

ARTICLE



The Abbottabad raid and the theory of special operations

James J. Wirtz

Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

When 'The Theory of Special Operations' was written in 1993 by then Commander William H. McRaven, USN, Al Qaeda was barely on the strategic horizon. Nevertheless, this thesis helped shape the denouement of the horrible tragedy that befell the world on 11 September 2001. This article describes McRaven's work and traces its influence on the 2011 Abbottabad Raid. It also identifies how the theory might be modified to better capture the civil-military nexus at the apex of the strategic use of special operations forces.

KEYWORDS William H. Mcraven; Abbottabad raid; Osama Bin Laden; Al Qaeda; U.S. Navy SEALs; special operations

Admiral William H. McRaven, USN (ret.) was asked during an on-line video presentation to the faculty and students at his alma mater if his studies at the Naval Postgraduate School influenced his career after graduation. McRaven, a former member of the Navy's Sea Air and Land (SEAL) force, was unequivocal in his response: 'I took the foundations of my thesis, the thesis on special operations, and I applied that to every mission I went on. Sometimes I'm asked did you use that on the Bin Laden raid – of course I did.'¹ Unfortunately, McRaven failed to explain how his thesis contributed to the planning and execution of the 2011 Abbottabad raid, which stands as the second most politically important special operation since World War II.² McRaven's comment also raises more questions than it answers. For instance, how did a thesis written at a time when Al-Qaeda was barely on the strategic horizon help provide the denouement to the horrible tragedy that befell the world on 11 September 2001? Exactly what elements of the theory contributed to the success of the raid? Are there aspects of the raid that McRaven failed to anticipate?

CONTACT James J. Wirtz  jwirtz@nps.edu  Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, USA

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¹William H. McRaven, Lessons in Leadership from Admiral Bill McRaven [Video] You Tube (24 June 2020) <https://nps.edu/-/lessons-in-leadership-from-admiral-bill-mcraven>.

²Al-Qaeda's strategic 'commando raid' on 11 September 2001 was of greater political significance.

This article explores several important questions raised by McRaven's comments by first describing and characterizing his theory of special operations, initially articulated in a master's thesis completed in 1993 and eventually published as a scholarly monograph in 1995.³ It then highlights the elements of the Abbottabad raid that reflect the theory of special operations and aspects of the raid that did not meet with theoretical expectations or were beyond the scope of the original theory. The article then offers some observations about the nature, strength and weaknesses of the theory of special operations. It concludes with some thoughts about applying the theory in a future characterized by rising great power competition.

The theory of special operations

When McRaven initially set his pen to paper, American strategists were beginning to come to terms with the collapse of the Soviet empire and the mercifully quick Coalition victory in the First Gulf War. Efforts were underway in the United States to identify surplus military capabilities that could be abandoned to create a long-awaited 'peace dividend.'⁴ Strategists also began to contemplate how the 'end of history' might lead to a 'unipolar moment' that could be used by the United States to foster the spread of democracy, bolster market economies and accelerate the Information Revolution and Globalization.⁵ Terrorism did not vanish with the collapse of the Soviet Union, but it was generally considered to be a nuisance compared to the nuclear Sword of Damocles hanging over everyone's head; paying attention to terrorists was seen as akin to playing into the hands of terrorists. The National Security Strategy of the United States, promulgated by the George H.W. Bush administration in January 1993, for instance, promised to oppose terrorism 'by all legal means available,' which indicates how terrorism often was framed as a run-of-the-mill law enforcement issue at the time.⁶ In this new, unipolar world, U.S. special forces would be relegated to tertiary missions within a Cold-War force structure that appeared bloated, obsolete and ripe for significant reductions. In the 'New World Order' that would reflect America's overwhelming military and political dominance and a promise of

³William H. McRaven, 'The Theory of Special Operations', M.A. Thesis, Department of National Security Affairs, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA June 1993. <http://archive.org/details.thetheoryofspeci1094514838>. A version of the thesis was published as William H. McRaven, *SPEC OPS Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

⁴Les Aspin, *Report on the Bottom-Up Review* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 1993).

⁵Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992); and Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70/1 (1990), 23–33.

⁶*The National Security Strategy of the United States*, January 1993, p. 18. <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss.nss1993.pdf?ver=2914-06-250121210-297>.

peace, commandos would play a small role at the margins of U.S. national security.⁷

The institutional setting

Although the theory of special operations is based on the insights provided by the Prussian philosopher Carl Von Clausewitz in his classic work, *On War*, McRaven's theory most closely resembles *The Command of the Air*, the work of the Italian airpower theorist Giulio Douhet.⁸ The two theories share several key elements in common. McRaven's underlying objective was to demonstrate that special operations, much like airpower in Douhet's schema, could achieve significant, if not quite war-winning, strategic effects. With events like the Bin Laden raid in recent memory, the observation that a special operation can achieve significant strategic effects might appear a bit trivial to today's reader. Nevertheless, critics have often noted that even successful special operations are 'mere pinpricks, hardly worth the diversion of manpower and equipment from other tasks'.⁹ This view was actually codified in various firepower-assessment methodologies that became popular as a way of estimating battle outcomes along the Central Front separating Western and Warsaw Pact forces during the Cold War. Special operations units were rarely included in these metrics and analyses because they lacked combat capability.¹⁰ A SEAL team, for instance, would have no discernable impact on large-scale conventional engagement, which was the scenario that pre-occupied planners and modelers. While most observers might have acknowledged that it was theoretically possible for small commando units to achieve strategic effects, they would also be quick to suggest that in practice such effects were rarely achieved for a host of logistical, tactical and operational reasons. For many observers, special operations forces were not rendered obsolete by the demise of the Soviet Union, they were not particularly relevant during the Cold War either. McRaven's opening premise – that special operations provided a capability that could achieve significant strategic effects – is an assertion that can appear obvious or dubious depending on recent experience.

