

## **The Last Good Chance: A Reassessment of U.S. Operations at Tora Bora**

PETER JOHN PAUL KRAUSE

*The inability of the United States to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and many of his top deputies at Tora Bora is widely recognized as one of the most significant missed opportunities of America's struggle with al Qaeda. However, the debate over U.S. actions at Tora Bora during Operation Enduring Freedom lacks in-depth analysis, especially concerning the commonly offered solution of more U.S. troops on the ground. This paper dissects the original operation against al Qaeda forces entrenched in the mountain complex in eastern Afghanistan in late 2001 and its impact on the debate over the Afghan model of warfare. An alternative plan involving U.S. conventional forces is presented that takes into account the considerable constraints of the scenario and analyzes the key make-or-break points of the operation. Although the challenges are far greater than most critics have allowed, the revised plan would likely have offered the best chance to capture or kill Bin Laden and a significant portion of the al Qaeda leadership.*

### INTRODUCTION

As the early stages of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) began to wind down, Michael O'Hanlon became the first of many observers to argue that U.S. efforts in Afghanistan represented a "flawed masterpiece."<sup>1</sup> Within three

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Peter Krause is a doctoral candidate in political science and a member of the Security Studies Program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael O'Hanlon, "A Flawed Masterpiece," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (March/April 2002): 47–63.

months of the 9/11 attacks, the George W. Bush administration assembled a massive coalition of over sixty-eight nations, convinced the Pakistani government to give up their official support of the Taliban and join America in the “War on Terror,” seized control of Afghanistan, and drove much of the Taliban and *al Qaeda* out of the country, all for exceedingly low costs in American blood and treasure. The combination of CIA and Special Forces teams, precision airpower, and indigenous allies employed by the United States in the early stages of OEF have become known as the Afghan model, and a related debate has been waged over the applicability of this strategy to other cases for intervention.

Supporters of the Afghan model initially argued the combination of American airpower and indigenous allies could serve as a broad template for future operations, whereas critics were quick to point out that the conditions necessary for the model’s success were unlikely to be encountered in the future.<sup>2</sup> Fortunately, scholars on both sides of the debate have recognized the truth lies somewhere between their initial extreme positions.<sup>3</sup> Richard Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas Griffith are correct in arguing that the significantly lower costs of this style of fighting may provide the United States with “a more credible stick to use in coercive diplomacy against small- and medium-sized opponents,” whereas Stephen Biddle is correct in noting that the skill and motivation of troops involved play a central role in the outcome of most types of conflict.<sup>4</sup>

The overwhelming consensus concerning the initial speed and proficiency of OEF is trumped only by the near unanimity surrounding what most believe to be the biggest flaw of the campaign: the failure of the United States and its allies to capture or kill Osama bin Laden and the rest of the *al Qaeda* leadership at Tora Bora. Seven years after the removal of the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, bin Laden and second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri continue to provide ideological guidance and inspiration to followers and sympathizers across the globe through their leadership of *al Qaeda*, which remains a significant threat to the United States and its interests to this day.<sup>5</sup> The killing or capture of bin Laden, Zawahiri, or hundreds of *al Qaeda* troops would not have ended the jihadi threat against the United States, but it would have removed some of its most important leaders who have proven adept at

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<sup>2</sup> For the best overview of the debate over the Afghan Model, see Stephen Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003), 1–8. Biddle and others have continued the debate to this day without achieving consensus. See Stephen Biddle, “Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq,” *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/2006): 161–76, and Richard Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas Griffith, “Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model,” *International Security* 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/2006): 124–60.

<sup>3</sup> Biddle, “Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare,” 1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Andres et al., “Winning with Allies,” 127. Biddle, “Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare,” 162–64.

<sup>5</sup> On the continued growth of *al Qaeda*’s influence, see Bruce Riedel, “Al Qaeda Strikes Back,” *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 24–40.

inspiring supporters in the Muslim world and constructing a potent transnational terrorist network. The task to capture or kill these men was particularly daunting, however, because the Tora Bora Mountains contained a reinforced complex of caves located at high altitude only a few miles from the Pakistani border in eastern Afghanistan. As the argument goes, Tora Bora represents the chink in the armor of the Afghan model. The reliance on indigenous fighters, American Special Forces and airpower meant the estimated 1,000–1,500 *al Qaeda* troops holed up in the region faced neither an effective frontal assault nor a well-positioned, reliable flanking force to prevent their escape.

The solution to the failure at Tora Bora, offered by almost every scholar, journalist, and soldier who has penned their opinion on the subject, was to insert significant U.S. conventional forces in the region.<sup>6</sup> Still, even the best writings on OEF offer few specifics concerning what would be done with these troops, what challenges the new operation would face, and why it would succeed where the previous plan failed. This lack of detail leaves these critics open to the arguments of supporters of U.S. actions, such as former Deputy Commander of United States Central Command (CENTCOM) Mike DeLong, who argued, “The simple fact is, we couldn’t put a large number of our troops on the ground. The mountains of Tora Bora are situated deep in territory controlled by tribes hostile to the United States and any outsiders. The reality was, if we put our troops in there, we would inevitably end up fighting Afghan villagers—creating bad will at a sensitive time—which was the last thing we wanted to do.”<sup>7</sup>

Since all would agree that what should have been done is based in large part on what could have been done, it stands to reason an examination of the latter would have a significant impact on the determination of the former, while serving as a valuable piece of campaign assessment in its own right. This essay addresses the feasibility and consequences of carrying out the major critique of OEF: inserting significant numbers of U.S. troops to engage *al Qaeda* at Tora Bora in the late fall of 2001. The mission to capture or kill bin Laden and the *al Qaeda* troops required a large-scale block and sweep operation in which U.S. forces would have had to move against the enemy while simultaneously preventing their escape by blocking potential exit routes out of the region.<sup>8</sup> The ability to complete such a complex mission

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<sup>6</sup> See Gary Berntsen, *Jawbreaker: The Attack on Bin Laden and Al-Qaeda* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005), 278, 298–99; and Philip Smucker, *Al Qaeda’s Great Escape: The Military and the Media on Terror’s Trail* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2004), 97–98, 132–39.

<sup>7</sup> General Dell Dailey also told Berntsen he was against deploying U.S. troops for fear of alienating our Afghan allies, and CENTCOM agreed. See Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 307. It is important to note that DeLong believes bin Laden was at Tora Bora during the attack. See Michael DeLong, *Inside CENTCOM: The Unvarnished Truth About the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004), 55–56.

<sup>8</sup> “Block and sweep” is the term employed here to refer to an encirclement of the enemy combined with a direct assault, although the comparable phrases “cordon and search” and “hammer and anvil” are used at times by other sources.

required adequate intelligence, force size and skill, and logistical support. The success of the mission would then have hinged on a combination of these and other variables, many of which were outside the control of the assaulting force.

Interestingly enough, the United States attempted to carry out a block and sweep operation at high altitude three months after Tora Bora in the Shahikot Valley to the south: Operation Anaconda. Recognition of the importance of blocking forces and the eventual deployment of American troops to serve in that capacity in the Shahikot represented progress over the original operation at Tora Bora three months earlier. However, Lieutenant General Paul Mikolashek and CENTCOM Commander Tommy Franks decided that Operation Anaconda should be based on the same “guiding principles” as the original battle at Tora Bora (and the rest of the Afghanistan campaign to that point): the Afghan Model of unconventional warfare led by indigenous forces.<sup>9</sup> The failure of indigenous forces to serve as an effective assaulting force at Anaconda, combined with intelligence and coordination missteps, prevented the United States from fully achieving its objective of killing or preventing the escape of many of the enemy fighters involved in the battle. Still, the employment of considerable numbers of U.S. forces helped turn the tide of battle from a potential debacle to an incomplete victory. Although some of the challenges at Anaconda could not be entirely overcome by the alternative plan for Tora Bora presented here, the employment of U.S. forces as both hammer and anvil would have likely led to a superior outcome.

