



## ***Special Ops: Obama's Election-Year Gamble***

**President's new strategy relies more on elite commandos**

By **JOHN T. BENNETT**  
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Relying more on special operations forces in Afghanistan and around the globe should help President Obama to get out of one war while increasing the U.S. military's efforts in hot spots around the globe. But it also is a risky election-year gamble.

America's elite commandos have scored a number of high-profile victories in recent months, including the raid in Pakistan that killed al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Buoyed by those missions—and hundreds of classified ones—the commander in chief and his Pentagon leadership believe special operations forces can do even more.

"As we reduce the overall defense budget, we will protect, and in some cases increase, our investments in special operations forces," Defense Secretary Leon Panetta said in January when he and Obama unveiled a new national defense strategy.

The Obama administration's new defense strategy "will affect all elements of the military, [but] its impact on Special Operations Forces is likely to be particularly significant," according to a new Center for Strategic and International Studies report. "Given their ability to operate in a wide range of environments and undertake tactical actions that produce strategic effects, SOF will increasingly be relied on to help address national security threats and challenges on a global scale."

During an exchange last week with New Jersey Democratic Rep. Steven Rothman, a member of a subcommittee that oversees Pentagon spending, Joint Chiefs Chairman Gen. Martin Dempsey—an Army armor officer with no

special operations experience—summed up Washington's newfound love affair with America's elite warriors: "Oh, they're terrific." The lawmaker immediately chimed in with his own homage: "They're amazing."

Special ops forces are the military option du jour for U.S. leaders. But their increased use and popularity are linked directly to one attribute that sets them apart from conventional troops: by definition they are high risk-high reward units.

Two former senior White House officials point out had the Navy SEALs-led bin Laden raid failed, it would have had dire political and operational consequences for Obama and the United States.

A failed mission "would have empowered bin Laden and strengthened the myth of his invincibility; undermined perceptions of U.S. power and credibility on the world stage; and demoralized the American people," Michele Malvesti and Frances Fragos Townsend—both former White House national security officials—wrote in a recent report.

While many administration officials, Pentagon leaders and lawmakers fawn over elite units, Malvesti and Townsend wrote elite troops carry with them "a few negative reputational issues [that] have been earned through the years." The former officials offered some words of warning to current leaders, urging them to be mindful of the past, when many in Washington "developed a 'learned vulnerability' that ... led them to be cautious when it comes to authorizing special operations in politically precarious situations."

The current fascination with SOF units grew out of their countless successes in Iraq and Afghanistan. But a closer examination of those two wars, according to Malvesti and Townsend, shows both to be, for elite units, "relatively permissive and highly enabled environments."

"They only work in regions of the third world where societies are fragile and institutions, if they exist at all, are very weak," says Doug Macgregor, a retired Army officer. "It's why SOF alone are not decisive in a conflict with a capable opponent."

Not every future battlefield will mirror the ones of the last decade, however.

Despite the high risks, just about every regional U.S. commander wants as many elite commandos as he can get his hands on. "The demand for special-operating forces of lots of different flavors is pretty significant in Africa," U.S. Africa Command chief Gen. Carter Ham said in late September. "I'd like more special-operations forces now."

Despite the temptations and risks, defense analysts say it is likely special ops forces' increased role is here to stay.

"The Obama defense strategy shows that we are going to see SOF forces spread out over a larger area of the globe," said Rick "Ozzie" Nelson, a former National Security Council and National Counterterrorism Center official and the author of the CSIS report.

"The combination of technological advantages and being more efficient means SOF can be more effective than indigenous forces," said Chris Preble of the CATO Institute. "Frankly, I like this strategy more than I like a 100,000 conventional forces trying to build failed states."

Experts acknowledged using the elite forces brings political risk for Obama. They were quick to note it remains unclear whether the president plans to ramp up high-risk raids. His new defense plan suggests SOF units will be asked to do "indirect missions" like training and advising local forces, experts said.

"SOF units can take tactical action to get strategic effects-and that is risky," Nelson said. "But using them for training and civil affairs is far less risky."

"I think we're going to see fewer high-risk direct-action missions by SOF" Nelson added. "Obama wanted to get Osama bin Laden. And he already got him."