Combating Terrorism Center
at West Point

Policy Considerations in Combating Terrorism: Decision-Making Under Conditions of Risk and Uncertainty

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About the Author

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Introduction

In May 2011, in what is arguably the United States' most strategically significant counterterrorism (CT) mission to date, a U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) team crossed over 100 miles into Pakistan—a putative CT partner—without informing the host government, infiltrated a residential compound that stood in proximity to a military academy, and killed Usama bin Ladin, the leader of al-Qa'ida and the individual ultimately responsible for the deadliest terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.

In deciding to approve the raid, President Barack Obama had the potential to produce important strategic and operational gains in combating terrorism. A successful raid would help to:

- Erode the myth of invincibility surrounding the 9/11 mastermind who had eluded capture for nearly a decade;
- Deprive the most operationally active anti-U.S. terrorist group of its leader and ideological founder;
- Affirm the American people's confidence in their government's ability to combat terrorism; and
- Demonstrate to the rest of the world that the United States follows through on its commitments—that when America says it will bring a terrorist to justice, it can and will do what it says it is going to do.

A failed raid, on the other hand, had the potential to produce among the worst losses or negative outcomes in combating terrorism:

- Embolden the terrorist leader and his followers;
- Rupture beyond repair the relationship with the government of Pakistan on future CT cooperation;
- Incur casualties among the commandos; and
- Call into question the ability of the United States to combat terrorism globally after a decade of dedicated investments and persistent CT operations.

The consequences of failure likely would have had implications well beyond CT policy and strategy. President Obama perceived that repercussions involving larger U.S. strategic interests were possible, acknowledging, "Obviously I knew that if we were unsuccessful, there was a potential for not only loss of life…but also there'd be huge geopolitical ramifications."[1] Vice President Joe Biden expected significant political losses if the raid failed. He asserted that in authorizing the daring mission into Pakistan, Obama placed "his entire future on the line as president of the United States of

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[1] Barack Obama, on-camera statement, History Channel's *Targeting Bin Laden*, aired 6 September 2011.

America."[2] While a failed raid would not necessarily have guaranteed a defeat at the polls for the president in 2012, arguably it would have undermined American prestige and perceptions of U.S. military strength on the world stage, jeopardizing the prospects for reelection.

Jimmy Carter placed his presidency on the line in 1980 when he approved a SOF mission to rescue over fifty Americans held hostage at the U.S. embassy in Tehran.[3] In stark contrast to the operation against Bin Ladin, however, the rescue attempt ended in failure. After the assault force commander aborted the mission when mechanical problems reduced the number of helicopters that were available to complete the operation, a helicopter and an aircraft collided during refueling for departure, killing eight U.S. servicemen. Commonly referred to as Desert One, the name given to the rendezvous site in Iran where the tragedy took place, the operational failure inflamed domestic and international perceptions of American impotence in resolving a crisis of national embarrassment. Ultimately, it contributed to Carter's reelection defeat at the polls later that year. After the mission, then-National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski commented in an interview, "Everyone recognized that the operation was risky. We also know from history that there are moments in which a certain amount of risk has to be taken."[4]

The classic definition of risk focuses on known probabilistic outcomes and utilities. Yet when most individuals consider the concept of risk, they rarely refer to numerical calculations of probability and utility; rather, they tend to focus on loss or adverse consequences. Contrary to its traditional focus, risk has come to be associated almost exclusively with negative outcomes, as well as with conditions of uncertainty, and this is particularly the case in the national security or foreign policy arena.[5] In this vein, the

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[2] Michael A. Memoli, "Biden Sees Bin Laden Raid, Ryan Budget as Game-Changers in 2012 Campaign," *Los Angeles Times*, 25 May 2011. Vice President Biden continued: "The American people watched him execute the decision—not only putting the lives of those special operators on the line, but his entire future on the line as president of the United States of America. And he didn't hesitate." Ibid.

[3] The seizure of fifty-three American hostages at the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979 would prove to be a critical event in modern state sponsored international terrorism. See Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 185-187.

[4] Rose McDermott, *Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 73 (quoting Zbigniew Brzezinski in an interview with Sam Donaldson).

[5] The primary association of risk with negative outcomes plays out in everyday interactions, and the academic literature on risk shows a similar evolution away from probability and utility and toward negative outcomes and uncertainty in how people come to think about risk. For a brief overview, see William A. Boettcher III, *Presidential Risk Behavior in Foreign Policy: Prudence or Peril* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 17-20.

more risky moments in combating terrorism arguably involve the use of force abroad, where there is violence of action and lives are placed directly in harm's way.[6] Often considered an option of last resort, the use of force abroad rests primarily with two instruments of national power. The first instrument is the military.[7] Although many traditional military activities, such as some overt or blunt uses of force, are less effective or applicable against terrorist networks, Special Operations are tailored to counter non-state and networked actors, and counterterrorism has been one of the core activities for SOF for more than two decades.[8] The use of force also is inherent in the instrument of intelligence and, more specifically, kinetic operations that are conducted as part of

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[6] Operationalizing risk in foreign policy decisions is challenging, and different disciplines and researchers offer different approaches. William Boettcher, who examines presidential risk behavior, has described comparatively riskier policy options as those with: "(a) more numerous and extremely divergent outcomes, (b) the perception that extreme negative outcomes are at least possible, and (c) recognition that estimates of potential outcomes and the probabilities associated with the occurrence of those outcomes are potentially flawed and may, in fact, be totally incorrect." Boettcher, 20, 171. While the riskiness of any instrument of national power or particular choice option is best determined in the context of a specific situation, for the purposes of this paper readers can intuit that some instruments—even in the abstract—are more likely to involve greater risks than others. Take, for instance, diplomatic, informational and financial efforts to combat terrorism on the one hand, and military CT efforts on the other. Reasonable readers will disagree over which of the four instruments are more likely to create better opportunities or gains in disrupting a threat or defeating a terrorist organization. They also might debate the extent to which each option will produce either divergent or more constrained outcomes. Yet many would concede that, all other things being equal, the potential negative outcomes associated with diplomatic, informational and financial CT efforts are less likely to be as grave as those associated with military activities, where violence of action is involved and human lives are often placed directly at risk.

[7] The literature on uses of military force abroad includes studies on war, uses of force short of war, political uses of force and varying degrees of military action. In order to distinguish such uses of force from covert action, this paper employs the term "traditional military activities." When Congress approved the new statutory definition of covert action (signed into law in 1991), it also statutorily excluded four categories of activities from the definition (see footnote 9 for covert action definition). "Traditional military activities" were one of the categories that would not be considered to constitute covert action. See Joint Explanatory Statement of the Committee of Conference, H.R. 1455, 25 July 1991.