Analysis of this sort has its origins in the net assessment of the Cold War era, which included a specific set of models to examine the potential outcomes of large campaigns involving the forces of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. However, as Stephen Biddle argues, “Almost all major force structure analyses are now built around the use of formal computer models whose ability to represent dismounted warfare against dispersed, covered, concealed targets in complex terrain is very limited.”<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, scholars like Alan Kuperman and Kelly Greenhill have demonstrated that net assessment of smaller-scale engagements far from American shores can still be conducted in a systematic fashion, yielding important strategic and policy insights.<sup>11</sup> To conduct my own analysis, I interviewed a number of individuals from within the U.S. military and intelligence community, some of whom were involved in the planning and execution of the original operation at Tora Bora and others who were drawn from units that would have been involved in the alternative

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<sup>9</sup> Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day To Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda* (New York: Berkley Books, 2005), 46–47.

<sup>10</sup> Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare*, 51.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Kuperman, *The Limits of Humanitarian Intervention: Genocide in Rwanda* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001) and Kelly Greenhill, “Mission Impossible? Preventing Deadly Conflict in the African Great Lakes Region,” *Security Studies* 11, no. 1 (Autumn 2001): 77–124.

plan presented here.<sup>12</sup> I worked from open sources, including extensive examination of maps, field manuals, and accounts of those who were involved in OEF and other recent conflicts in Afghanistan. Although a lack of available information at times limited the depth of my analysis, this constraint is shared by those who regularly plan such operations amidst significant uncertainty.

I argue that the insertion of a considerable number of U.S. conventional forces at Tora Bora could have been achieved in the time and space required, although the logistical challenges posed by swiftly transporting the required numbers of troops to some of the most forbidding terrain on earth ensured it would have been no easy task. The vulnerability of U.S. forces, all of who would have had to be airlifted into the hostile region, coupled with the advantages enjoyed by the defenders in the extreme conditions, all but ensured American forces would have suffered significant casualties over the course of such an engagement. The success of the operation would have hinged upon the relative skill of the combatants, the timing of the intelligence and subsequent decision making, the efficiency of the deployment and sustainment of American forces, and two variables outside of American control: the strategy of the enemy and the weather. If most of these variables favored the Americans, they would have had their best chance before or since to capture or kill bin Laden and the majority of the *al Qaeda* leadership. Significant challenges at each step of the operation made success far from assured, and the operation presented here is admittedly extremely ambitious and risky. However, I will also demonstrate that the operation originally carried out was even more precarious, and the scarcity of actionable intelligence on the location of *al Qaeda* members of significant quantity or quality make this a risk the United States should have taken.

The argument is developed over four sections.<sup>13</sup> First, I discuss the course of the actual battle at Tora Bora in the late fall of 2001 and emphasize key characteristics of the scenario that would be relevant for any newly conceived operation. Second, I present a revised plan for the operation and critique its main elements. Third, I make predictions about the course of the engagement by highlighting the make-or-break points in the plan and comparing its key aspects to similar battles fought by the Americans in Afghanistan. Finally, I discuss the implications of the operation for the Afghan model and the larger “War on Terror.”

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<sup>12</sup> Some of my sources have requested varying degrees of anonymity, which I have granted. I am confident all of the information presented here is accurate to the best of my ability, and I welcome any who offer more information about the operations discussed here, especially if it contradicts my own. I have cited open source material wherever possible to support my arguments.

<sup>13</sup> It is important for the reader to know this essay includes detailed discussion of military operations due to the nature of the research question and the need to support my argument with adequate theory and evidence. I have attempted to present an argument that can be sufficiently understood by audiences from a wide variety of backgrounds in military affairs, but the reader shall decide if I have succeeded.

## WHAT REALLY HAPPENED AT TORA BORA

The first American forces, in this case a seven-man CIA team named “Jawbreaker,” were inserted into Afghanistan on 26 September 2001.<sup>14</sup> The first U.S. airstrikes against Taliban and *al Qaeda* positions began two weeks later, on 7 October. Progress was sluggish in the first month despite the United States providing the Northern Alliance—a loose coalition of approximately fifteen thousand soldiers that had fought the Taliban since its capture of Kabul in 1996—with money, supplies, and air support. Finally, on 9–10 November the first major objective of the campaign—the northern city of Mazar-e-Sharif—was taken. Within the next few days, the Taliban’s hold on the country began to rapidly collapse as its fighters who escaped death on the battlefield changed sides, fled, or simply melted back into the civilian population. Northern Alliance forces entered Kabul on 13 November, and Gary Berntsen, the new commander of Jawbreaker, soon learned bin Laden had fled southeast toward Jalalabad with a large contingent of *al Qaeda* supporters.<sup>15</sup>

The problem for Berntsen was that the Northern Alliance, which had served as the main ground force up to that point in the campaign, had neither the desire nor the ability to move toward Jalalabad into neighboring Nangahar Province. Their objective was to retake control of Afghanistan from the Taliban, not chase after *al Qaeda*. Furthermore, since most of them were ethnic Tajiks or Uzbeks and not Pashtuns, they could not easily enter the historically Pashtun-dominated Nangahar. Berntsen was forced to turn to Hazret Ali, who was a Pashai tribal leader (more closely related to the Pashtuns) allied with the Northern Alliance, and other minor local Pashtun warlords who were not fighting for the Taliban.<sup>16</sup> The problem was these commanders had to recruit fighters that generally were more poorly trained and not as experienced (especially in recent fighting with the Americans) as their Northern Alliance counterparts. As the Americans were to soon discover, the motivation of these new fighters for pursuing and killing *al Qaeda* forces also was not any greater than that of the Northern Alliance.

While Special Forces units were working with Hazret Ali and other warlords to prepare to confront bin Laden’s forces, Berntsen sent in an eight-man team (Team “Juliet”) on 18 November to pursue bin Laden, who was moving his forces south of Jalalabad into the complex at Tora Bora (“black dust” in Pashto) that he had helped reinforce in recent years, which is only a few

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<sup>14</sup> For details on Jawbreaker’s early actions, see Gary Schroen, *First In: An Insider’s Account of How the CIA Spearheaded the War on Terror in Afghanistan* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 196.

<sup>16</sup> Berntsen refers to two of the U.S.-allied warlords as “Babrak” and “Nuruddin” in his book, but it is clear from Smucker’s accounts that Berntsen is referring to Hazret Ali and Haji Zaman, respectively. For a discussion of the rivalry between the two aspiring leaders, see Smucker, *Al Qaeda’s Great Escape*, 42–49.

miles from the Pakistani border.<sup>17</sup> In the final week of November, four of the members of Juliet who were led by ten local guides drawn from Hazret Ali's men crept into the mountains around Tora Bora and called in airstrikes on *al Qaeda* camps in the Milawa Valley with Special Operations Forces Laser Markers (SOFLAMS).<sup>18</sup> The incredibly risky attacks, conducted without potential search and rescue (SAR) or friendly ground forces close by, seemed to take the *al Qaeda* troops by complete surprise, and the Juliet team was able to call in effective strikes for days without being discovered. Eventually, the surviving members of *al Qaeda* retreated to the south, further up into the mountains to seek refuge in the caves.