McRaven also suggested that to produce a significant operational or political impact, special operations had to be planned and executed to the

⁷George H.W. Bush, Address Before a Joint Session of Congress on the End of the Gulf War, Presidential Speeches, UVA Miller Center. <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-6-1991-address-joint-session-congress-end-gulf-war>.

⁸Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009).

⁹David W. Hogan, Jr., *Raiders or Elite Infantry? The Changing role of the U.S. Army Rangers from Dieppe to Grenada* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1992), 14.

¹⁰Trevor N. Dupuy, *Numbers Predictions & War: Using History to Evaluate Combat Factors and Predict the Outcome of Battles* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1979); and Trevor N. Dupuy, *Understanding War: History and a Theory of Combat* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1987).

highest standards, standards that by implication could best be achieved by special operators themselves. This is a second similarity between Douhet and McRaven's work – Douhet noted that airpower needed to be wielded by aviators, while McRaven advocated that special operations should be placed under the purview of special operators. Indeed, the notion that special operations and operators were often misused and abused by conventionally minded commanders was in the air in the late 20th century and was often identified as a justification for hiving off special forces into Special Operations Command. For example, Susan Marquis, in her organizational history of U.S. Special Forces, described why the special operations community believed that it was nearly impossible for conventionally-minded commanders to employ special forces properly:

The critical values of independence, unconventional thinking, and near equality among the members of the small operational teams are often in direct conflict with the values of conventional military forces. To a commander faced with conventional military missions – “to close with and destroy” the enemy, take and hold ground, and inflict tremendous damage in direct conflict with enemy forces – special operations capabilities may appear irrelevant, insignificant, and even un-American.¹¹

If Special Operations forces were to play a relevant and significant role in combating threats to national security, they would have to be placed under the command of officers drawn from their ranks, individuals who understood their capabilities and limitations.

A third point of convergence is that both Douhet and McRaven identified the tactical and operational elements of successful air and special operations that set the stage for achieving strategic effects independently. For example, Douhet identified the importance of aviators exercising command and control, mass, targeting (urban areas) and weapons (chemical) that would produce a shock that would ultimately detach enemy populations from their political leaders and wartime objectives. McRaven, by contrast, identified six principles – simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed and purpose – that were deemed to be conditions necessary to achieve strategic effects through special operations. Successfully implementing these principles would allow a special unit to gain ‘relative superiority’ in a concise area of operation, enabling it to achieve strategic effects with a very limited force. By contrast, if special operations units, or air formations, for that matter, were used in a supporting role for conventional operations, the opportunity to use them to their full potential would be lost.

The theory of special operations thus links tactical, operational and organizational considerations into a value proposition about the role and

¹¹Susan Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1997), 8.

importance of unconventional operations in peace and war. Mirroring Douhet's earlier work, it seeks to demonstrate that a tactic and unit deemed largely irrelevant by conventionally-minded officers and civilian strategists could actually achieve strategically and politically important effects, but only if planned and executed by special operators themselves against significant targets in proper ways. It also is no coincidence that Douhet and McRaven devised their theories at a time when war weariness and hope for a peace dividend influenced perceptions of the future of 'niche' military capabilities. Both theorists championed the strategic potential of a weapon, tactic or operation that most observers at the time would have agreed was of unproven or of questionable value. German Zeppelin raids against English cities in World War I suffered nearly 40% attrition and barely managed to create a nuisance, while the 1979 special operation to rescue American hostages being held in Tehran ended in disaster before coming close to the target.¹² The ideas advanced by Douhet and McRaven were not eagerly accepted by military audiences or publics reeling from the horrors of World War I and the hair-raising nuclear risks of the Cold War.

Suspending war's dialectic

The Clausewitzian idea that war is a duel informs the tactical elements of McRaven's theory. Outcomes in war are linked to the clash of forces, strategies and opposing wills that take place in individual engagements and across entire theaters of operation. In other words, one side alone cannot dictate the outcome of a conflict because the opponent's actions influence outcomes. War is dialectical in the sense that the outcome of battle is determined by the interaction of the parties in the contest. Outcomes also are not based on absolute superiority in all dimensions of combat. Instead, relative advantages in critical areas can often be sufficient to turn the battle in one's favor. For instance, one does not need perfect strategy or tactics or weapons to best an opponent; instead, one can succeed with relatively better strategy, or tactics or weapons. Additionally, an advantage along one dimension of conflict can create a snowball effect that can stymie an opponent's effort to regain the initiative, leading to a general collapse across an entire theater of operations. For example, the bulk of the French Army remained combat capable but was unable to reorient effectively against Nazi armored formations once they penetrated their defenses and raced to the English Channel in May 1940.¹³

It is possible, however, to wield force outside the duel that is war. Without an active opponent, it is possible to undertake actions in an unfettered

¹²Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *A History of the World War 1914–1918* (New York: Faber, 1934), 76; and Charles G. Cogan, 'Desert one and its Disorders', *The Journal of Military History* 67/1 (2003), 201–16.

