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Good Counterterrorism Is Cheap, and Expensive Counterterrorism Is Not Good

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| [Justin Logan](#)^[2]

Today's *Washington Post* has an [above-the-fold front page item](#)^[3] on an advanced stealth drone that the CIA apparently used to monitor bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad. According to the *Post*,

Using unmanned planes designed to evade radar detection and operate at high altitudes, the agency conducted clandestine flights over the compound for months before the May 2 assault in an effort to capture high-resolution video that satellites could not provide.

The aircraft allowed the CIA to glide undetected beyond the boundaries that Pakistan has long imposed on other U.S. drones, including the Predators and Reapers that routinely carry out strikes against militants near the border with Afghanistan.

[...]

The stealth drones were used on the night of the raid, providing imagery that President Obama and members of his national security team appear in photographs to have been watching as U.S. Navy SEALs descended on the compound shortly after 1 a.m. in Pakistan. The drones are also equipped to eavesdrop on electronic transmissions, enabling U.S. officials to monitor the Pakistani response.

The CIA never obtained a photograph of bin Laden at the compound or other direct confirmation of his presence before the assault, but the agency concluded after months of watching the complex that the figure frequently seen pacing back and forth was probably the al-Qaeda chief.

This highlights one of the under-appreciated realities of dealing with terrorism: the best ways of dealing with it are often cheap and not particularly emotionally satisfying. In recent weeks I have heard [former Bush administration officials](#)^[4] and read [neoconservative think tankers](#)^[5]

suggesting that bin Laden's death was somehow the product of America's massive defense expenditures.

Balderdash.

The vast, swaying bulk of America's military has absolutely nothing to do with effectively combating terrorism—including the large land armies that we deploy to Muslim countries in efforts to destroy and then reconstitute their states.

Rather, effective counterterrorism is best conducted with relatively cheap means, like patient intelligence work, including cooperation with foreign intelligence services when available, standoff platforms like the RQ-170 discussed in the *Post* article, and small teams of direct actors like SEAL Team 6.

If people want to defend the fact that Washington spends over \$700 billion per year on its military—in spite of the fact that no state or other actor threatens us in a way that requires spending anywhere close to that ^[6]—they really ought to find a different rationale than terrorism.

More by

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[3] http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/cia-flew-stealth-drones-into-pakistan-to-monitor-bin-laden-house/2011/05/13/AF5dW55G_story.html

[4] <http://www.cftni.org/5.3.11libya.pdf>

[5] <http://www.defensestudies.org/cds/you-get-what-you-pay-for>

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