After inserting another Special Forces team to help call in airstrikes on *al Qaeda* positions, the indigenous commanders that made up the so-called Eastern Alliance were deployed across the front: a Pashtun-warlord named Haji Zaman to the west, Hazret Ali in the center, and another Pashtun commander named Haji Zahir in the east. The idea was to surround the *al Qaeda* forces and trap them against the fourteen thousand-foot mountains that lined the border with Pakistan. The Pakistani government supposedly deployed four thousand of their "Frontier Forces" to the border to intercept any *al Qaeda* or Taliban troops that tried to flee into Pakistan, although how many of these were in the region south or east of Tora Bora is unclear.<sup>19</sup> Another problem was that the Eastern Alliance, made up of a total of five hundred to two thousand troops depending on how many decided to show up on any given day, was an alliance in name only. Haji Zaman had only recently returned from exile and his forces included men who had previously been digging caves for bin Laden and even fighting for the Taliban, Haji Zahir simply showed up with 700 soldiers but no supplies or knowledge of unfolding events in the area, and Hazret Ali saw the other warlords as potential rivals for control of the province after the fall of the Taliban.<sup>20</sup>

The main killer on the battlefield was American airpower, which laid down a sustained barrage from the first strikes called in by Juliet on 30 November until almost three weeks later, when major bombing was halted to allow U.S. allies to move forward into the caves on 17 December. Until 9 December, the only U.S. troops on the battlefield were the members of Juliet and one other Special Forces team in the mountains. On 10 December a forty-man Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) unit arrived, took command of the battlefield, and attached their troops to the various units of the Eastern Alliance. Up to one hundred airstrikes a day were called in by the troops on the ground, leading to bombing runs by B-52s, B-1s, F/A-18s,

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<sup>17</sup> Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 215.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 265–71.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>20</sup> On Eastern Alliance infighting and unreliability, see Smucker, *Al Qaeda's Great Escape*, 86–90; and Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 280–81, 306.

and F-16s dropping JDAMS and AC-130 gunships providing massive cannon-fire. The United States deployed its most destructive conventional bombs in attempts to destroy *al Qaeda* troops seeking refuge in Tora Bora's extensive cave system. A B-52 dropped an AGM-142 Have Nap missile equipped with a rock-penetrating warhead, and a C-130 dropped a fifteen thousand-pound BLU-82 bomb, which observers later reported left a path of destruction five football fields wide.<sup>21</sup> American forces estimated that five hundred *al Qaeda* troops were killed in the first week of the bombing.<sup>22</sup> Large numbers of *al Qaeda*'s weapons and supplies were destroyed in the strikes in the Milawa Valley, forcing *al Qaeda* to communicate with unencrypted walkie-talkies easily picked up by American forces.<sup>23</sup>

The loss of the *al Qaeda* force's tanks in the initial bombing left them armed mostly with the ubiquitous Kalashnikov, as well as a few heavy DShk machine guns, mortars, and a number of rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs).<sup>24</sup> Despite their relatively light weaponry, the *al Qaeda* troops enjoyed a number of advantages. They were generally well-trained fighters with strong morale and had demonstrated their willingness to engage assaulting forces even amidst U.S. airstrikes. After the shock from the first bombing runs, most of the *al Qaeda* troops moved to nearly two hundred prepared firing positions and caves in higher ground that were stockpiled with food and ammunition.<sup>25</sup> Hundreds of caves had been dug into the fourteen thousand-foot peaks since the time of the war with the Soviets and had proven resistant to airstrikes and air assaults in the past.<sup>26</sup> Although U.S. airstrikes often forced *al Qaeda* troops to remain in their caves, the low quality of the indigenous forces that were tasked with identifying and advancing on their positions allowed *al Qaeda* to hold off the advance for weeks. The Eastern Alliance troops were unable to do much more than occupy territory vacated by *al Qaeda* troops, and their penchant for returning to dine with their families each night meant territory taken was rarely held.<sup>27</sup> When they finally reached

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<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror: America's Conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2005), 149; and Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 295–96.

<sup>22</sup> Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 292.

<sup>23</sup> Author interview with American intelligence officer who deployed to Afghanistan.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Anthony Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan: War Fighting, Intelligence, and Force Transformation* (Washington, DC: The Center for Strategic and International Studies Press, 2002), 26.

<sup>26</sup> The Soviet forces launched numerous operations against mujahideen based at Tora Bora during their occupation of Afghanistan. Mohamed Asif Qazizanda told Peter Bergen of his experience as deputy commander of the area from 1980–83: "I witnessed many offensives by the Soviets against Tora Bora. At one time two thousand Russian and two thousand Afghan communist soldiers mounted an offensive against Tora Bora, supported by fifty Russian helicopters and MiG jets. We shot down two of the helicopters with machine guns and captured a soldier from the Ukraine. During the jihad against the Soviets we had a force of 120 to 130 people stationed in Tora Bora." Peter Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know: An Oral History of Al Qaeda's Leader* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 329–30.

<sup>27</sup> For an account of Eastern Alliance efforts, see Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 265–310 and "United States Special Operations Command History: 1987–2007," 93–98, <http://www.fas.org/irp/agency/dod/socom/2007history.pdf>.



the main stronghold in mid-December after almost three weeks of fighting, Eastern Alliance forces were only able to capture about fifty or so disheveled prisoners: “the stupid ones, the foolish and the weak,” according to one commander.<sup>28</sup>

On or around 16 December, bin Laden split his forces into two groups and left Tora Bora. The first group of 135 soldiers was eventually captured by the Pakistanis, while bin Laden’s group of approximately two hundred men, which included Zawahiri, escaped into Pakistan.<sup>29</sup> The Pakistani forces deployed to block *al Qaeda*’s escape were militia units from regions with known loyalties to the Taliban and bin Laden, called upon because the government had little control over the border provinces and could not send elements of its regular army there without generating conflict. Eastern Alliance commanders admitted some of their men were paid to help *al Qaeda* troops escape, which should not have come as a surprise to the Americans who had won the loyalty of these local Pashtun fighters only weeks earlier with similar cash handouts.<sup>30</sup> Despite requests for a battalion of U.S. conventional troops from Berntsen and other CIA elements on the ground, forty Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and twelve Special Forces (SF) soldiers were the only other Americans that made an appearance on the battlefield, not including the swarm of journalists that were able to descend on the schoolhouse at the base of the mountains that served as the command post.<sup>31</sup> These requests for U.S. forces reached President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney, as did evidence that the Pakistani blocking forces had not arrived during the last week of November. Although the President seemed concerned about the quality of the Eastern Alliance forces, he, Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld mistakenly trusted Prime Minister Pervez Musharraf’s assurance that Pakistani forces would do the job.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jane Corbin, *Al-Qaeda: In Search of the Terror Network that Threatens the World* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2002), 262.

<sup>29</sup> Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 307–8.

<sup>30</sup> For accounts of U.S. payments to indigenous allies (although much of it remains redacted by the CIA), see Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 249–50, 272–73. On the “betrayal” of Eastern Alliance troops, see Corbin, *Al-Qaeda*, 259–62.

<sup>31</sup> The number of soldiers in a battalion varies depending upon a variety of factors, including its type and mission. For this essay, battalions will be defined as consisting of about eight hundred troops. Gary Berntsen, who headed up the CIA’s Jawbreaker team during the fighting at Tora Bora and requested the insertion of a battalion of Rangers, believed the refusal by CENTCOM to deploy conventional U.S. troops was a major mistake that allowed bin Laden to escape. For Berntsen’s account of his requests, see Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 277, 290–91, 298–301, 305–10. For the best account of the swarms of journalists that chased after bin Laden during the opening months of OEF, at times seemingly with more fervor than U.S. military forces, see Smucker, *Al-Qaeda’s Great Escape*. The author looks forward to the publication of a new book on the actions of U.S. Delta Force troops at Tora Bora, written by the commanding officer and scheduled for publication in October 2008. Sean Naylor, “Former Delta Officer’s Book to Shed Light on Tora Bora,” *Army Times*, [http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/01/army\\_delta\\_book\\_080131w/](http://www.armytimes.com/news/2008/01/army_delta_book_080131w/)

<sup>32</sup> Ron Suskind, *The One Percent Doctrine: Deep Inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies Since 9/11* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 58–59, 74.

This disappointing outcome was largely due to three major factors: (1) the lack of a swift deployment in response to U.S. intelligence about bin Laden's location; (2) the lack of a motivated, well-trained and well-equipped assaulting force; and (3) the lack of motivated, well-trained and well-equipped blocking forces around Tora Bora. The commonly suggested solution to this problem was the rapid deployment of significant numbers of U.S. conventional forces, potentially to serve as both hammer and anvil around the enemy at Tora Bora.<sup>33</sup> What would such an operation look like? What are the fundamental issues any plan would have to address to stand a chance of success? What would be the major obstacles to its implementation? I will address these and other key questions by breaking down the new operation into three components: intelligence, force size and application, and logistics.