[8] The U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) does not assert exclusivity or ownership over the military's counterterrorism efforts. While he was Commander, USSOCOM, Admiral Eric T. Olson stated, "There are currently 12 activities that are specifically assigned to United States Special Operations Command. Most of them are included in the original legislation that establishes they are defined as core special operations activities insofar as they relate to special operations forces. *This does not give Special Operations Command ownership of any of these activity areas, but it does mean that within each of these activity areas, there are tasks that are peculiar to special operations in nature* and therefore our responsibility to prepare a force to conduct." Admiral Eric T. Olson, "Remarks on USSOCOM: Function and Focus," given at Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Military Leaders Forum (1 April 2010), http://csis.org/files/ attachments/100401_olson_transcript.pdf (emphasis added).

covert action.[9] Both Special Operations and kinetic forms of covert action play important roles in disrupting the lifecycle of terrorism and degrading terrorist organizations. They can be used to destroy, sabotage or neutralize the weapons, infrastructure, and organizational assets that terrorists rely upon for their operations; deny physical sanctuaries; and help surrogate and other indigenous forces conduct operations against mutual enemies. They also can be used to capture or kill terrorists who threaten the safety and security of the United States and to rescue U.S citizens held hostage abroad.

When faced with a decision to approve a Special Operation or a kinetic form of covert action in combating terrorism, presidents and their national security teams take into account a range of political and operational considerations. Drawing on examples from the Bin Ladin raid and the Iranian hostage rescue mission, this paper examines six such considerations:
1. Confidence in the intelligence,
2. Challenges of sovereignty,
3. Sensitivity to casualties,
4. Assessments of effectiveness,
5. Comfort with the operational units, and
6. Pressures to take action.[10]

In the face of terrorist enemies who remain capable and intent on attacking the United States, these six policy dimensions will continue to define many U.S. decisions to combat terrorism under conditions of risk and uncertainty for the foreseeable future.

Policymaker Considerations

Consideration #1: Confidence in the Intelligence. One of the roles of intelligence is to help policymakers manage risk and reduce uncertainty during the national security

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[9] Glenn Hastedt asserts, "The four elements of intelligence are clandestine collection, analysis and estimates, covert action, and counter-intelligence." Glenn Hastedt, "Controlling Intelligence: Defining the Problem," in Glenn Hastedt, ed., *Controlling Intelligence* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 6. Covert action is defined in Title 50 of the U.S. Code as "an activity or activities of the United States Government to influence political, economic, or military conditions abroad, where it is intended that the role of the United States Government will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly." See National Security Act 1947, Title 50 U.S. Code, Sec. 503 (e), 413b. Covert action can involve a wide spectrum of activities, both kinetic and non-kinetic. Examples include lethal uses of force, paramilitary operations, propaganda and both political and economic activities to influence the leadership of strategically significant countries.
[10] While numbered for ease of reading, these six considerations are not ranked in any particular order.

decision-making process. Tom Fingar, who served thirty-five years as a professional in the U.S. intelligence community, writes:

> [T]he primary purpose of intelligence inputs into the decision-making process is to reduce uncertainty, identify risks and opportunities, and, by doing so, deepen understanding so that those with policy-making responsibilities will make "better" decisions. Being better informed does not guarantee better decisions, but being ill informed or misinformed certainly reduces the likelihood of policy success.[11]

Counterterrorism operations involving Special Operations or covert action are often time-sensitive and intelligence-intensive. In deciding whether to approve such operations, the level of confidence that policymakers have in the precision and accuracy of the underlying intelligence can prove dispositive. The extent to which policymakers are confident in the (hypothetical) analytic assessments that al-Qa'ida terrorists are actually operating at a training camp; a high value individual has been properly identified and accurately placed at a location; or that terrorists are preparing for imminent operations against the United States or its interests abroad can affect their propensity to approve, reject or even consider particular courses of action.

President Obama's decision to proceed with the raid against Usama bin Ladin is noteworthy in this regard. The case that the terrorist was actually living at the compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan was largely circumstantial, and assessments from multiple senior intelligence officers regarding confidence in the intelligence varied dramatically. Obama noted in one interview that in the meetings leading up to the final approval, these assessments ranged from 30-90 percent.[12]

Few missions, if any, offer 100 percent certainty in information accuracy, and policymakers are routinely called upon to make decisions with incomplete, inconsistent and even contradictory information. While greater degrees of certainty are preferable, the lowest probability that will give policymakers comfort in recommending a particular course of action will vary by person and situation. That said, a *reduction* in the probability that the intelligence is accurate just prior to a decision to approve or reject a

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[11] Thomas Fingar, *Reducing Uncertainty: Intelligence Analysis and National Security* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 25.

[12] President Obama specifically stated, "Some of our intelligence officers thought that it was only a 40 or 30 percent chance that Bin Ladin was in the compound. Others thought it was as high as 80 or 90 percent. At the conclusion of a fairly lengthy discussion where everybody gave their assessments, I said, 'This is basically 50-50.' It was circumstantial. We couldn't know for certain." Barack Obama, on-camera statement, History Channel's *Targeting Bin Laden*, aired 6 September 2011.

risky CT mission can lead to a greater sense of risk aversion. This occurred during the Bin Ladin raid deliberations. The Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) previously had given a 60-70 percent probability that Bin Ladin was at the compound, but a separate, independent Red Team—designed to provide fresh analysis by those not involved in the process and conducted just days before the president was to make his decision—assessed the likelihood at 40-60 percent.[13] This reduced level of confidence affected members of the president's national security team:

- John Brennan, Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, observed, "When some of the principals heard [the Red Team's assessment], it was like, 'Whoa, wait a minute, we thought…the prospects were higher of his being there.' And the president recognized that when people were saying, 'Well, there is only a 40 percent chance,' that some people were going to get a little bit soft on this."[14]

- Ben Rhodes, Deputy National Security Adviser for Strategic Communications, echoed this sentiment: "There was a deflation in the room, because what you are looking for as you're getting closer to the call is greater certainty, not less. So essentially it played into all of the fears that people had about what could go wrong—is this worth the risk?"[15]

Two other issues related to intelligence also can affect those at the decision-making table. The first is whether additional information can be collected that will improve the levels of confidence. Intelligence had been collected against the residence in Abbottabad over the course of many months. At some point, however, the president and his national security team must weigh two imperatives against one another: the likelihood of obtaining significantly new insight through additional collection, and the need to render a decision on the proposal in front of them. Michael Leiter, the Director of the National Counterterrorism Center at the time of the raid, observes:

> The possibility of additional intelligence collection significantly factors into the decision-making calculus of whether and when an operation should be launched. Sometimes those advising the president will request more time in the hopes of collecting better intelligence that will guide the decision. Enhanced collection related to the compound in Abbottabad,

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[13] Documentary narration, History Channel's *Targeting Bin Laden*, aired 6 September 2011.