¹³Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle: France 1940* (New York: Penguin Books 1969).

environment, albeit one where friction can still raise its ugly head. As Edward Luttwak noted, without an active opponent, military operations can operate according to a linear logic whereby they can function at the theoretical limits of their capability.¹⁴ The element of surprise, when it effectively removes the opponent from the contest, turns the duel that is war into an administrative matter; it allows one party to achieve objectives it cannot achieve in war or in an isolated engagement.¹⁵ Without active opposition, actors can achieve their objectives more or less at their leisure, or at least to the extent that their planning, preparation and endurance will allow and to the extent that friction does not undermine the execution of the mission.

McRaven recognized that the fundamental problem inherent in small unit commando operations is that the commandos themselves will likely be lacking in combat capability when compared to the enemy units operating in the vicinity of their mission areas or even the specific force stationed to defend an intended target. Despite the fact that they are often depicted as superior warriors and experts in combat techniques and technologies, special operations forces generally lack the logistics, organic firepower and reserves needed to stand and fight against larger and better armed conventional units.¹⁶ This insight led McRaven to suggest that special operations can only succeed if they first create and then exploit a situation of 'relative superiority,' whereby they temporarily enjoy a decisive military advantage. Creating this relative superiority is no small matter especially when one considers the relative inferiority of the average commando unit compared to the opposing forces that could be encountered during the course of a mission. This relative superiority also is localized and fleeting. Nevertheless, if one can arrive at a critical target undetected and unopposed, it is possible to achieve highly asymmetric results given the limited resources and capabilities possessed by the force assigned to a mission and the strategic effects created when objectives are achieved. Surprise is the critical enabler of strategic special operations because it creates relative superiority, and the planning and practice that precedes a mission is intended to create and exploit this temporary suspension of war's dialectic.

In order to achieve this relative superiority created by the element of surprise, McRaven listed the elements inherent in the planning, preparations and execution of successful special operations. Simplicity, based on good intelligence, innovation and identification of key objectives, is they key consideration during the planning phase. A target has to be selected with an eye towards its political, strategic or operational significance. Even brilliantly

¹⁴Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 8.

¹⁵James J. Wirtz, 'Theory of Surprise', in Richard K. Betts and Thomas G. Mahnken (eds.) *Paradoxes of Strategic Intelligence: Essays in Honor of Michael Handel* (London: Frank Cass 2003), 101-116.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 104.

successful operations are unlikely to produce strategic effects if they are directed against inconsequential targets. Superior intelligence about the target is important because it enables innovation – technical, tactical or operational inventiveness that presents the opponent with an unexpected threat or a threat that unfolds along an unexpected attack vector. Often this innovation takes the form of new attack or transportation modalities that allow special operations units to appear unexpectedly at their target without arousing a defensive response. That is the sweet spot of special operations – by gaining minutes or hours of access to a significant target without meaningful resistance or no resistance at all, units can act approximately at the theoretical limits of their capability.

In the preparation phase of the operation, McRaven addresses the problem of friction, a problem that can still rear its ugly head even in the absence of an alerted opponent. To reduce the chance that friction will interfere with mission execution, McRaven suggests that operators must practice the individual and unit skill sets needed for the mission until they are second nature. Dress rehearsals should be undertaken to the greatest extent possible not only to detect unanticipated flaws in planning and execution, but to make sure that each individual understands their contribution to the collective enterprise. Realistic rehearsals, however, can create challenges in terms of maintaining secrecy, leading McRaven to highlight the importance of operational security during preparations. Given that potential targets will be known to the opponent and defended as a matter of routine, rehearsals that reveal future operations or raise suspicions will only serve to alert existing defenses. The challenge during preparations is centered on the need to overcome the inherent dilemma created by the effort to rehearse the operation as thoroughly and realistically as possible while not revealing the existence and details of the mission to the intended target.

During the execution phase of the operation, surprise, speed and purpose become paramount. Surprise is the key enabler of the entire operation because it suspends war's dialectic and to the extent that it is achieved, it will allow a unit to operate unopposed and unconstrained by the opposition of an active adversary. Surprise is what creates relative superiority, which in theory should be 'absolute' given the absence of an opponent during the operation. Once surprise has been achieved, speed of execution becomes critical because the duration of surprise can only be estimated, and relative superiority will quickly deteriorate into relative inferiority once nearby forces became aware of the unfolding operation. Rehearsals enable speed – operations that 'work things out on the fly' will literally be overtaken by events as opponents recover from surprise and begin to respond to the presence of commando units in their vicinity. Purpose comes into play as the principle that overcomes friction, weaknesses in planning and execution or unexpected obstacles. Sharing a common perception of the purpose of the operation and a personal dedication to achieving the mission objective can

enable the initiative needed to fulfill the mission in the face of unforeseen circumstances. The principle of purpose also influences the operation from its inception by preventing 'mission creep.' At a minimum, a mission that services secondary and ancillary targets will require larger forces and larger rehearsals. The larger the force, the harder it is to maintain operational security leading to an increase in the chance of detection, which compromises the all-critical element of surprise. More objectives often translate into 'more time on the ground,' which can be used by the opponent to generate greater opposition once the element of surprise begins to fade.