### AN ALTERNATIVE "OPERATION TORA BORA"

#### Intelligence

Intelligence on the quantity, the quality, and especially the location of the enemy is perhaps the most sought after prize in warfare. For militaries engaged in conflicts with irregular forces that often try to blend into the local population, reliable intelligence is even further treasured, in large part because of its comparative scarcity due to the nature of the enemy. For any operation to be successful in killing or capturing bin Laden and/or his lieutenants, actionable intelligence on their whereabouts would first have to be acquired and passed on to the American military leadership.<sup>34</sup>

U.S. intelligence put large numbers of *al Qaeda* as well as bin Laden himself in the area around Jalalabad by mid-November. As Colonel John Mulholland, the Fifth Special Forces Group commander who headed Task Force Dagger, told Philip Smucker, "The agency [CIA] were basically the ones who came to me and said, 'Hey, look, we believe Osama Bin Laden is in Tora Bora.' We were working together and it really became clear that we were going to mount an operation into Tora Bora."<sup>35</sup> The U.S. military and civilian leadership was not surprised by this move, since Tora Bora was

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Pape argues for a slightly different version of hammer and anvil tactics in which air forces act as the hammer and land forces as the anvil upon which the enemy is smashed. In this case, ground forces were required to serve in both roles for the best chance of success, although air power would still play a part in the battle. See Robert Pape, "The True Worth of Air Power," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 2 (March/April 2004): 116–30.

<sup>34</sup> Such actionable intelligence was the key component in the killing or capturing of terrorist leaders like Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi and Khalid Shaikh Mohammed.

<sup>35</sup> Smucker, *Al Qaeda's Great Escape*, 59. Much of Mulholland's intelligence was coming through Gary Berntsen, who headed the CIA's Jawbreaker team whose objective was to capture or kill bin Laden and other *al Qaeda* members. For an account of a conversation between the two men regarding bin Laden's movement toward Tora Bora, see Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 213–14.

known as an historic mujahideen stronghold that bin Laden had improved and utilized in recent years. In fact, the United States dropped bombs on the cave complex on 10 October and again on 27 October based on previous intelligence, making it clear that Tora Bora was a known entity since before the first days of OEF.<sup>36</sup> Journalists in the area received numerous reports of bin Laden and a significant entourage moving south from Jalalabad into the Spin Ghar (“White Mountains”) on 13 November, which helped saturate the area with more media members than U.S. troops, despite the presence of CIA and SOF forces.<sup>37</sup>

After the failure to capture or kill the majority of the *al Qaeda* fighters at Tora Bora, including any of the top leadership, many officials attempted to argue that bin Laden had never been at Tora Bora in the first place. However, these claims, largely made for reasons of political self-interest, are undermined by the words of the same members of the political and military leadership. For instance, Rumsfeld claimed in April 2002, “Nor do I know today of any evidence that [bin Laden] was in Tora Bora at the time or that he left Tora Bora at the time or even where he is today.”<sup>38</sup> However, Mike DeLong, deputy commander of CENTCOM during the operation at Tora Bora, admitted the leadership was aware of bin Laden’s presence, albeit indirectly: “We didn’t kill any civilians unnecessarily up there [at Tora Bora]. We know for a fact from our multiple intelligence sources that we wounded bin Laden. But yes, he did get away.”<sup>39</sup> Radio transmissions from bin Laden placed him in Tora Bora as late as early December, as did the accounts of numerous journalists and intelligence officials.<sup>40</sup> Berntsen, one of the top CIA officers in Afghanistan at the time, confirms that all of the intelligence he received before and since indicated bin Laden was at Tora Bora.<sup>41</sup> Another reason some officials may claim not to have seen reports on bin Laden at Tora Bora is that although his presence was reported numerous times by intelligence sources on the ground both orally and in writing to American officials, access to such information was severely restricted and not included in daily intelligence estimates due to concerns about leaks.<sup>42</sup>

It is clear bin Laden was at Tora Bora in November 2001 and U.S. political and military officials knew it. Furthermore, it is not disputed that many hundreds, if not over a thousand *al Qaeda* fighters were there, making it the largest concentration of that enemy before or since.<sup>43</sup> Such a high number

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 54–57; and Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, 331–36.

<sup>38</sup> Corbin, *Al-Qaeda*, 301.

<sup>39</sup> “Interview with Gen. Mike DeLong,” *The Command Post*, 24 September 2004, [http://www.defenddemocracy.org/research\\_topics/research\\_topics\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=240947](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/research_topics/research_topics_show.htm?doc_id=240947).

<sup>40</sup> Bergen, *The Osama Bin Laden I Know*, 331–36.

<sup>41</sup> See Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 213–14, 239–40, 249–50, 269, 307–8.

<sup>42</sup> Author interview with American intelligence officer who deployed to Afghanistan.

<sup>43</sup> The only other scenario that involved a concentration approaching one thousand *al Qaeda* and allied fighters was Operation Anaconda in the Shahikot Valley in March 2002. Most analysts believe,

of *al Qaeda* troops made the target highly valuable; the added presence of bin Laden and perhaps the rest of the leadership made it the most significant target in the “War on Terror” to this point. The simple fact the U.S. organized an operation against the enemy at Tora Bora that lasted for three weeks reveals that the American leadership had the necessary intelligence in a timely fashion to spur them into action. The next decision, and the one for which they have received the most criticism, concerned the quantity and quality of forces they chose to employ to confront the enemy.

### Force Size and Application

The forces required for the operation (hereafter referred to as Operation Tora Bora or OTB) would have to possess four key characteristics: (1) rapid deployability to the region, (2) small enough size to enable maneuver and not be perceived as a massive invading force, (3) skill in irregular combat, and (4) ability to operate in difficult terrain. Large formations of conventional U.S. forces would not do the job because they would take far too long to deploy. Since Afghanistan is a landlocked, mountainous country far from major U.S. bases, OEF required almost all forces and supplies to be sent in by air. Airlifting anything approaching a division to the area in the days to weeks the U.S. expected to have to prevent *al Qaeda*'s escape would have been all but impossible. Even if it could have been done, such a force would have been too visible to the local populace, allowing the enemy advance warning of any attack and jeopardizing CENTCOM's goal of a small footprint.<sup>44</sup> The requirements of the operation, which included high altitude insertions by helicopter and direct assaults against prepared positions in a mountain fortress, further underlined the need for small, agile forces that could defeat the hardened, irregular combatants they would face amidst some of the most difficult terrain in the world.

The United States has maintained such forces for years, presumably for such challenging operations. Fortunately for the United States, a few of these units were already deployed to the region. Over one thousand troops from the Tenth Mountain Division (a combination of soldiers from the First Battalion, Eighty-seventh Infantry and the Fourth Battalion, Thirty-first Infantry) were deployed to Karshi Khanabad in Uzbekistan since the start of OEF, with hundreds of them redeployed to Bagram Air Force Base by the

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however, that bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri were not in the Shahikot during Operation Anaconda, but were at Tora Bora during the attack in December 2001.

<sup>44</sup> Whether this advanced warning would have led to the enemy fleeing or simply a tougher fight against a prepared foe depends on the strategy and disposition of the *al Qaeda* forces, which will be discussed later. The latter point concerning the need for any new force to fit within a small footprint speaks to the issue of cotenability, which is a key consideration for a counterfactual case such as this. For more on the issue of cotenability, see James Fearon, “Counterfactuals and Hypothesis Testing in Political Science,” *World Politics* 43 (January 1991): 169–95.



**FIGURE 1** Afghanistan and Its Neighbors.

end of October (see Figure 1 for a map of the region).<sup>45</sup> Although these units initially assisted in upgrading and protecting these key airfields, the majority could have been deployed to Tora Bora, with other units shifted to support U.S. operations at the airfields if needed.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, many of the troops at Karshi Khanabad were tasked with “cleaning latrines and functioning as military police” and were itching to put their training as infantrymen to work.<sup>47</sup> In addition to their ideal position at airfields less than a few hundred miles from the objective, these troops were trained to be rapidly deployable.<sup>48</sup> Other small, agile army units in the region included the Third Battalion, Seventy-fifth Ranger Regiment stationed in Oman. Two hundred of these troops had conducted a parachute assault on an airfield southwest of Kandahar on 19 October, demonstrating their ability to conduct nighttime

<sup>45</sup> Richard Stewart, *The U.S. Army in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom*, CMH Pub 70–83-1, U.S. Army Center of Military History, 10, <http://www.army.mil/cmh/brochures/Afghanistan/Operation%20Enduring%20Freedom.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Col. Paul La Camera, commander of the First Battalion, Eighty-seventh Infantry of the Tenth Mountain Division told Philip Smucker that his battalion had been prepared since mid-November to deploy anywhere in Afghanistan: “We knew. We weren’t just sitting there digging holes and looking out. We were training for potential fights because eventually it was going to come to that.” Smucker, *Al Qaeda’s Great Escape*, 83.