[14] John Brennan, on-camera statement, History Channel's *Targeting Bin Laden*, aired 6 September 2011.

[15] Ben Rhodes, on-camera statement, History Channel's *Targeting Bin Laden*, aired 6 September 2011.

however, was not likely. In light of this, I was significantly swayed to support the raid.[16]

A second additional issue is the *comparative* levels of confidence in the intelligence from an *historical perspective*. Leiter, who pulled together the independent Red Team analysis, emphasizes:

> In terms of my own comfort with the analysis, I took account not only of the percentage of confidence—40-60 percent—but also how this compared to historic levels of confidence in Bin Laden's whereabouts. The salient point I made to the president during the deliberations was that even if I accept the lower end confidence level of 40 percent, that level is still 38 percent higher than our confidence over the past 10 years. And that makes a huge difference in my view.[17]

Ultimately, there was a lack of consensus among Obama's national security team regarding whether to proceed with the raid, based in part on the nature of the underlying intelligence. National Security Adviser Tom Donilon has stated, "[The president] received divided counsel. There were some of his most senior advisers who advocated against doing this. Thought it was too risky. Thought the case too circumstantial."[18] Yet in deciding to approve the raid into the Abbottabad compound, the president digested the varying probability assessments that had been presented and determined for himself that there was a 50 percent likelihood that the man responsible for 9/11 would be at the compound that had been under surveillance for eight months. Obama acknowledged, "Even though I thought it was only 50-50 that Bin Ladin was there, I thought it was worth us taking a shot."[19]

Consideration #2: Challenges of Sovereignty. The most significant terrorist threats and challenges to the United States today do not emanate from "hot" battlefields, but rather from countries with which the United States is not at war. In addressing terrorism that arises from such non-traditional and ambiguous battlefields, policymakers confront the issue of sovereignty. Respect for sovereignty and the associated norm of non-intervention remain the basis of today's international order. Policymakers must weigh

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[16] Michael Leiter, email exchange with the author, 23 October 2011.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Thomas E. Donilon, on-camera statement, History Channel's *Targeting Bin Laden*, aired 6 September 2011.

[19] Barack Obama, on-camera statement, History Channel's *Targeting Bin Laden*, aired 6 September 2011.

respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity against the security interests of the United States, and this will vary by country and situation.

One factor affecting this decision is the level of CT partnership the United States has with the country in question. Since 9/11, many—if not most—successes against al-Qa'ida and other terrorist groups have been made possible through effective CT relationships with allies and partners. The ideal host nation partner in combating terrorism is a functioning state that is governed by the rule of law, has the ability to extend its writ, holds common values and shares a history of successful collaboration with the United States against mutual terrorist enemies. In the case of such willing, able and reliable partners, the United States routinely relies upon that state to address terrorism within its own borders.

The United States, however, does not always get such ideal partners. Take failed states. In general, failed states can serve as breeding grounds, transit points and sanctuaries for terrorists and other violent sub-national actors who support them. Terrorists and their supporters exploit ungoverned and ill-governed areas that exist throughout the state, leveraging gaps in security and governance and capitalizing on social instability in order to advance their operational activities and ideological goals. The perennial failed state of Somalia, an oft-cited example of such a terrorist safe haven, presents a continual challenge for the CT community.[20] The Somalia-based terrorist group al-Shabaab attracts recruits from around the world, including American citizens; core leaders are aligned ideologically with al-Qa'ida;[21] and the presence of al-Qa'ida elements within the group enables al-Shabaab to develop trans-regional ties with other al-Qa'ida affiliates who use the region as a key operating area. In contrast with willing and able partners inside highly functioning states, however, the United States tends to lack a reliable host nation partner, or any host nation partner at all, in combating terrorism inside failed or failing states. Although the United States might not be inclined to conduct certain operations inside a state like Somalia for other policy reasons (such as not wanting to "Americanize" the problem), the United States risks drawing little international condemnation or other political ramifications for combating terrorism in a place that has virtually no functioning state institutions.[22]

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[20] "Failed States Index 2009," *Foreign Policy*, 22 June 2009. Somalia also was listed as the preeminent failed state in the 2010 Index, making it the number one failed state three years in a row.
[21] Despite the ideological leanings of some al-Shabaab core leadership, the majority of rank-and-file members are motivated more by Somali nationalist concerns.
[22] Failed States Index 2009, Somalia Country Report.

The more challenging states for the U.S. counterterrorism community are not truly failed ones, but rather those states that have under-governed or ill-governed territories that terrorists exploit and are functioning just enough to help the United States combat common enemies. In some instances, the state will be a weak but willing partner, committed to combating terrorism but lacking the ability to act effectively. In other instances, the state will prove reluctant to collaborate with the United States, perhaps due to internal political cleavages or fears of external threats. When the United States works with weak but willing countries or is able to persuade a reluctant state to cooperate on a CT mission, even the direct involvement of the given host nation does not entirely mitigate the potential consequences that policymakers often consider when weighing decisions to conduct operations on the sovereign territory of another state. Many CT operations demand secrecy and low-visibility. However, if an operation becomes public—as operations often now do—the direct involvement of U.S. military or intelligence personnel could embarrass that host nation's leader, empower his opposition, unleash or inflame internal unrest and ultimately lead to a backlash inimical to broader U.S. strategic interests. The potential for negative outcomes is greater if the leader had not previously disclosed to his public that he had allowed U.S. forces to operate inside the country (whether in a leading or supporting role). These effects could be particularly pronounced if the population of the host nation in question—separate from the country's leadership—is vehemently anti-American, or if the leader of a highly fractured government with competing sources of authority had not informed other officials of the collaborative effort with the United States.

Negative outcomes often are magnified in scenarios where the host government's leader or security services must be kept altogether unwitting of the forthcoming action lest the entire operation be placed in jeopardy. Sometimes such secrecy is necessary because the country is hostile to the United States, as was the case in the Iranian hostage rescue attempt. Other times, it is because the country, while not altogether hostile, does not share with the United States a common view of the terrorist enemy, the urgency of the threat or how to address it. The unilateral conduct of a CT operation within the territory of an unwitting state could prove detrimental to U.S. interests by inciting international censure against the United States, strengthening the narrative of the terrorists, and impeding America's ability to act in the future. In the case of a hostile state, that country could perceive U.S. violations of its territory, particularly U.S. "boots on the ground" in a CT operation, as a grave provocation, even an act of war. In the case of unilateral operations on the territory of an unreliable or unresponsive partner, the United States at a minimum risks hampering CT cooperation with that country in the future, even if that partner had given tacit consent to similar operations in the past.

