lethal missions. [According to the Times](#), 12,000 special operators are deployed abroad and have operated in 70 nations in the last decade. [Other reports](#) claim that special operations forces have lately conducted operations in [Syria](#), Nigeria, [Iran](#), Algeria, and even Peru. In some cases, the special operators are [reportedly collecting intelligence](#), a job various intelligence agencies already have. In others, the special operations forces are seemingly committing acts of war, which should require explicit congressional approval.

It is not clear that Congress has been briefed on these operations, let alone debated them. One can argue about whether they are legal--the statutes governing the special operations forces or the 2001 Authorization of Military Force may provide sufficient authority. But that debate is academic until Congress remembers its war powers. As long as these deployments proceed with little oversight, debate or public knowledge, they will be undemocratic and unwise.

Wars should be hard to start in liberal states. The constitution divides war powers not only to ensure democratic control but also to improve policy. The need to justify policies and compromise makes blunders less likely. The [history of U.S. covert operations](#) demonstrates the point. More debate and oversight of [CIA](#) operations during the Cold War would likely have prevented several military and moral disasters. Efficiency is overrated in defense policy.

[[U.S. Official: 'No Out of the Ordinary' Military Moves on Syria, Iran.](#)]

Certainly the secrecy and dispatch required by some military missions makes democratic debate inappropriate. Much of Special Operations Command's business, like raids on terrorists and hostage rescue, fits that mold. But missions that require limiting democracy should be minimized. The inclination to use force secretly often suggests that we shouldn't use it at all.

Where special operations forces do undertake such missions, the decision to deploy them should be the president's. Because they get elected, they face more democratic control than military leaders. And presidents have a broader perspective. Military commanders, like other agencies' leaders, serve a particular government end. Presidents have incentive to weigh those competing ends, making their decisions better approximations of the national interest.