<sup>47</sup> Naylor, *Not a Good Day To Die*, 230.

<sup>48</sup> Unfortunately, the Tenth Mountain troops had long ceased any special training in mountainous warfare. However, they are among the army’s most deployed and experienced soldiers.

parachute operations successfully in hostile territory.<sup>49</sup> Outside of the theater, the Deployment Readiness Brigade (DRB) of the Eighty-second Airborne Division possessed the necessary combination of size, speed, and flexibility for Operation Tora Bora. Within eighteen hours of notification, a battalion of the brigade (DRF-1) can deploy to conduct forcible entry parachute assault anywhere in the world. Although the brigade's location at Fort Bragg, North Carolina is over seven thousand miles from Kabul, the U.S. Army's plans for such a strategic lift, including large numbers of C-17s, tankers, and other platforms, make it possible for the approximately eight hundred soldiers to be deployed to Afghanistan in less than a week.

Standard U.S. doctrine holds that assaulting forces should enjoy a three to one ratio in soldiers to achieve a reasonable chance of success in high-intensity ground combat.<sup>50</sup> However, beyond potential discrepancies in troop skills and training discussed later, two key factors suggest such high ratios in favor of the attacker were not required for success, at least initially: surprise and airpower. U.S. forces could expect to enjoy the advantages of surprise, especially early in the battle, which would allow them to kill large numbers of *al Qaeda* forces before they were properly concealed and prepared to repel an assault.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, the impact of virtually unopposed U.S. airpower would provide American forces with a lethal asset that had helped tip the balance toward assaulting forces in previous engagements.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, Northern Alliance forces were outnumbered by more than 2.5 to 1 in their assault on Mazar-e-Sharif, yet due to the bravery of General Abdul Rashid Dostum's forces and the power of U.S. precision airstrikes called in by SOF

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<sup>49</sup> Objective Rhino was assaulted again on 25 November and turned into Forward Operating Base Rhino by members of the Fifteenth and Twenty-sixth Marine Expeditionary Units to support operations against Taliban forces in Kandahar. Elements of the Fifteenth and Twenty-sixth Marine Expeditionary Units were deployed in the Arabian Sea since the early part of OEF. Ordered to serve as a blocking force for Taliban elements fleeing Kandahar, these units could have served a similar function at Tora Bora. The Marine units were certainly more than capable, but the strategic value of Kandahar and the uncertainty of its fall at the time meant it would have been unwise to make them unavailable for deployment to that region. The Marines would have been needed to support America's indigenous allies should Taliban and *al Qaeda* forces have fought to the last man in their spiritual capital, as expected. Stewart, *The U.S. Army in Afghanistan*, 14.

<sup>50</sup> See "Field Manual 3-34.2: Combined Arms-Breaching Operations," Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington, DC, 31 August 2000, 1-32 and 1-43, [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/3-34-2\\_2002/chap1.htm#pgfld-1024575](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/army/fm/3-34-2_2002/chap1.htm#pgfld-1024575).

<sup>51</sup> As previously discussed, accounts of the original battle bear this out, as *al Qaeda* forces, including bin Laden himself, were shocked by the speed and destructiveness of the initial assault. Most of the casualties among *al Qaeda* forces occurred during the initial bombings called in by the Juliet team. Despite the employment of more powerful bombs later in the battle, the cover and concealment employed by *al Qaeda* troops after the strikes in the Milawa Valley made them far more difficult targets. Author interview with American intelligence officer who deployed to Afghanistan.

<sup>52</sup> Biddle offers the best discussion of the motivation and training of Taliban and *al Qaeda* forces. He argues the latter possessed relatively high amounts of motivation and training, although his comparison is to U.S. indigenous allies, not U.S. troops. See Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare*, 13-16.

troops on the ground, the city was taken.<sup>53</sup> Although the Northern Alliance soldiers were courageous and experienced, it is safe to say U.S. forces would be far better outfitted, supplied, and trained. Nonetheless, two factors argued against U.S. encirclement and assault on Tora Bora with a severe numerical disadvantage: the terrain and the objective.

The incredibly difficult terrain at Tora Bora and the previously demonstrated tenacity of *al Qaeda* forces meant an assault with significantly inferior numbers would face slow progress, allowing the enemy more time to plan and execute an escape. Unlike Mazar-e-Sharif, the objective of OTB was the enemy itself, not the land. The significant blocking forces required for such an operation considerably increase the required size of the overall force; however, the ratio in troop levels is only one aspect of such an operation. The massing of fires to suppress those of the enemy while destroying his soldiers and positions is also a significant part of the thinking behind the three to one ratio. Massive fire from U.S. airpower, expected to provide U.S. forces with a major advantage on the battlefield, had a mixed record of success against concealed, prepared enemy positions in OEF. As Biddle points out, "At Operation Anaconda in March 2002, an intensive prebattle reconnaissance effort focused every available surveillance and target acquisition system on a tiny, ten-by-ten kilometer battlefield. Yet fewer than fifty percent of all the *al Qaeda* positions ultimately identified on this battlefield were discovered prior to ground contact. In fact, most fire received by U.S. forces in Anaconda came from initially unseen, unanticipated defenders, who had to be overcome by repeated close assault by U.S. and other Western ground forces."<sup>54</sup> Well-fortified caves and bunkers, especially those at high altitude on sloping terrain, are the most difficult targets to destroy, and Tora Bora was replete with them. Interestingly, the battle space at Tora Bora was almost identical in size and similar in terrain to that of Anaconda, except for the extensive caves, which made Tora Bora an even tougher target. It is therefore reasonable to assume that despite the best American effort, a number of *al Qaeda* positions would have been both undetected and untouched by U.S. airpower. The five hundred troops initially involved in the assault might therefore have to be reinforced over the course of the battle by the reserve troops from the Tenth Mountain and/or some of the Eastern Alliance fighters to hold territory previously taken while the U.S. troops advanced after the initial surprise wore off.

Despite the challenges of identifying and destroying the caves and other fighting positions at Tora Bora, U.S. airpower would have provided American

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<sup>53</sup> Andres et al., "Winning with Allies," 139. As Andres notes, force ratios on the battle for Mazar-e-Sharif are unreliable, but it is clear the Northern Alliance forces were heavily outnumbered and assaulting well-prepared defensive positions. DeLong claims the ratio was actually eight to one in favor of the Taliban. DeLong, *Inside CENTCOM*, 41.

<sup>54</sup> Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare," 170.

troops on the ground with a significant advantage over their *al Qaeda* counterparts. As Benjamin Lambeth notes, “To all intents and purposes, the United States achieved uncontested control of the air over Afghanistan above 20,000 feet almost immediately during the wars earliest days.”<sup>55</sup> From carriers based in the Indian Ocean, as well as numerous air bases in the region and even some in the United States, F-14s, F-16s, F/A-18s, B-52s, and B-1Bs had dropped around ten thousand munitions by the last week in November, sixty percent of which were precision guided munitions (PGMs).<sup>56</sup> By mid-November, Kabul had fallen, leaving a rapidly weakening Kandahar as the only other area with significant numbers of targets. Suffice it to say, the United States was prepared to commit massive airpower to the operations at Tora Bora, with preplanned air attacks supplemented by close air support (CAS) from aircraft deployed to the region to respond rapidly to airstrike requests from troops on the ground.