The specific state of the relationship between the countries at hand is particularly

salient. Consider the CT relationship between the United States and Pakistan before the Bin Ladin raid. It is worth noting that this partnership had been sub-optimal, if not broken, for quite some time before the raid. Yet rather than influencing policymakers toward an aversion to risk, a soured relationship could have the potential to broaden the aperture for risk-seeking activities. Juan Zarate, who served as Deputy National Security Adviser for Combating Terrorism from 2005 until 2009, observes:

> When weighing the challenges of sovereignty, decision-makers must take into account the state of relations between the countries and what the event represents. During the time of the President's deliberations with his national security team regarding the proposed raid, there not only had been growing displeasure with the Pakistanis on CT, but also a deterioration in the relationship due to the festering Raymond Davis incident. The decision could have been seen as either having the potential to rupture fundamentally the relationship or as a point of clarity to force improvement. The latter view may have prevailed in light of the intelligence with the sense that "things can't get much worse."[23]

Consideration #3: Casualty Sensitivity.[24] Policymakers take into account operational hazards when contemplating CT missions that involve the use of force abroad. One such hazard is the potential for unintended casualties, which can occur through errors in targeting or when force is applied indiscriminately. Collateral damage (as it is commonly called) is always a possibility when employing force, but its effects can be magnified when such incidents occur outside recognized zones of war. This is particularly true for those operations focused on capturing or killing senior terrorist leaders. Such individuals are adept at seeking refuge in residential or other populated areas in order to deter outside forces from conducting an operation, as well as hiding in physically challenging environments that decrease their susceptibility to an attack.

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[23] Juan Zarate, email exchange with author, 31 October 2011. Raymond Davis reportedly was a contractor for the CIA who, following a deadly shooting incident in Lahore in January 2011, was jailed by Pakistani authorities, leading to a diplomatic furor between the United States and Pakistan. Davis was released in March 2011.

[24] The author thanks Peter Feaver for recommending use of the term "casualty sensitivity." Feaver's work with Christopher Gelpi and Jason Reifler makes distinctions among the phrases "casualty tolerance," "casualty sensitivity," "casualty shyness," "casualty aversion" and "casualty phobia." Borrowing, in part, from their distinctions, the use of "casualty sensitivity" in this paper means that the public and policymakers consider "casualties as a negative, preferring less if possible." See Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 8.

American casualties among those conducting the mission are a second potential operational hazard. When asked about the most difficult aspect of authorizing the commando raid in order to bring Bin Ladin to justice, President Obama answered, in part, "[M]y number one concern was: if I send them in, can I get them out?"[25] Fearing for the safety of those military or intelligence personnel who will execute a risky CT operation is a common policymaker consideration. According to Frances Fragos Townsend, who served as Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism during the George W. Bush administration, senior CT officials often weighed whether an operator would be captured, for example, in the course of an operation.[26] This was out of concern for the individual's welfare, but also out of fear that the enemy would use that captured individual as public leverage against U.S. policy interests.[27]

Technological innovation, such as in weapons systems that enable remote-controlled operations, stand-off delivery and precision targeting, allows the United States to use force in combating terrorism while at the same time limiting both collateral damage and the extent to which U.S. forces are placed directly in harm's way. Yet placing military or intelligence personnel on the ground or in an otherwise precarious situation often is necessary or preferable, either because the particular scenario requires it or doing so will help to achieve a better tactical gain or strategic outcome. Only an assault force, for example, can rescue hostages. Capturing terrorists also involves placing individuals in harm's way, but often proves invaluable in cultivating strategic intelligence and obtaining information that can save lives. President Obama understood the benefits that could be gained by sending in an assault force in the specific case of the operation against Bin Ladin. In his first interview after the raid, he stated:

> [I]n some ways sending in choppers and actually putting our guys on the ground entailed some greater risks than some other options. I thought it was important, though, for us to be able to say that we'd definitely got the guy. We thought that it was important for us to be able to exploit potential information that was on the ground in the compound if it did turn out to be him.[28]

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[25] "Obama on bin Laden: The Full '60 Minutes' Interview," *CBS News*, transcript, 8 May 2011. The interview was conducted on 4 May 2011.

[26] Frances Fragos Townsend, interview with author, 25 March 2010.

[27] Ibid.

[28] "Obama on bin Laden: The Full '60 Minutes' Interview."

Policymakers are not the only ones concerned with U.S. casualties that can occur during an operation; the American people also are sensitive to the death or capture of their fellow citizens. This sensitivity, however, should not be equated with zero tolerance. In challenging the conventional wisdom that the American public is extremely averse to casualties, various studies demonstrate that the American people do not necessarily demand zero casualties as much as they are influenced by mission success. Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, for instance, find:

> [C]asualty phobia is not the dominant feature of the general public. On the contrary, policymakers can tap into a large reservoir of support for missions, even missions that entail a fairly high human price, provided those missions are successful. The public is defeat phobic, not casualty phobic.[29]

Richard Eichenberg examined U.S. public opinion data on the use of military force from 1981 through early 2005. He concludes that mentioning the prospect of U.S. casualties in polls tends to lower the public's support for military operations *before* the use of force begins, but once an action is underway, the public's support is contingent upon the success or failure of the operation rather than the number of U.S. casualties that occur during its execution.[30] The assault against Usama bin Ladin was made all the more extraordinary that not one single U.S. life was lost during the operation. Even if the assault team had incurred casualties, Eichenberg's research suggests that Americans likely would have concluded that "it was worth it" if the mission still yielded a similar victorious outcome.[31] President Obama appears to have drawn such a conclusion. When asked about the advantages outweighing the risks of failure involved in the operation, the president noted:

> I concluded that it was worth it. And the reason that I concluded it was worth it was that we have devoted enormous blood and treasure in

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[29] Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 97.

[30] Richard C. Eichenberg, "Victory Has Many Friends: U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981-2005," *International Security* 30, no. 1 (Summer 2005), 175.