McRaven's six principles of special operations create a coherent and compelling vision of success that can temporarily overcome the dialectical nature of war to achieve truly strategic results. Other doctrines and operational schema, for example the U.S. Army's principles of war – objective, offense, mass, economy of force, maneuver, unity of command, security, surprise, simplicity – are similar, but they are intended to help soldiers prevail in the duel that is war. By contrast, combat, in McRaven's theory, is something that is best avoided by special operators, an observation that also flies in the face of commonly held views about the forte and function of special operations units. Instead, he depicts special forces as experts in transportation and technical, tactical and operational innovation, appearing in unanticipated ways at locations deemed inaccessible and at times that catch an otherwise prepared opponent napping. Special operators also are innovative; they devise creative tactics or employ new technologies to attack the target, retrieve the hostages or conduct surveillance in unanticipated ways. By selecting and understanding targets of strategic importance and identifying how to penetrate or evade their defenses, a team of motivated, highly trained and deviously intelligent operatives can achieve results that appear impossible *ex ante*. McRaven demonstrates the essence of this sort of thing in his discussion of Captain Otto Skorzeny's September 1943 rescue of Benito Mussolini from his guards at the Sporthotel Camp Imperatore – done without firing a shot but not without a glass of wine.¹⁷ Without active opposition and with the requisite amount of time, a special forces unit can achieve results that approximate the theoretical limits of its destructive or creative potential.¹⁸

The Abbottabad raid

The worm turns. The Global War on Terror following the 11 September 2001 Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon bolstered the role

¹⁷McRaven, 'The Theory of Special Operations', 251–309. After reading McRaven's narrative of the Skorzeny raid, it is hard to escape the conclusion that he unintentionally offers a way of overcoming the inherent constraint on behavior encapsulated by John Farnam's 'laws of stupid as amended': you can hang out with stupid people, or go to stupid places, or be out at stupid times, or do stupid things, but doing two or more of these activities simultaneously will lead to highly unpleasant consequences.

¹⁸Armed with only box cutters and mace, two, five-man teams were able to destroy the World Trade Center in an operation that lasted a few hours.

and importance of special operations forces in U.S. defense strategy. By 2011, the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) stood astride a global SOF enterprise that was becoming an increasingly networked, joint and allied force of all types of air, sea and land units. Within USSOCOM was JSOC, the Joint Special Operations Command, which was in charge of the elite special operations units (e.g., the Army's Delta Force, the Navy's SEAL Team Six, etc.) within the U.S. military that performed highly classified operations.¹⁹ In what must be an irony for the ages, VADM William McRaven, USN, who as a student might have characterized his chances of rising to the rank of O6 (Navy Captain) as 'slim to none,' now found himself at the helm of JSOC.²⁰ The theorist was now in overall command of U.S. special operations mission planning and execution in the enabling institutional setting he had outlined in his thesis. The special operators were in fact in charge of special operations and theory was about to be put to a very practical test.

The general course of the Abbottabad raid is well known, although details about the intelligence activities that led to the identification of Bin Laden's compound and his death continue to be a matter of debate and controversy.²¹ On 1 May 2011, about two dozen Navy SEALs and a dog were carried aboard two specially equipped Black Hawk helicopters flown by U.S. Army aviators from the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment from a forward base in Afghanistan to Bin Laden's compound inside Pakistan. The SEALs arrived undetected, although they suffered one mishap at the outset of the operation. One of the Black Hawk helicopters was forced to make a controlled crash inside the compound after the building's structure undermined its lift energy as it was hovering to allow its SEAL payload to fast rope into the courtyard of Bin Laden's residence. A brief, albeit fully anticipated, firefight ensued between the SEALs and various occupants of the compound as they entered the premises and began searching the building. Bin Laden was encountered and killed in a bedroom on the third floor. The SEALs removed the body and a trove of digital archives, destroyed the damaged Black Hawk and then boarded the remaining Black Hawk and a high-capacity Chinook helicopter that had been kept in reserve. The plan called for the SEALs to remain on the ground for forty minutes – some reports claim they beat that target with two minutes to spare.²²

¹⁹United States Special Operations Command, History 1987–2007, 12–20. <https://fas.org/irp/agency/dod/socom/2007history.pdf>; and Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* (New York: St. Martin's 2015).

²⁰At the time, Slim was preparing to ride out of town.

²¹Jonathan Mahler, 'What do We Really Know About Osama bin Laden's Death?' *The New York Times Magazine*, 15 October 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/magazine/what-do-we-really-know-about-osama-bin-ladens-death.html>.

²²Ibid. and Mike Allen, 'Exclusive: Raid Yields Trove of Data', *Politico*, 2 May 2011. <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/05/exclusive-raid-yields-trove-of-data-054151>

The theory applied

The influence of the theory of special operations is indeed quite manifest in the planning, preparation and execution of the Bin Laden raid, which fits the situational criteria addressed by the theory: 'A special operation is conducted by forces specially trained, equipped, and supported for the specific target whose destruction, elimination, or rescue (in the case of hostages), is a political or military imperative.'²³ There also is little doubt that 'eliminating' Bin Laden, either through capture or more extreme measures, was of the utmost importance in terms of real security concerns and domestic politics. 'The Bin Laden raid,' according to Warner and Jonathan Schilling, 'encompassed two different potential benefits: eliminating a talented leader and operational figure and eliminating the person most associated with the September 11 attacks and thereby satisfying the emotional need for revenge and justice among the American public and government.'²⁴ The mission to Abbottabad was not undertaken as an adjunct to a larger conventional operation. Instead, it was a mission of the highest political-strategic importance in which the units involved would have to obtain relative superiority to succeed.