Close air support from AC-130s would also be crucial, especially if any of the blocking forces happened to face a determined assault from the *al Qaeda* troops, as occurred at Operation Anaconda three months later. Anaconda revealed the challenges posed by a multitude of requests for CAS from troops on the ground simultaneously flooding the system for help, as well as heightened concerns about fratricide due to the nonlinear structure of the battlefield. Nonetheless, these potential costs would have been outweighed by the significant benefits of U.S. CAS, as they were at Anaconda.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, the rarity and unprecedented value of receiving actionable intelligence on bin Laden and significant numbers of the *al Qaeda* leadership meant the significant risks discussed here were simply worth taking.

The objective of OTB—capture or kill bin Laden, Zawahiri, and as many of the *al Qaeda* soldiers as possible—meant the operation would require a large-scale block and sweep in which the enemy would be surrounded by U.S. troops. The assault or “sweep” would come from the north, while troops deployed to the east, west, and south would be tasked with blocking the enemy from escaping. After initial airstrikes bombed *al Qaeda*’s weaponry and fighting positions previously identified by U.S. sensors, the assaulting troops would move against the *al Qaeda* elements deployed forward in the Milawa Valley, working their way up into the mountains.

To deal with enemies or civilians that wander into the area, blocking units would have had to set up holding areas for those not killed in their attempts to cross through. The presence of noncombatants unfortunately complicates what would already be a difficult engagement. The presence

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<sup>55</sup> Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror*, 84.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>57</sup> Indeed, close air support at Anaconda is credited with saving the lives of many U.S. soldiers, as first Apache helicopter attacks and later support from AC-130s and other fixed-wing aircraft kept *al Qaeda* troops at bay and destroyed a number of their fighting positions. Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 194–97, 210–48, 323–38.



of locals embedded with blocking units, however, would have facilitated identification of the foreigners who comprised a large portion of *al Qaeda*, although indigenous troops would not necessarily be any better at differentiating between Afghan civilians and Taliban soldiers. The blocking forces should have expected to encounter small groups of soldiers and civilians fleeing the battlefield at the onset of the bombardment, with larger groups attempting to escape as the assaulting forces pushed into the mountains. Assaulting and blocking forces should have begun to link up after five to seven days, with some blocking forces potentially deploying forward. At the end of major combat operations, some units would have begun to search the caves while others would have been extracted. Smaller numbers of key blocking positions should have been maintained for a week or more after the battle to catch stragglers. To keep forces at these altitudes for such a long period might have required the deployment of some of the reserve and/or SF troops to take over for the units previously in place. Due to potential problems of coordination between Special Forces and General Purpose Forces (GPF), SF teams in the region would have been deployed behind the GPF around the battlefield to serve as a further layer of blocking forces. One of the best places to position SF forces was just over the border in Pakistan, since they could have operated without drawing much attention from *al Qaeda* or Pakistani tribes alike.<sup>58</sup>

Although the one battalion requested by Berntsen (and subsequently denied him by CENTCOM) would have been a major improvement over the forces that actually did the fighting, the scale of the mountains and caves, as well as the size and importance of the enemy, suggest that such a force still would have been too small to get the job done. The lessons of large-scale block and sweep operations in the region reveal that even four battalions efficiently deployed would have had a difficult time capturing or killing all of the enemy troops. Still, these units would have given the United States the ability to surround the *al Qaeda* fighters with reliable American soldiers while maintaining a relatively small footprint in the country. Arguments for even greater numbers of troops face a further constraint: logistics. As I will now demonstrate, simply transporting these four battalions to their correct positions on the battlefield would have made OTB one of the more challenging operations of its kind in the modern history of the U.S. military.

### Logistics and Deployment Considerations

The only aspect of Operation Tora Bora that poses more problems than the conduct of the battle itself may be the logistics. Transporting any one of the four battalions to their objectives would have been a significant challenge

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<sup>58</sup> A couple of Special Forces teams did in fact deploy behind the Pakistani border during the original battle of Tora Bora. Author interview with American intelligence officer who deployed to Afghanistan.

in and of itself; moving all four within a short period and sustaining them throughout the operation would have made OTB a truly daunting mission. For planning purposes, the approximate day on which CENTCOM decided to act on the intelligence it was receiving about bin Laden's presence in the Tora Bora region (approximately 14 November), will henceforth be referred to as Day 1, with the following day referred to as Day 2, and so on. For the battalion of the Eighty-second Airborne, Day 1 would represent the execution of everything they trained for as part of the DRB. E. M. Flanagan describes the first eighteen hours for DRF-1:

N hour is notification—mission received. By N hour plus 4 the troops begin movement to the corps marshaling area. At N hour plus 4:30 heavy drop rigging begins. By N hour plus 8, the troops begin loading their heavy drop equipment on the planes parked at the Pope Air Force Base Green Ramp. By N hour plus 12, the [DRF-1] conduct assembly and mission rehearsals. From N-hour plus 15 to N hour plus 16, the air force and 82nd Division commanders conduct a mission brief. By N-hour plus 17:30, the troops are aboard the planes on Green Ramp. And at N hour plus 18, the lead aircraft has its “wheels up.”<sup>59</sup>

The Eighteenth Airborne Corps, of which the Eighty-second Airborne and Tenth Mountain are a part, had already received a warning order signed by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld within a week of the 9/11 attacks, giving them months to prepare for the call to deploy that they knew would come.<sup>60</sup> In fact, the United States later began planning to introduce conventional forces in a battle for Kabul in case the Northern Alliance advance stalled. The plan was to airdrop a brigade of the Eighty-second to Kabul airport, then fly in conventional units to take over the city. The rapid flight of the Taliban out of the city left those plans unrealized, but it revealed that such an operation was indeed possible.<sup>61</sup> Estimates of the number of c-17s (or their equivalents) required to airlift eight hundred troops and their equipment range from sixteen to thirty-three.<sup>62</sup> Although the official number is classified, the fact that each c-17 can hold approximately 102 paratroops or eighty-five tons of equipment means that approximately nineteen c-17s would be required to transport the battalion (nine for the soldiers and ten for their approximately 850 tons of equipment). The equipment for the battalion

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<sup>59</sup> E. M. Flanagan, *Airborne: A Combat History of American Airborne Forces* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 426–27.

<sup>60</sup> Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror*, 66. Interview with Col. Michael Wehr, member of the Eighty-second Airborne Division.

<sup>61</sup> Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 11–12.

<sup>62</sup> E. M. Flanagan claims that each battalion of the Eighty-second requires sixteen c-17s, while the Department of Defense argued that an airlift of three battalions would require one hundred c-17s, meaning approximately thirty-three for each battalion (perhaps a few more for common elements). Flanagan, *Airborne*, 426.

includes six 105 mm howitzers, mortars, and a variety of small arms, which can be tailored to the specific mission. The troops themselves would be initially outfitted with enough food and ammunition for approximately three days.<sup>63</sup>

The Eighty-second troops have the ability to fly directly from Pope Air Force Base to Afghanistan; however, the rigors of such an extended flight, followed by a firefight against a determined enemy at extreme altitudes, would stretch even these well-trained troops to their limits. Instead, the c-17s ferrying the Eighty-second troops would fly to Prince Sultan Air Force Base in Saudi Arabia, a flight of approximately six thousand nautical miles that would require midair refueling once along the way by KC-10s and KC-135s. The troops could then spend the night in Saudi Arabia before flying the 1,400 nautical miles to Bagram, a relatively short flight that would take approximately 3.5 hours. Given the eighteen hours required to make all units of the Eighty-second airborne, the fourteen or so hours of flight time to the Prince Sultan AFB, the added hours of delay for midair refueling, and the time spent resting in Saudi Arabia and finally flying into Afghanistan, it would take approximately three days to transport DRF-1 from North Carolina to Bagram. The Eighty-second troops would then meet with the other units to coordinate the operation and prepare for their insertion just north of Tora Bora two days later. Although the jagged terrain directly to the east, west, and south of Tora Bora did not provide quality drop zones, the flatter terrain to the north would allow the Eighty-second to parachute into the area in relative safety. As discussed below, the deployment to this area would place them close to their initial assaulting position, which is ideal given that these troops are not highly mobile immediately following an airdrop.<sup>64</sup>

The Third Battalion of the Seventy-fifth Ranger Regiment at Oman was located less than one thousand miles from Bagram, making its flight via air transports a comparatively short three hours. Including loading, takeoff, landing, and refueling, a fleet of five to ten c-130s could airlift the battalion to Bagram within forty-eight hours of notification.<sup>65</sup> The soldiers of the Tenth Mountain Division would have the shortest distance to travel since many of them were already based at Bagram, and the rest were close by at Karshi Khanabad. While the rest of the forces for OTB were being transported to the

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<sup>63</sup> The requirements for resupply depend in large part on whether the troops engage in hostile action. For those forces that do, aerial resupply would be required much earlier.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Col. Christopher Conner, member of the U.S. Special Forces; and Interview with Col. Michael Wehr, member of the Eighty-second Airborne Division.