[31] Eichenberg notes that the public's support in this regard is indicative of a cost-benefit analysis: "If the United States accomplishes what it sets out to do, citizens generally respond that it was 'worth it.' If the mission fails, public support is withdrawn." Ibid. Separately, various polls conducted immediately after the raid show that Americans overwhelming supported the operation that killed Bin Ladin. A survey by Rasmussen Reports has American approval at 86 percent, while one USA Today/Gallup poll showed that 93 percent approved of the operation. See "86% Approve of Obama's Decision to Kill bin Laden," *Rasmussen Reports*, 4 May 2011; "Americans Back Bin Laden Mission; Credit Military, CIA Most," *Gallup*, 3 May 2011.

fighting back against al Qaeda. Ever since 2001…. And I said to myself that if we have a good chance of not completely defeating but badly disabling al Qaeda, then it was worth both the political risks *as well as the risks to our men*.[32]

Consideration #4: Assessments of Effectiveness. The extent to which they assess that a proposed Special Operation or covert action is likely to be effective is a fourth issue that policymakers will take into account. Such assessments, however, are rarely straightforward, since operations can be evaluated across multiple, even competing, dimensions. In the specific case of Special Operations, for example, Hy Rothstein measures effectiveness in terms of unit performance, effects on target and strategic outcome.[33] *Unit performance* focuses on whether the operational entity charged with conducting the mission plans and executes to the standards of its training. While military leaders will be concerned with unit performance, policymakers generally will not delve into such assessments. In contrast, policymakers certainly will be seized with evaluating *effects on target:* is the unit likely to accomplish its given mission? Will the SOF team be able to kill terrorist X, capture extremist Y, or rescue hostage Z? Over the decade since 9/11, SOF have become more operationally adept and combat capable than ever before.[34] Their tactical aptitude directly influenced President Obama's decision to proceed with the Bin Ladin raid. He has stated:

> The fact that our Special Forces [sic] have become so good—these guys perform at levels that 20, 30 years ago would not have happened—I think finally gave me the confidence to say, "Let's go ahead." I think that the American people have some sense of how good these guys are, but until you actually see 'em and meet them, it's hard to describe how courageous, how tough, how skilled, how precise they are. And it was because of their skills that I ended up having confidence to make the decision.[35]

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[32] "Obama on bin Laden: The Full '60 Minutes' Interview" (emphasis added).

[33] Hy Rothstein, telephone interview with author, 20 October 2010.

[34] For a discussion on the growth, deployments and transformation of SOF since 9/11, see Michele L. Malvesti, *To Serve the Nation: U.S. Special Operations Forces in an Era of Persistent Conflict,* Center for a New American Security (June 2010).

[35] "Obama on bin Laden: The Full '60 Minutes' Interview." The author notes that although Barack Obama in his interview referred to the forces that conducted the Bin Ladin raid as "Special Forces," this is not accurate. A more accurate (albeit general) descriptor would be Special Operations Forces, or SOF. The SOF community comprises many tribes, including four service components, one each for the Army, Navy, Air Force and the Marine Corps. Within SOF, the term "Special Forces" is used to connote designated groups from the U.S. Army Special Forces Command, which in itself is just one part of the larger U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC). For more information on the various tribes within SOF, see Malvesti, 9-11.

Despite the successful execution of the raid into Abbottabad, some policymakers are still likely to experience a degree of concern regarding the viability of risky SOF missions in the future. Such doubts would not be entirely misplaced. Virtually every Special Operation is a conjunctive event involving multiple moving parts and stages that must be brought together as one mission. While SOF today are more proficient in executing each stage of a mission as compared to before 9/11, the orchestration of all these stages remains an overriding challenge. Compound probabilities indicate that the overall probability of a conjunctive event tends to be lower than the probability of its component stages. Take, for example, a hypothetical CT mission that has three broad stages: infiltrate a country, raid a compound and exfiltrate out of the country. If each stage is estimated to have, say, an 80 percent probability of success, the overall probability of the mission being successful is not 80 percent but rather only 51 percent (.80 x .80 x .80 = .512). The success of the Bin Ladin raid notwithstanding, the inherent vulnerabilities of orchestration tend to be exacerbated in non-permissive operating environments, such as in the territory of peer or near-peer competitor states or unwitting partner nations.

Policymakers also are likely to consider a third dimension on which a CT mission can be evaluated—*strategic outcome*.[36] While an operational entity might prove successful in unit performance and achieving the desired effects on target, such successes do not always translate into durable outcomes that facilitate U.S. strategic objectives. Often, policymakers will disagree among themselves whether a particular course of action will produce a desired strategic outcome. Consider a hypothetical operation to target and destroy a terrorist training camp in a country with which the United States is not at war. Those at the decision-making table might all agree with the intelligence assessments that show terrorists are operating at the camp. They might also agree that U.S. military or intelligence assets will be able to neutralize the site successfully and with minimal collateral damage. Some might disagree, however, whether destroying the camp will

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[36] Many within the national security establishment use the term "strategic effects," but Hy Rothstein makes a distinction between effects and outcomes. In a draft chapter for a forthcoming book, Rothstein explains: "It is important to differentiate between effects and outcomes. The military has liberally used the word 'effects' for decades. In fact, 'effects based operations' were a part of strategic discussions until the concept lost its cache. Effects are generally short term and are brought about by concentrating resources in a specific location for a specific purpose. For example, the increased tempo of recent operations around the Taliban's stronghold of Kandahar has produced favorable effects. Will these positive effects persist when security forces depart? 'Outcomes' constitute a higher order of concern related to the above question. 'Outcomes' are long lasting, durable, permanent effects that are self-sustaining." Hy Rothstein, "America's Longest War," in *Afghan Endgames*, ed. Hy Rothstein and John Arquilla (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, expected 2012). Information provided to author by Rothstein via email, 14 June 2011.

have an appreciable and significant effect on the terrorist network. And while they are all likely to concur that a tactical failure could produce severe strategic consequences, some will argue that even the successful destruction of the camp could produce unintended and unacceptable strategic costs, including costs in policy areas beyond the narrow issue of combating terrorism.

When operational hazards manifest themselves—in the form of collateral damage, American casualties or mission failure—there are consequences beyond the hazard itself. The Iranian hostage rescue attempt is instructive in this regard. Both the decision to abort the mission mid-stream due to problems with the helicopters and the death of eight servicemen that occurred during departure preparations were intrinsically tragic events. Yet the operational failure at Desert One also injured U.S. standing on the world stage, highlighted foreign perceptions of American military impotence and raised questions regarding Carter's ability to lead the United States.

When asked if the Iranian hostage rescue mission weighed on him during his decision to approve the raid into Abbottabad, President Obama acknowledged that he "absolutely" thought about the hostage rescue attempt, as well as the 1993 battle in Mogadishu that is popularly referred to as Black Hawk Down.[37] Policymakers often use history in general, and historical analogies in particular, in order to better understand or characterize a situation, as well as to help generate policy options to resolve it.[38] Given certain parallels between the 1980 rescue mission and the raid to get Bin Ladin, it would have been surprising if either President Obama or one of the principals advising him had *not* invoked Desert One as an analogy to what can go wrong as a result of combating terrorism under conditions of risk and uncertainty, as both operations involved clandestinely flying a SOF team over long distances in helicopters into an unwitting country, and both involved direct action raids in response to the defining anti-U.S. terrorism event of their time period.