In a way that was not fully anticipated by the theory, however, the Bin Laden mission, much like other strategically significant special operations, was not exactly 'devised' by the special operators, but was instead given to them as a problem to be solved by designing and executing a successful operation. By contrast, some of the other special operations missions surveyed in McRaven's earlier work actually allowed for more creativity in terms of defining the problem to be solved and how best to solve it – the British destruction of the dry dock at Saint-Nazaire, France in March 1942, which was intended to keep the German battleship *Tirpitz* bottled up in a Norwegian fiord, is a case in point.²⁵ In other words, the opportunity to apply McRaven's theory would only unfold after certain key issues, especially the identification of the target and the political decision to 'service' it, had already been made.²⁶ Those decisions were most definitely made by politicians, not by McRaven or his JSOC staff.

Although the task at hand had been specified by senior officials within the Barak Obama administration, the special operators were more or less left alone to plan, rehearse and execute the raid. The mission itself was simple: eliminate Bin Laden. To their credit, the planners kept things simple. They completely avoided becoming sidetracked with ancillary tasks that appear

²³McRaven, *SPEC OPS*, 2.

²⁴Warner R. Schilling and Jonathan L. Schilling, 'Decision Making in Assassinations in International Relations', *Political Science Quarterly* 131/3 (2016), 530.

²⁵McRaven, *SPEC OPS*, 115–159.

²⁶The exact orders given to McRaven remain classified. Nevertheless, they might be best characterized as 'get Bin Laden dead or alive,' with an emphasis on the former outcome, see Schilling and Schilling, 'Decision Making in Assassinations in International Relations', 528.

superfluous in hindsight, but could have been suggested as potential actions. For instance, extra resources and time might have been devoted to looking for hidden document caches, or removing all of the residents of the compound for further questioning, or disrupting road networks to prevent a military or police response, or even planting covert intelligence devices at nearby targets of interest. Planners also incorporated an important innovation – use of specially configured Blackhawk helicopters – into the mission to solve a key problem, the lack of an effective and clandestine means of transportation to a target located deep inside a denied area. In other words, the planners encountered the critical problem that lies at the heart of most special operations, the lack of a readily available means to get to and return from the target. The use of the Blackhawks, however, also created a key operational constraint. Their flight performance and range was highly limited by the way they were modified to reduce their multispectral – radar, sound and heat – signatures. The controlled crash of one of the Blackhawks at the outset of the mission testifies to their compromised airworthiness. Nevertheless, the use of an ‘experimental’ technology allowed the planners to solve the transportation issue, which constituted the key mission enabler.

Preparations for the raid also corresponded to McRaven’s playbook. Efforts to protect the secrecy surrounding the mission were undertaken from the outset. The SEAL team selected to undertake the mission was chosen in part because it was returning from a deployment in Afghanistan and could be redirected to a training area in North Carolina without attracting the attention of the residents and press at their home base.²⁷ Indeed, even the SEALs chosen to participate in the mission were not initially told about its true objectives. The SEALs also launched a series of dress rehearsals at different locations to test and practice various elements of the mission. They first used a full-scale mock up of Bin Laden’s compound constructed at the Harvey Point Testing Facility in North Carolina, before moving to Nevada to test the performance of the Blackhawks in a high desert environment similar to conditions in Abbottabad.²⁸ The Nevada mockups, however, were not exactly true to life: chain link fences were substituted for the walls that surrounded the real compound and these porous fences failed to interfere with the lift generated by the Blackhawks. A failure to replicate operational conditions in rehearsal thus contributed to the crash. Ironically, McRaven had earlier linked a failure to conduct realistic rehearsals to problems encountered during the Saint-Naizaire raid.²⁹ In any event, when the SEALs moved into theater, they

²⁷Slobhan Gorman and Julian E. Barnes, ‘Spy, Military Ties Aided bin Laden Raid’, *Wall Street Journal* (online), 23 May 2011, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704083904576334160172068344>.

²⁸Nicholas Schmidle, ‘Getting Bin Laden: What Happened That Night in Abbottabad’, *The New Yorker*, 1 August 2011, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/08/08/getting-bin-laden>.

²⁹McRaven, *SPEC OPS*, 154.

continued to rehearse the operation at a full-scale mockup of Bin Laden's compound that was constructed at Bagram airbase in Afghanistan.

There was strict operational security surrounding preparations and planning of the raid. It was clearly important not to 'tip off' the inhabitants of the compound, who could have easily escaped with something between a few days warning – the time it might take for information to reach them – and a few hours notice. Although the ultimate target of this operational security was located in Abbottabad, it is evident from the precautions taken that planners feared that 'leaks' emanating from the U.S. government and military itself were the greatest threat to the operation. Indeed, information suggesting that the United States had located Bin Laden and was planning a raid to eliminate him would have been difficult to keep under wraps inside the government. As Erik Dahl has noted in his review of the intelligence support for the mission, 'the spread of information technology and the speed of leaks in Washington would seem to make it highly unlikely that [an] administration could keep the lid on an operation of the importance and scale of the Bin Laden raid.'³⁰ Given the inherent mobility of the target and the inability of the mission to conduct a search beyond the compound, any breach of operational security would have doomed the mission to failure or even disaster if the Pakistani military had managed to interfere with the operation.