<sup>65</sup> A contingent of the battalion that participated in the raid on Rhino remained in Afghanistan after completing the operation in October. However, many of these troops served mainly as guards for other Special Forces units and were frustrated at their lack of action. Suffice it to say, a combination of these troops and those Rangers still based in Oman would have been available to serve in this mission to strike high value targets, which was the supposed objective of the Rangers' task force in the first place. See Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 37–38; and Mir Bahmanyar, *Shadow Warriors: A History of the US Army Rangers* (New York: Osprey, 2005), 214–15.

Group	Units	Region	Assignment
N (North)	82nd Airborne, DRF-1	Foothills north of Tora Bora	Lead main assault against <i>al Qaeda</i>
S (South)	10th Mountain Division (Elements of the 1st Battalion, 87th Infantry and the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry)	Mountains on Afghan-Pakistan border to the South of Tora Bora	Block <i>al Qaeda</i> escape south into Pakistan, capture/kill escapees
E (East)	3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment (1 Company)	Agamtangai River to the east of Tora Bora	Block <i>al Qaeda</i> escape to the east, capture/kill escapees
W (West)	3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment (2 Companies)	Waziratangai River to the west of Tora Bora	Block <i>al Qaeda</i> escape to the west, capture/kill escapees

**FIGURE 2** Operation Tora Bora: Group Units and Assignments.

theater, the Tenth Mountain troops would be busy planning for the operation as well as preparing the airfield for the influx of planes, equipment, and soldiers that would arrive over the next few days.

Having selected the appropriate forces and calculated the time and resources necessary to transport them into Afghanistan, the next step in planning Operation Tora Bora involves their positioning in and around the battlefield (see Figure 2 for a summary of the positioning and assignments of the units involved in OTB). The Tora Bora cave complex and surrounding mountains cover an area approximately six miles wide and six miles long, with the main occupied area marked by wooded foothills rising to jagged, stony peaks.<sup>66</sup> Bounded by mountains of eight thousand to fourteen thousand feet on three sides, the easiest approaches to the region are from the sloping but relatively smooth northern plain. The rest of the target area is delineated by a six to ten-mile long section of the mountainous border with Pakistan (which lies approximately nine miles to the south), the Agamtangai River to the east, and the Waziratangai River to the west.<sup>67</sup> Since the main objective of the operation is the enemy and not the land, an assault from one direction is unlikely to succeed.

To assure a decent chance of success, significant forces must be placed around the entire region, so that those looking to escape will face the strong possibility of observation and eradication or capture by U.S. forces in any

<sup>66</sup> "United States Special Operations Command History: 1987–2007," 93, 95.

<sup>67</sup> Local maps show two rivers with the name Waziratangai River (with various translated spellings). Group W would deploy to the river valley farther to the west, as the Waziratangai River to the east flows from the center of the Tora Bora complex. Defense Mapping Agency Hydrographic/Topographic Center, Joint Operations Graphic (Air), 1:250,000, 1501 Air Series, Sheet NI 42–7. Washington, DC, 1981.

direction. The battalion of the Eighty-second Airborne will parachute to drop zones (DZs) in the relatively flat approaches to Tora Bora, south of the village of Landa Khel, to lead the main assault as Group North (N). The DZs will have been scouted by CIA and Special Forces teams in the region, who will then orient the new units and attach previously recruited indigenous guides to each company. The Third Battalion, Seventy-fifth Ranger Regiment will be split into two groups, East (E) and West (W), which will deploy to the Agamtangai and Waziratangai Rivers, respectively.<sup>68</sup> Group E will contain only one company of Rangers due to the comparative difficulty of the terrain to the west and the fact that Group N will cover many of the escape routes to the east in the course of their assault. Groups E and W will be inserted by helicopter from Bagram along the riverbank furthest from the cave complex. Finally, the most difficult assignment will fall to the Tenth Mountain troops, who will be deployed south of the cave complex along the Afghan-Pakistan border as Group South (S). They will be inserted via helicopter from Bagram along with indigenous guides.

The deployment of forces would proceed as follows. First, the Tenth Mountain forces would be inserted by helicopters at first light on Day 6 to the best possible landing zones (LZs) along the border region with Pakistan. Landing zones would be selected for their proximity to major roads, favorable terrain, and the lack of enemy troops and civilians in the area. Intensive surveillance by satellites and Predators would take place from Day 1 (if not before), allowing the selection of the safest and best positioned LZs. Although nighttime insertion would reduce the danger posed by enemy surface-to-air missiles (SAMS) and anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) (not to mention regular small arms), the problems associated with landing transport helicopters on fourteen thousand-foot unfamiliar mountains is enough to make landings at first light preferable, especially since they would not be directly within the Tora Bora complex but rather a few miles to the south.<sup>69</sup> Group S would be deployed first to keep the target from escaping into Pakistan, where U.S. forces could not pursue them. The fact that Tora Bora was a moving battlefield meant the positioning of Group S would depend on how long it took for them to deploy. If all went according to the plan outlined here, then inserting Group S behind *al Qaeda* forces but still within Afghanistan would not have been a problem. However, if Group S forces were delayed in their deployment, the window in which they could safely deploy would shrink.<sup>70</sup> Although

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<sup>68</sup> Breaking up a battalion is obviously not ideal, but given the demands of time and space, it is the best option given the objective.

<sup>69</sup> To help avoid detection by enemy forces, the Group S helicopters would fly along a right hook trajectory from Bagram, to the west of Tora Bora, crossing briefly into Pakistani airspace and approaching the objective from the south. To minimize the chances of detection and attack by SAMS, helicopters should vary their flight path from sortie to sortie and never return along the same route they used to arrive, although all should avoid flying directly over the main concentrations of *al Qaeda* forces.

<sup>70</sup> Author interview with American intelligence officer who deployed to Afghanistan.

the enemies' escape to the east or west would not be desirable, they would remain viable targets for coalition forces another day.

Next, the battalion of the Eighty-second Airborne would be airdropped to its position north of Tora Bora. Although the c-17s give the battalion incredible range of motion while airborne, its troops' ability to maneuver is considerably constrained once they disembark from their aircraft, necessitating deployment close to the objective. After establishing contact with troops already deployed, the battalion would set up a local headquarters, scout the enemy positions, and prepare their assault. The troops of the Seventy-fifth Ranger Regiment that compose Groups E and W also would be inserted by helicopter as soon as possible, although the speed of their placement would depend in part on the progress of Group S, since there would likely not be enough helicopters in the theater to transport all units at once. Landing zones for Group E would be spaced near key roads and trails along the eastern bank of the six-mile stretch of the Agamtangai River, which flows from the Pakistani border to the south of the Afghani village of Pacir.<sup>71</sup> Landing zones for Group W would be spaced in similarly desirable positions along the six-mile stretch of the Waziratangai River, from the green foothills into the mountainous border with Pakistan.<sup>72</sup>

Group S would be inserted by CH-47D and MH-47E Chinook helicopters due to their ability to operate at high altitudes and carry large numbers of troops. These helicopters can operate at ten thousand to fifteen thousand feet, although their regular capacity of approximately forty troops would be reduced at this altitude due to the lack of lift provided by the thin air. However, Colonel Wiercinski noted that in Operation Anaconda, CH-47s were able to carry thirty-five fully loaded combat troops above eleven thousand-foot mountain ridges and place them down at LZs 8,500 feet and up without a problem. Therefore, an assumption of thirty troops per helicopter seems to be reasonable for Group S.<sup>73</sup> This means that about twenty sorties would be required to insert all six hundred troops, roughly by platoon.<sup>74</sup> Each sortie is expected to cover an average of three hundred miles roundtrip with an average flight time from departure to arrival back at Bagram of approximately

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<sup>71</sup> Previous surveillance would again allow the selection of the safest and best positioned LZs. To help avoid detection by enemy forces, the Group E helicopters would fly along a left hook trajectory from Bagram to the east of Tora Bora before setting down along the riverbank.