That said, the Desert One—Bin Ladin analogy is flawed in at least three ways when looking at risk from an operational lens.[39] First, the failure at Desert One became a watershed event for SOF. Within weeks, the Joint Chiefs of Staff chartered a Special Operations Review Group—also known as the Holloway Commission after its

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[37] "Obama on bin Laden: The Full '60 Minutes' Interview."

[38] For examples of the ways in which presidents and their advisers have used history, see Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

[39] The author thanks Bill Boettcher for suggesting she draw out the differences she has observed between the two operations.

chairman Admiral James L. Holloway—in order to "independently appraise the rescue attempt [and] recommend improvements in planning, organizing, coordinating, directing, and controlling any such operations in the future."[40] Of note, the investigative panel recommended the establishment of a Counterterrorist Joint Task Force.[41] Modern day SOF units are direct beneficiaries of the Holloway Commission recommendations and other reforms implemented throughout the 1980s and 1990s that have strengthened the Special Operations community both operationally and institutionally.

Second, the 9/11 era accelerated SOF transformation.[42] In the wake of the attacks, Special Operations moved from a peripheral to a central role in addressing the country's primary national security challenges, and persistent combat operations over the ensuing decade enabled SOF to hone their tactics, techniques and procedures. SOF further advanced their operational capabilities after 9/11 by investing in relationships across departments and agencies in Washington and by achieving forward, on-the-ground success through various Joint Interagency Task Forces. Coupled with continuing technological innovation, the outer operational limits and capabilities of the 2011 task force that killed Bin Ladin far eclipsed those of the 1980 task force sent to rescue the hostages in Iran.

Finally, there are notable differences between the two missions regarding the actions on the objectives. An attempt to rescue over fifty innocents in a hostage barricade situation is operationally more complex than targeting one terrorist in his residence. It is important to recall, however, that the rescue mission was aborted before the commandos reached the U.S. embassy in Tehran. In this regard, it is perhaps more appropriate to compare actions on the objective in the Bin Ladin raid with other, more recent SOF missions, such as those undertaken against well-defended and hard-fought targets in Iraq and Afghanistan, particularly those in which the enemy was expecting an attack or was otherwise sensitive to an approach by U.S. forces. The raid into Abbottabad, like many Special Operations, was operationally sophisticated, and the narrow margins for timing and execution imposed an additional measure of complexity on the mission. It also was not devoid of peril. Yet comparisons between the Bin Ladin raid and other SOF missions, including the 1980 hostage rescue mission, should take into account differences in their operational profiles. The utility of analogical reasoning will depend, in part, on the relevance of the invoked analogy to the current situation and whether the decision-makers now at the table draw the right historical lessons.

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[40] U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Special Operations Review Group, *Rescue Mission Report* (Washington: GPO, August 1980), 1.

[41] Ibid., 61.

[42] For more information on the post-9/11 evolution of SOF, see Malvesti.

Whether or not President Obama and his advisers actively dissected the similarities and differences between the two missions, the units involved in the Bin Ladin raid were positioned for success in ways that those involved in the Iranian hostage rescue mission were not.

Consideration #5: Comfort with the Operational Units. When policymakers convene to discuss a proposed CT operation, they determine what they would like to accomplish and then think through which instruments of national power and specific operational units have the requisite capabilities to perform the mission. Yet while a particular military or intelligence unit might have proven its ability in the past, that does not necessarily mean that all those at the decision-making table will be sufficiently comfortable with using that entity in the future. Lack of comfort, which could affect not only which department or agency will be tasked with the operation, but also whether policymakers decide to proceed with an operation at all, can be rooted in at least two issues. First, some senior advisers might believe that an operational unit, despite being proficient on the battlefield, can create more problems than it solves in more ambiguous or politically precarious situations. For example, while not altogether accurate or emblematic of SOF today, such perceptions historically have been associated with SOF.[43] Accordingly, some officials and their departments, agencies or staffs may have developed what James Q. Wilson describes as a "learned vulnerability:"

> Every organization, like every person, learns from experience what behavior will create big problems; but compared to people, organizations have longer memories and are more risk averse. Once burned, forever shy…. When something goes badly wrong at a high political cost the incident enters the agency's memory as a legendary horror story. A great deal of the time and energy of agency officials is devoted to creating mechanisms designed to insure that the horror never recurs.[44]

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[43] In his article "Showstoppers: Nine Reasons Why We Never Sent Our Special Operations Forces After al Qaeda Before 9/11," Dick Shultz examines why SOF long had not been employed to maximum effect in combating terrorism. A running thread throughout several of the nine reasons was long-standing aversion to inherently risky Special Operations, combined with disdain for and distrust of SOF, particularly by senior conventional military officers. Shultz also comments that distrust of SOF dates to World War II. See Richard H. Shultz, Jr., "Showstoppers: Nine Reasons Why We Never Sent Our Special Operations Forces After al Qaeda Before 9/11," *Weekly Standard* (26 January 2004), 25-33.

[44] Wilson talks about avoiding learned vulnerabilities in order to minimize rivals of and constraints that can be placed upon an organization. James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 191-92.

The extent to which policymakers believe they can exert sufficient control or oversight in order to mitigate such vulnerabilities is a second issue. Juxtaposing traditional military activities and covert action is instructive in this regard. When considering operations in countries with which the United States is not at war, for example, policymakers in the past have often had a greater comfort with covert action, according to Frances Fragos Townsend.[45] There are at least four reasons for this. First, covert action is deniable. As noted earlier, the role of the U.S. government in covert action is intended not to be apparent or acknowledged publicly. While many operations will ultimately find themselves in the public domain, the prospect of deniability will give policymakers a sense that they can counter some of the actual or perceived risks of exposure. Second, covert action requires the explicit approval of the president through a "Finding," as outlined in Title 50 of the U.S. Code. Such institutionalized oversight on the part of the president and, by extension, his national security team, has given policymakers the sense of greater control over the operation. Third, although Title 50 does not grant approval to any particular department or agency nor assign covert action authority exclusively to the CIA, historical precedent has privileged the CIA as the covert action arm of the U.S. government. With covert action traditionally having been conducted by one agency, this has fostered in the president and his senior policymakers a measure of institutional familiarity and comfort with both the action and the operational units charged with its execution. Finally, the CIA has had a long-standing seat alongside policymakers at the national security decision-making table. Such regular, often daily interaction on a variety of issues beyond covert action has helped to bolster policymakers' familiarity with the CIA, the personalities involved and the activities they conduct. Altogether, the CIA has developed a close and highly accountable relationship with the president and his advisers through the years. The success of the Bin Ladin raid, which was approved after many intense, high-level meetings between the president, his national security team and senior SOF leaders, also is likely to give policymakers a greater sense of accountability and comfort in their relationship with SOF going forward. This is an important opportunity, not only for SOF, who should continue to cultivate their interagency relationships, but also for policymakers who can employ the full spectrum of SOF capabilities to maximum effect.