Surprise, speed and purpose are all evident in the raid. The inhabitants of the compound were surprised by the arrival of the SEALs and lacked the opportunity to bolster defenses, set booby traps or even flee. From a theoretical perspective, the controlled crash of the Blackhawk into the courtyard was unplanned but was not unhelpful – it accelerated entrance of the SEALs into the compound and increased the overall shock of the team's arrival on target. The fact that the Blackhawk crash did not derail the mission also is evidence of the purpose shared among the participants in regards to the mission. In terms of the specific operational requirements identified by the theory of special operations, the Abbottabad raiders achieved surprise and relative superiority over the target, encountered only the anticipated opposition and quickly overwhelmed it, and achieved their objective in the allotted time after encountering a significant problem that could have interfered with the overall success of the mission. The mission to eliminate Osama Bin Laden was a 'textbook' example of a special operation that followed the script laid out by McRaven nearly twenty years earlier.³¹

³⁰Erik J. Dahl, 'Finding Bin Laden: Lessons for a New American Way of Intelligence', *Political Science Quarterly* 129/2 (Summer 2014), 200.

³¹Austin Long was probably first to offer this assessment see Nate Rawlings, 'Operation Neptune Spear: The New Textbook for Special Operators', *Time*, 2 May 2012, <https://nation.time.com/2012/05/02/operation-neptune-spear-the-new-textbook-for-special-operators/>.

Sources of potential failure

Several issues emerged during the planning and execution of the Bin Laden raid that can be woven together to create an alternative narrative, one that highlights potential problems that might have sown the seeds of a possible mission failure. The first is the intelligence supplied to the JSOC. As it turned out, the intelligence was outstanding. The Intelligence Community not only located Bin Laden's compound, but they also developed an accurate estimate of its layout, number of occupants and defenses. In practice, however, it is virtually impossible to have complete confidence in the accuracy of available intelligence *ex ante* and it is clear that there was much soul searching among intelligence analysts and policymakers when it came to their confidence in their estimates.³² The way the theory implies that 'good' intelligence will be readily available and recognized *ex ante* does not really correspond to the way planners and policymakers evaluate intelligence in practice. Evidence that appears cut and dried in hindsight can appear a bit sketchy before events fully unfold – a phenomenon that emerged during planning for the raid.

Without the aid of hindsight, there are two ways to look at the intelligence available to policymakers and military planners in the months leading up to the raid. On the one hand, there are a host of reasons to believe that analysts had found Bin Laden. The compound was clearly custom built in 2005 to hide someone. It housed two men closely associated with Bin Laden. It also was consistent with what the Central Intelligence Agency expected Bin Laden's hideout to look like.³³ The Abbottabad compound also reflected the trade-craft employed by Al-Qaeda. Bin Laden, like the operatives who executed the 9/11 attacks, practiced a form of denial and deception known as 'hiding in plain sight.' The denizens of the compound went to great lengths not to draw local attention to themselves or to create signatures that might be detected by various forms of surveillance available to U.S. intelligence agencies. In fact, the operational security at the heart of their denial strategy was so good that it served to arouse analysts' suspicions. The absence of 'normal' signatures emanating from the compound, including the lack of an Internet or telephone connection, suggested that someone was going to great lengths to not draw attention to the site.

On the other hand, if things appear too good to be true – Bin Laden had been located after a nearly decade-long manhunt – they very well might be too good to be true. The Abbottabad compound might have in fact been an elaborate ruse to lure a U.S. unit to an ambush set up by Al-Qaeda. Terrorist

³²Analysts from the National Counterterrorism Center were asked to evaluate available intelligence and their confidence that Bin Laden had actually been located ranged from forty to sixty percent, see Schmidle, 'Getting Bin Laden'.

³³Massimo Calabresi, 'The CIA Gets a Rare Public Victory', *Time*, 2 May 2011. <https://content.time.co/time/nation/article/0,8599,2068998,00.html>.

organizations generally lack the resources needed to undertake such elaborate denial and deception campaigns, hence the reliance on hiding in plain sight.³⁴ Nevertheless, this type of operation also was in keeping with Al-Qaeda's tradecraft. Al-Qaeda had previously used a 'dangle' to lure 13 U.S. and Jordanian intelligence officers into an ambush at Camp Chapman, Afghanistan on 30 December 2009.³⁵ The intelligence available could have supported the judgment that Al-Qaeda was again using the prospect of 'getting at' Bin Laden to kill the Americans who would inevitably rise to the bait.³⁶ Indeed, if one accepts Seymour Hersh's alternative explanation for the discovery of the compound, i.e., that Bin Laden's whereabouts were revealed by a 'walk in,' then the chances that the Abbottabad raid was a trap become palpable.³⁷

Another issue that emerges is that policymakers might have hedged their bets not only when it came to the overall quality of the available intelligence, but also in terms of the overall prospects of mission success. As originally conceived by military planners, the SEALs would simply surrender to Pakistani authorities if the mission encountered some sort of catastrophic failure. President Obama himself, however, asked McRaven to prepare a plan to have the SEALs 'fight their way out' if they encountered difficulty. It is unclear what motivated the President's decision to alter the SEAL's original plan. It might have been influenced by the recent difficulty encountered in gaining the release of a CIA contractor held in Lahore jail after a shooting incident, or by concerns that Al-Qaeda might have laid a trap. Nevertheless, the President's request altered the existing plan by placing additional SEAL teams and helicopters in forward staging areas apparently inside Pakistan and by placing fighter aircraft on alert status.³⁸

It is not entirely clear how a few dozen additional SEALs would allow the original Abbottabad mission to 'fight its way out of Pakistan,' although this additional force could conceivably turn the tide if the Abbottabad compound turned out to be a ruse. From a theoretical perspective, however, the addition of these forces actually created a risk to the success of the overall mission because as more forces became involved, the more likely their planning and activities might leak to the press or be observed by Al-Qaeda informants.

