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# Bin Laden raid: A model for how US should fight Afghanistan war?

The US is now waging a troop-heavy counterinsurgency to win Afghan hearts and minds. But the bin Laden raid has boosted critics, who say the Afghanistan war should involve smaller forces and a greater reliance on targeted strikes.



Osama bin Laden's compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, is seen in flames after it was attacked May 1.

(REUTERS)

By Anna Mulrine, Staff writer

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Washington

With the death of Osama bin Laden at the hands of a special operations force commando team on May 1, calls are intensifying to pull US troops out of Afghanistan more quickly and change US strategy in what has become America's longest war.

After all, the argument goes, it was strikes by unmanned US Predator drones that ultimately drove Mr. bin Laden from the ungoverned tribal areas of Pakistan to the comparative affluent garrison town of Abbottabad, and it was US intelligence agencies that found him there. A premier team of Navy SEALs proved how effective the US military can be in small numbers.

Vice President Joe Biden and other US officials have long been advocating for America to end its troop-intensive counterinsurgency strategy of winning hearts and minds, and instead opt for a "counterterrorism" strategy, scaling back the number of soldiers on the ground and concentrating on promptly striking terrorist cells when they crop up. The bin Laden raid has now become their Exhibit A.

## IN PICTURES: Winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan

The "Biden" view, however, still has its share of opponents. The notion of a smaller, more flexible military relying on special forces strikes was tried – and failed – in Iraq before the surge, they say. To abandon the Afghan surge now, when it is beginning to show some signs of progress, would be to ignore the lessons of Iraq, they add.

In 2009, the Pentagon and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton ultimately prevailed in convincing President Obama that a surge of US troops was needed in Afghanistan, with 100,000 currently fighting throughout the country today. But the bin Laden operation has now given critics of that approach fresh momentum.

"I hope the killing of bin Laden signals the chapter of our military being extended in that part of the world will end, and we will conclude that actionable intelligence and clandestine operations will allow us to deal with our enemies effectively," says Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D) of Ohio, a member of the Defense Appropriations Committee.

## Critics speak out

On Monday, a bipartisan group of eight lawmakers similarly said the death of bin Laden "requires us to examine our policy of nation building in Afghanistan."

"We believe it is no longer the best way to defend America against terror attacks, and we urge you to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan that are not crucial to the immediate national security objective of combating Al Qaeda," wrote the congressmen, led by Reps. Peter Walsh (D) of Vermont and Jason Chaffetz (R) of Utah.

In a time of economic crisis, a strategy that relies more heavily on special-forces operations may offer more return on what is currently a tremendous investment, both in money and in political will, says retired Marine Col. T.X. Hammes, a senior research fellow with the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

"We said we got into this war to get Al Qaeda guys," he says. But as their ranks in Afghanistan diminish and the costs of the war escalate, "it's getting harder and harder to argue that," and in turn, to justify continued US troop presence on the ground, he adds.

## Stay the course

The Biden counterterrorism approach has its detractors, most notably Secretary Clinton, as well as military leaders including Gen. David Petraeus, commander of the Afghan war and future director of the CIA. They have plenty of supporters on Capitol Hill, as well. Sen. Lindsey Graham (R) of South Carolina, who sits on the Senate Armed Services Committee, calls the prospect of a stepped-up US troop pullout a "catastrophic blunder."

Opponents to counterterrorism point out that former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld was enamored of special operations forces and a small footprint in Iraq – an approach that was largely discredited after violence began to ebb on the heels of a surge of US troops into the country.

For its part, the White House has said that bin Laden's death will not change US policy. Though troops are scheduled to begin deployment in Afghanistan in July, the numbers are widely expected to be small. "Our agenda, the president's agenda has not changed at all in the last eight days," said White House Press Secretary Jay Carney.

Indeed, to some experts, bin Laden's death is evidence that the current counterinsurgency strategy is working in the most violent areas of the country. "What we're slowly seeing is that the strategy is actually starting to work in the south. It has actually seized the momentum back from the insurgency, and has them on the back heels," says Jeffrey Dressler, an analyst with the Institute for the Study of War in Washington. "I find it troubling that given the state of play we're talking about rushing to the exits."

The point is not simply to eliminate Al Qaeda operatives, which are estimated to number in the dozens in Afghanistan, Mr. Dressler says. Troop operations in Afghanistan, in conjunction with Pakistani military operations across the border, are designed to strike not only Al Qaeda, but also Taliban and other insurgent groups that work with the terrorist group.

"They're designed to squeeze these guys in between, keep them as constrained as possible, and cut down on the amount of terrain they're able to use," he says.

US military officials tend to agree, noting that US troops are still needed for a wide array of other security needs, such as training Afghan security forces.

Special operations strike forces like the Navy SEALs and Delta soldiers often have "great impact, but they're not the be-all and end-all," says Maj. Gen. Richard Mills, commanding general of the first Marine Expeditionary Force, who recently returned from serving as commander of US troops in southwest Afghanistan. "You don't play golf with one club."

## Consequences of change

Pull US troops out, and Al Qaeda operatives, in cooperation with other insurgent groups, will move into the ungoverned spaces and establish bases. That is essentially what had happened in Afghanistan before the surge, Dressler says: "Things spiraled out of control, and nothing short of a massive troop surge was going to get the job done."

It also happened last spring. When military commanders closed small US combat outposts in the violent but remote Korengal Valley to instead focus on protecting Afghan population centers, Al Qaeda operatives entered and set up training camps.

Yet what happened in the Korengal Valley has also bolstered proponents of the smaller footprint "targeted strikes" approach. After Al Qaeda moved back in, US military aircraft bombed the camp and killed a number of foreign fighters, including a wanted Saudi militant.

If US troops pull out of Afghanistan, the Pentagon can do the same thing – destroy training camps if they crop up, says David Rittgers, a former special forces officer and analyst at the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington. What's more, in Afghanistan, unlike Pakistan, US forces would have more leeway to operate, says Mr. Rittgers.

"It would be very similar to what we're doing in Pakistan," he says, "but we'd have more freedom of movement to use drones, and even to use" troops or strike forces.

**IN PICTURES: Winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan**



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