Consideration #6: Pressures to Take Action. A sixth broad consideration for policymakers that can affect CT decision-making is the extent to which they feel pressure to take action. This pressure, either explicit or implicit, can stem from a variety of sources. Three forms of pressure—public calls for action, time pressures and the aspirations of the decision-makers—are discussed below.

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[45] Frances Fragos Townsend (Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism for President George W. Bush), interview with author, 25 March 2010.

Public Calls for Action. The American people can be a source of pressure on presidents to take action. The Iranian hostage crisis illustrates this point. After militant students seized the U.S. embassy on 4 November 1979, the Carter administration pursued a two-pronged path of restraint: applying international economic, diplomatic and legal pressures on Iran; and engaging in negotiations. The American people initially supported this approach: in early December, a little over a month after the embassy takeover, 76 percent of the public approved of Carter's handling of the crisis.[46] The public, however, grew frustrated as the crisis wore on without resolution. In January 1980, two months into the crisis, a majority of U.S. citizens—51 percent—opposed the use of force, believing it would imperil the lives of the hostages. Yet by April, there was a groundswell of support for more forceful, direct action. One poll conducted in early April—coinciding with Carter's approval of the rescue mission—indicated the American people favored military action by a majority of nearly two to one, even if it endangered the hostages' lives.[47] The decision-makers within the Carter administration knew they were in a deficit with regard to public calls for action. Gary Sick, the director for Iranian affairs on the National Security Council staff during the crisis, observed:

> There was mounting impatience and anger with a cautious policy of restraint that seemed to produce only failure and repeated humiliation. No elaborate political polls or grass-roots surveys were required to understand this; any random conversation with almost any group of U.S. citizens would suffice.[48]

Exacerbating public calls for more decisive action during the hostage crisis was the non-stop media coverage. On the CBS evening news, Walter Cronkite ended each broadcast by announcing the number of days the hostages remained in captivity. This affected the decision-makers. Stansfield Turner, the Director of Central Intelligence at the time, noted, "The impulse to 'do something soon' was what brought most of us to favor the rescue mission; the hostages had been dominating American foreign policy for 156 days. Every evening we winced when Walter Cronkite signed off with yet a higher number of days."[49]

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[46] George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion 1980* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1981), 96.

[47] Barry Sussman, "55% Favor Use of Force in Iran; Use of Force Against Iran Favored by 2-1 Majority," *Washington Post*, 20 April 1980. The poll was conducted 9-13 April 1980. Ibid.

[48] Gary Sick, *All Fall Down: America's Tragic Encounter with Iran* (New York: Random House, 1985), 280.

[49] Stansfield Turner, *Terrorism and Democracy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 106. Exacerbating the public and media pressures on Carter was his upcoming bid for reelection. Carter's advisers maintained that the president's prospects for reelection, and domestic political considerations in general, did not affect Carter's decision-making during the crisis. Stansfield Turner, for one, contends that while the

Yet few highly sensitive decisions to combat terrorism actually occur in such an open context. In sharp contrast with the Iranian hostage ordeal that ultimately seized the American people's attention for 444 days, President Obama's decision to launch the raid against Bin Ladin did not take place against a public backdrop of national crisis or open debate. Indeed, the American public and the media, not to mention other heads of state and government, were unaware that the United States, after nearly a decade, had finally cultivated actionable intelligence on the whereabouts of the world's most notorious and elusive terrorist. The intelligence community and the broader national security apparatus successfully kept secret this information and the attendant operational planning for a raid. Accordingly, as Obama was contemplating his options, he was not subject to continual public pressure or a constant drumbeat from elite public opinion makers calling for action. In fact, despite the overwhelming media coverage of his death immediately *following* the raid—it accounted for 69 percent of the news hole that first week in May, including 90 percent of the airtime on cable television—Bin Ladin was considered to be a dominant newsmaker in just *one* story in the *first four months* of 2011, according to the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.[50] There also had been relatively minimal media coverage of the al-Qa'ida leader over the previous *four years*; notable spikes occurred when he released a new video or audio clip, but mainstream coverage over those four years rarely centered on the hunt for Bin Ladin.[51]

president and his domestic advisers undoubtedly were aware of the crisis' potential effect on the reelection campaign, "I never saw any hint of his placing that consideration above what was in the best interests of the hostages." See Stansfield Turner, *Terrorism and Democracy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1991), 82n. Brzezinski also noted the lack of discussion on domestic politics. See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-1981* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1983), 490. The election, however, did loom large. Indeed, after a critical decision meeting where the president decided to proceed with the rescue mission, Jody Powell, the White House press secretary, commented to Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, "Mr. Secretary, the President is going to go with this thing, I can sense it. If we can bring our people out of there, it will do more good for this country than anything that has happened in twenty years." Jody Powell, *The Other Side of the Story* (New York: William Morrow, 1984), 228. Brown agreed but presciently added, "and if we fail, that will be the end of the Carter presidency." Ibid. Unlike Carter's decision to launch the rescue mission, which occurred within months of the election, President Obama's decision to launch the Bin Ladin raid was made well over a year-and-a-half before his reelection bid. Still, regardless of whether or not the 2012 election was ever an explicit factor in the decision, Obama likely will reap the benefits of the raid's success during his reelection campaign.

[50] Project for Excellence in Journalism, "When (and Why) bin Laden Made News," *Pew Research Center*, www.journalism.org/numbers_report/when_and_why_bin_laden_made_news. See also Project for Excellence in Journalism, "News Coverage Index May 2-8, 2011 Osama Bin Laden's Death Continues To Dominate The News," *Pew Research Center*, www.journalism.org/index_report/pej_news_coverage_index_may_2_8_2011.

[51] Project for Excellence in Journalism, "When (and Why) bin Laden Made News."

Additionally, while President Obama benefited from an instant (and expected) boost in approval ratings after the successful raid, he also had been receiving relatively positive marks from the American people for his handling of terrorism in the months leading up to his decision. One poll in January 2011 showed that 55 percent approved of the president's handling of terrorism.[52] A separate poll that same month showed a 60 percent presidential approval rating on terrorism.[53] These are worth noting, given that the American people have become a more engaged and informed citizenry on counterterrorism issues since 9/11.