³⁴James J. Wirtz, 'Hiding in Plain Sight: Denial, Deception and the Non-State Actor', *The SAIS Review of International Affairs* XXVIII/1 (Winter-Spring 2008), 55–63.

³⁵Bruce Riedel, 'The remarkable case of the triple agent and the bombing in Khost, Afghanistan', *Brookings*, 6 December 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/06/the-remarkable-case-of-the-triple-agent-and-the-bombing-in-khost-afghanistan/>.

³⁶The SEALs on the raid were aware of the possibility of booby traps on the compound, although the presence of children indicated that none would be found see Schmidle, 'Getting Bin Laden.'

³⁷Huani Haqqani, 'What Pakistan Knew About the Bin Laden Raid', *Foreign Policy*, 13 May 2015. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/05/13/what-pakistan-knew-about-the-bin-laden-raid-seymour-hersh/>.

³⁸Siobhan Gorman and Julian E. Barnes, 'Spy, Military Ties Aided bin Laden Raid', *Wall Street Journal* (online) 23 May 2011. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704083904576334160172068344>.

Movement of these rescue forces to their forward operating positions also raised the possibility of detection by Pakistani units, which could have compromised the movement of the main force to its primary target. The idea that more U.S. forces would join the fray in a running battle to rescue surviving raiders seems guaranteed to make matters worse following some sort of failure. Indeed, the addition of a 'contingency rescue plan' could actually constitute an ancillary mission objective, the sort of thing that had to be avoided to guarantee mission success.

Additionally, the fact that the President 'reached down' to alter the proposed plan in a significant way seems to violate the notion of military independence when it comes to planning and executing special operations. This sort of civilian meddling in the planning process was not fully anticipated by McRaven's theory, which suggested that special operators needed to be at the helm when it came to mission planning and execution. This raises an important issue about the nexus of civil-military relations during special operations: when a special operation is strategically significant, it is unlikely that political authorities will leave special forces to their own devices. Ironically, as things worked out, civilian intervention in JSOC planning might have facilitated mission success. The Chinook helicopter that retrieved the marooned SEALs might have been placed in reserve following Obama's request to develop some sort of back up plan.

Advancing the theory

The juxtaposition of McRaven's theory over the history of the Abbottabad raid reveals several observations for future theorists to ponder. For example, the principles highlighted by the theory might best be viewed as the tactical or operational corollaries to the Douhet-like value proposition articulated by McRaven. In other words, to achieve their full potential, special forces (1) must not be frittered away in ancillary missions in support of conventional operations and instead must be used on missions of political or strategic importance; (2) must be placed under the control of special forces; and (3) must incorporate specific tactical and operational principles that are required to produce truly asymmetric strategic effects (hence the six principles highlighted by the theory). Indeed, it is the link between the value proposition and the tactical and operational dicta supplied by McRaven that explains how special forces can serve as a strategic instrument of statecraft, which has to be considered as the primary accomplishment of the theory.

The Abbottabad raid also raises questions about whether the principles identified by McRaven are actually necessary conditions for the success of special operations. Shortcomings in the rehearsal of the raid contributed directly to a significant operational failure that could have doomed the entire evolution. Nevertheless, despite the failure to conduct a fully effective

rehearsal, the raid succeeded. A completely accurate rehearsal is not a *necessary* condition for success. Another way of viewing the rehearsal failure is that it raises the possibility that the theory is actually 'one-point safe,' so to speak. In other words, failure to fully execute one of the six principles does not inevitably result in mission failure. The Obama administration's willingness to add potential contingencies into the original mission planning even raises the possibility that the theory is 'two-point' safe; success can still be achieved despite shortcomings in two requirements identified by the theory. One might also add that the theory tends to express its principles as fully achievable, while practice suggests that this is never really the case. Rehearsals can only approximate real conditions and doubts will always exist *ex ante* about the quality of available intelligence. This would suggest that the principles articulated by McRaven really are admonitions to the practitioner that identify where risk to potential missions lurks and where effort should be expended, not necessary conditions that must be in place for success.

Additionally, while this article highlights how surprise, which suspends war's dialectic, is the key enabler of mission success, McRaven believed that this view mistakenly ignored other equally important elements of the theory:

Many tacticians consider the principle of surprise to be the most important factor in a successful special operation. They mistakenly believe that it is surprise that gives them the decisive advantage over the enemy, as if merely catching the enemy unprepared would assure the attacking force of victory. This is not the case. Surprise is useless and indeed unachievable without the other principles. What good would it do to surprise the enemy, only to be ill equipped to fight him? Relative superiority is gained only through the correct application of all the principles. Surprise is essential, but it should not be viewed in isolation. It is only valuable as part of the complete pyramid of principles.³⁹

McRaven's point is well taken. The Abbottabad raiders would have failed if they lacked a plan and the skills needed to overcome the weak resistance offered by the inhabitants of the compound. By highlighting the importance of relative superiority vice surprise, however, McRaven turns the focus of the theory back to its human elements. In other words, success is created by superiority across all tactical and operational aspects of the mission by pitting 'elite' forces, excellent planning, execution and command with the element of surprise against less capable average units or even 'garrison' forces. Debating the importance of surprise and relative superiority might appear to be of limited interest, the stuff that troubles academics, not practitioners. Nevertheless, it raises an important issue about the skill set and commitment needed to follow McRaven's playbook and whether or not run-of-the-mill forces and operations can put the theory of special operations to use.

³⁹McRaven, *SPEC OPS*, 19.

The theory of special operations also is focused on the operational level of war, which explains how tactics can be integrated into strategy. Nevertheless, given the strategic value proposition contained in the theory, a failure to consider the civil-military nexus and the politics of special operations is a significant shortcoming, especially since the theory posits that special forces are capable of achieving strategic and political objectives of the highest significance. As Colin Gray has suggested, however, achieving the value proposition advanced in McRaven's theory requires a good bit of collaboration between politicians who set political and policy objectives and military tacticians and strategists who plan and execute military operations to achieve those objectives:

Policy makers will need to adjust their political guidance to the dynamic evolution of the "big picture"; tacticians and operational commanders must report on what is proving militarily feasible and what is not, as events reveal; and strategists have to translate a shifting political guidance into operational plans to be practicable for combat.⁴⁰

McRaven's theory might be enhanced if future strategists consider how to best synchronize political, strategic, operational and tactical considerations when it comes to undertaking special operations directed at achieving politically important objectives. It is a rare, happy coincidence when all of these considerations naturally align. Indeed, as Gray notes, 'the historical record demonstrates a permanent structural disharmony, great and small, among policy, strategy, and tactics.'⁴¹ Given the strategic and political impact of the type of special operation championed by McRaven, it is especially important for planners to make sure that tactical and operational requirements do not undermine the achievement of the political goals behind the operation. Given the political stakes involved, planners should thus keep the first rule of strategy in mind – do no political harm – as they synchronize all of the elements embodied in a special operation. The theory of special operations needs to be extended to incorporate this admonishment to strategists.

Conclusion

When viewed with nearly thirty years of hindsight, The theory of special operations has indeed stood the test of time. It has stood this test because of its focus on the practitioner, its demonstration of the value proposition behind special operators and operations and its brevity and simplicity. 'Just as a little theory typically is more useful to practice than is a lot of theory,' notes Gray, 'so a smaller architecture of theory is likely to be more refined and

⁴⁰Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2010), 145.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 148.

profound than is a theoretical structure of monumental complexity.⁴² It also remains significant because, as the Abbottabad raid demonstrates, it can guide successful operations.

Nevertheless, one also senses that the worm is again turning. It has been ten years since Bin Laden's demise. Preoccupation with the Global War on Terror is being replaced with newfound interest in devising ways for the U.S. military to adapt to the reemergence of great power competition, which would seem to push special operations again into the background of military planning. Yet, this is exactly the context that led McRaven to craft his theory – to offer a value proposition for special forces during great power competition and to specify the conditions that had to be met before special operators could provide that value. In fact, with a decade's worth of hindsight, it increasingly appears that the Abbottabad raid might even constitute a 'least critical test' for the theory. No one believed that servicing the Abbottabad target was unimportant, the Global War on Terror had put JSOC in the driver seat and the (ultimately constructive political-operational) kibitzing on the mission only came from the very top, albeit in a way that was not anticipated by the theory. The real test for the theory might come in a situation when more conventionally-minded officers not only have a more tangible justification for command, but a more valid claim on the mission itself.

Finally, if one drops the value proposition associated with McRaven's work, one might be forgiven for thinking that his foray into theory was actually mislabeled in two respects. First, McRaven's six principles might be associated generally with tactical or operational success, regardless of the units involved. For instance, the Japanese aviators who attacked Pearl Harbor or the Doolittle raiders who attacked Tokyo both enjoyed the 'relative superiority' highlighted by McRaven's theory, allowing them to strike heavily defended areas with minimal opposition. One can also identify many of the principles outlined by McRaven in these operations. For example, innovation enabled both operations. The Japanese modified aerial torpedoes to function in the shallow depths of Pearl Harbor, while the Americans devised a way to fly medium-range Army bombers from the deck of an aircraft carrier. In other words, his theory might have been better described as a 'theory of successful operations.'

This leads to the second reservation. The title chosen by McRaven for his theoretical foray might have been a bit of bureaucratic marketing gone awry. Many focus on his choice of definite article in the title of his theory as misguided, but the real inaccuracy is that the theory never addresses the full gamut of the missions undertaken by special forces. Indeed, the list of tasks undertaken by special forces is long and varied: military training, aviation, underwater demolition and use of various

⁴²Ibid., 279.

'submersibles' reconnaissance, intelligence operations, military liaison, diplomacy, counter-insurgency, fostering insurgency and other types of resistance movements, supporting fifth columnists, etc. McRaven's work is not a theory of 'special operations'; it is actually a 'theory of raids,' one small part of the portfolio of missions undertaken by special forces units. Calling it a 'theory of raids,' would have been more accurate, but it would have ultimately reduced the impact of its value proposition and its cachet in the special operations community's most important engagement – the one occurring in the Pentagon.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this article are those of the author alone and do not reflect the position of any government or agency.

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Notes on contributors

James J. Wirtz is a Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, USA. He recently completed co-editing the 7th edition of *Strategy in the Contemporary World* (Oxford, 2022). He received his Ph.D. from Columbia University.

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