Time Pressures. Time pressures, particularly compressed timelines for decision, also can come into play as policymakers contemplate various courses of action. This is especially true with risk-seeking operations. As noted earlier, many CT operations that employ Special Operations or covert action are intelligence-intensive and time-sensitive. They often require a level of detailed, actionable intelligence that can prove challenging to acquire and highly perishable once in hand. For example, although intelligence for a proposed mission to capture or kill a high value individual inside a denied area might accurately place the designated target at a particular location, that individual might not be there within a week or month, or even the next day. He might habitually move locations as a matter of personal security, or he might have an unexpected change in his routine. The designated terrorist also might receive a tip or otherwise become aware that he is being tracked. This latter time pressure was an increasing factor in connection with the decision to launch the raid against Bin Ladin. As noted earlier, those privy to the extremely sensitive information on the whereabouts of the al-Qa'ida leader appropriately kept it secret. Yet as more time passed, and as more individuals in government became aware of the intelligence—whether or not they knew a military raid was being planned—the potential for disclosure, unintentional or otherwise, was growing. Any indication that the United States was aware of the terrorist leader's location or that the intelligence community had been collecting intelligence against the compound in Abbottabad placed the pending military operation—and the prospects of ever getting Bin Ladin—at risk. Michael Leiter notes, "The probability of a leak was increasing with each passing day. In my view, this was a significant factor underlying the president's decision to act on the information at hand and conduct the raid."[54] Time is a commodity for presidents and their advisers. While they deserve time in order to

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[52] "Obama Ratings Remain Rock Steady," *Pew Research Center for the People & the Press*, 13 January 2011, pewresearch.org/pubs/1856/obama-approval-steady-gop-congressional-leadership-less-popular-tea-party-influence.

[53] "Obama approval up to 55%, but still under 50% on economy," *CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll*, 24 January 2011, politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2011/01/24/cnn-poll-obama-approval-up-to-55-but-still-under-50-on-economy/.

[54] Michael Leiter, email exchange with the author, 23 October 2011.

distill sensitive information and to formulate courses of action, time often proves to be a luxury they are not afforded in all scenarios. The likelihood that a target is about to relocate or that highly sensitive intelligence or operational planning could be compromised might not necessarily drive a president toward a particular course of action, but by constraining the time period in which he might need to render a decision, it has the potential to affect his ultimate choice.[55]

Aspirations of the Decision-Maker. Another form of pressure can stem from the aspirations of the decision-maker. An explicitly stated and oft-repeated goal for President Obama, for example, was finding and taking decisive action against al-Qa'ida's core leaders in general and Bin Ladin in particular:

- As a presidential candidate, Obama had criticized the country's then-current targeting approach, stating, "The Bush administration has not acted aggressively enough to go after al-Qaeda's leadership."[56]

- He also placed a marker on the table, noting, "As president,…I would be clear that if Pakistan cannot or will not take out al-Qaeda leadership when we have actionable intelligence about their whereabouts, we will act to protect the American people. There can be no safe haven for al-Qaeda terrorists who killed thousands of Americans and threaten our homeland today."[57]

- Upon taking office, the new president prioritized the hunting down of al-Qa'ida's leader. When he announced Bin Ladin's death, Obama let it be known that, "[S]hortly after taking office, I directed Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA, to make the killing or capture of bin Laden the top priority of our war against al Qaeda, even as we continued our broader efforts to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat his network."[58]

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[55] In one study, William Boettcher examined the effect of time pressures on presidential decisions under risk and uncertainty. He hypothesized that if time pressures are not acute, presidents—whether they are risk-averse or risk-acceptant—will likely delay their decision. Boettcher found varying degrees of support for this hypothesis across several cases. Conversely, he hypothesized that when time pressures are acute, risk-averse presidents will be likely to engage in incrementalism, while risk-acceptant presidents will be likely to engage in bolstering. Boettcher found support for the former but not the latter. See Boettcher, 174-75.

[56] "Q&A: Obama on Foreign Policy," *Washington Post*, 2 March 2008, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/02/AR2008030201982_pf.html.

[57] Ibid.

[58] The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by the President on Osama Bin Laden" (2 May 2011), www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/02/remarks-president-osama-bin-laden.

- After the raid, Obama also reminded the American people of his vow to take action if presented with the opportunity: "Keep in mind that obviously when I was still campaigning for President, I had said that if I ever get a shot at bin Laden we're gonna take it. And I was subject to some criticism at the time, because I had said if it's in Pakistan and, you know, we don't have the ability to capture [him] in any other way, then we're gonna go ahead and take the shot. So I felt very strongly that there was a strategic imperative for us to go after him."[59]

As a candidate for the nation's highest office and later as its occupant, Barack Obama was deeply committed to the goal of developing information on Bin Ladin's whereabouts. More important, he was committed to acting on it. Once the president was presented with the information on the Abbottabad compound, he could have suffered politically if it ever leaked that the United States had actionable intelligence, however circumstantial, and decided not to act. The depth of Obama's commitment, however, might be more relevant in another way with regard to his decision to approve the raid. In examining aspiration levels as part of risk-taking in foreign policy, William Boettcher describes the decision-maker's strength of commitment as a significant component, "since understanding an actor's level of commitment will shed light on the extent to which risks will be taken to achieve the immediate goal."[60]

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has examined six issues that presidents and their national security teams often consider as they contemplate the use of Special Operations and covert action in combating terrorism—confidence in the intelligence, challenges of sovereignty, casualty sensitivity, assessments of effectiveness, comfort with the operational units and pressures to take action. Although any specific decision also will be influenced by the unique characteristics of the proposed mission, the larger international and domestic contexts of decision and the personalities at the table, these six considerations will define many decisions to disrupt acts of terror and defeat terrorist organizations for years to come.

Special Operations and covert action can help the United States produce important strategic and operational gains in combating terrorism, as evidenced most prominently with the operation that killed Bin Ladin. The consequences that can occur when risky missions fail, however, as in the Iranian hostage rescue attempt, will continue to give

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[59] "Obama on bin Laden: The Full '60 Minutes' Interview."
[60] Boettcher, 8.

presidents pause. As they consider the policy dimensions discussed in this paper, presidents and their advisers will seek to mitigate the losses or adverse consequences that can occur if, for instance, the intelligence is not as precise as predicted, the operators suffer significant casualties or the mission fails. Not all negative outcomes associated with risky operations, however, can be prevented or even anticipated. It is reasonable for those charged with protecting the nation's security to fear the potential consequences that can occur in failure, but when the United States is capable of conducting a CT operation with probable success, a decision not to take a well-considered risk can be consequential as well. Conceptions of risk-taking in combating terrorism have shifted since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. Juan Zarate notes:

> In the post 9/11 world, a new risk calculus applies in national security decision-making. The perceived political and national security risks for inaction when given opportunities against looming threats are often deemed too high and thereby compel action—even in the face of imperfect information and potential failure.[61]

In the end, presidents and their advisers must remain open to calculated risks that can help to disrupt an act of terrorism, deal a decisive blow against a terrorist organization or otherwise produce a strategic outcome in service to the nation.

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[61] Juan Zarate, email exchange with author, 30 October 2011.