<sup>72</sup> The Group W helicopters would approach their LZs from the west of Tora Bora, flying along the river valley before setting down on the western bank.

<sup>73</sup> See Austin Bay, "A Full Report on Operation Anaconda, America's First Battle of the 21st Century: A Complete After Action Interview with Colonel Wiercinski," [http://www.strategypage.com/on\\_point/20020627.aspx](http://www.strategypage.com/on_point/20020627.aspx). This claim is backed by Naylor, who describes Chinooks carrying over forty soldiers and inserting them at over eight thousand feet. See Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 1–3.

<sup>74</sup> This figure for shooters is a bit higher than the 471 estimated for battalions of light infantry. The figure would be higher due to the requirements of the mission (given that they were available from the more than one thousand troops at Bagram and Karshi Khanabad), as well as the requirements of the situation at Bagram and K2, in which more logistical support troops were needed.

five hours. If fifteen Chinooks were available, it should take under twelve hours to insert the entire battalion of Group S.<sup>75</sup> One thousand two hundred Marines were quickly deployed to Forward Operating Base Rhino in southeastern Afghanistan in the last week of November by a stream of CH-46 and CH-53 helicopters, demonstrating that an adequate number of helicopters were in the region at the time to assist in OTB.<sup>76</sup> Groups E and W would be inserted by platoon using a combination of Chinook and Blackhawk helicopters, which would be operating around four thousand to eight thousand feet.

Command of OTB at the operational level would fall to the Tenth Mountain, whose officers and staff would have been in country longer and done much of the planning. However, the commander of the Eighty-second Airborne would maintain local control of the battlefield since his battalion would be designated the lead, supported element in the operation by the Tenth Mountain. The leadership of the Eighty-second would have the best view of the situation on the battlefield since their troops would serve as the assaulting force in the proposed block and sweep. CENTCOM would help coordinate the operation and provide a broad view of the battlefield, yet this would largely be a company and platoon commanders' fight, meaning the captains and lieutenants would have significant local control over their forces within the limits of their assigned missions.

Approximately five hundred soldiers of Group N would commence the assault in the early morning hours of Day 6 following preplanned initial airstrikes with subsequent strikes called in by troops on the ground. The remaining soldiers from Group N would maintain the local HQ for the attack and serve as a ready reserve to reinforce the assault or any of the blocking positions should they require it.<sup>77</sup> Groups S, E, and W would observe and report any movement in their region and call in airstrikes at their discretion. The initial attack is expected to take three to four days, with U.S. troops advancing on foot into the heart of the cave complex by the close of the fourth day, at which point the toughest fighting of all, involving skirmishes in and around the caves and high mountain positions of *al Qaeda*, would begin.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> This includes two additional hours at Bagram for refueling and loading of the new units. Even with high rates of attrition due to enemy fire or mechanical malfunction, fifteen helicopters should be sufficient to allow a maximum of two roundtrip flights per helicopter to deploy the blocking troops.

<sup>76</sup> Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror*, 139.

<sup>77</sup> After deployment of Groups S, E, and W, approximately one-third of the helicopter force would be based with the Group N reserve north of Tora Bora, with the rest remaining at Bagram to prepare to assist in resupply and extraction.

<sup>78</sup> Despite the presence of trucks locally secured for ferrying supplies, a few older Soviet tanks provided by indigenous allies would represent the only tracked vehicles on the battlefield (*al Qaeda* likely had a few older T-55s as well). The rugged nature of the terrain made motorized movement all but impossible beyond the initial advance.

The blocking forces of Groups s, e, and w would spread out at their discretion to cover the main routes out of the region. The indigenous guides placed with each company would be a key resource in swiftly identifying the main roads and trails in their area of operation. They would attempt to remain as inconspicuous as possible, making use of a variety of unattended ground sensors (UGS) to help them identify the approach of individuals into their area of responsibility. If the operation lasted longer than a few days (as expected) then all units would require aerial resupply, necessitating the identification of potential drop zones in the area for the food, ammunition, and other required items.<sup>79</sup>

Having demonstrated that bringing a sufficient number of American troops to bear on Tora Bora in a timely fashion was indeed possible, I will now discuss why Operation Tora Bora would likely have succeeded, and then assess the key variables upon which success or failure of the new operation would have turned.

### WHY OPERATION TORA BORA WOULD SUCCEED

No sound models exist to predict with absolute certainty the outcome of an attempted block and sweep operation between a few thousand foot soldiers at ten thousand feet. However, Stephen Biddle's analysis of combat outcomes offers the best insight into why Operation Tora Bora would be a major improvement over the previous operation and far more likely to achieve the objective.<sup>80</sup> Biddle grants that superior numbers and technology can play a role in determining the victor in combat; however, he argues the relative skill of combatants is the key variable for predicting outcomes in warfare. According to Biddle, "The key elements of the modern-system offensive [and defensive] tactics are cover, concealment, dispersion, small-unit independent maneuver, suppression, and combined arms integration."<sup>81</sup> Within certain parameters of relative technology and force ratios, the side that does a better job mastering these complex tactics and employing them on the battlefield is likely to emerge victorious. The wider the disparity in ability to adopt these

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<sup>79</sup> The challenges of sustaining these troops at high altitudes are significant and will be discussed below in the section on key variables that would determine the outcome of the battle. As for the blocking forces themselves, each unit must remain in contact with HQ and their neighboring units to provide a picture of their position to avoid friendly fire incidents and allow HQ to relay information on approaching individuals observed from the Predators patrolling the area. These units must resist the urge to advance or retreat to any significant distance, since such movement could open a gap for enemy forces and place the entire operation at risk. Although any massed attack from behind the blocking forces was unlikely, outward-facing scouts should be posted to watch for reinforcements and supplies that *al Qaeda* may attempt to bring into the region.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 35, 44.



tactics, the more land and fewer casualties the victorious side will take while destroying a larger enemy force in less time, *ceteris paribus*.<sup>82</sup>

Biddle convincingly demonstrates the power of his theory applied to OEF by discussing the outcomes of a number of significant engagements. Precision American airpower was all that was needed to destroy positions held by Taliban troops who exhibited little skill in cover or concealment early in OEF.<sup>83</sup> However, later assaults against more skilled Taliban and *al Qaeda* fighters at Bai Beche and Sayed Slim Kalay required assaults by ground troops to identify concealed defensive positions and conquer territory.<sup>84</sup> When the attacking troops possessed inferior skills to the defenders, their attacks were often repulsed, as at Arghestan Bridge on 5 December 2001 when untrained militias could not take positions manned by superior *al Qaeda* fighters.<sup>85</sup>

As Biddle describes, there were roughly three levels of fighters on each side in OEF. On one side were the Taliban and *al Qaeda*.<sup>86</sup> Many of the latter's troops were well-trained and committed soldiers from bin Laden's training camps, while the former's forces were split between hardened troops who had mastered some of Biddle's modern system of warfare and others who had little more than religious or monetary inspiration to face down their enemies. America's indigenous allies, like the Taliban, also had a mix of battle-hardened troops with considerable skills honed through years of civil war, such as many of those under the command of Northern Alliance General Dostum, as well as those with little experience or training, like many in the ill-fated Eastern Alliance. The American Special Forces and conventional forces like those of the Tenth Mountain Division were the best trained and most highly skilled on either side. These skill levels assist in a comparison of the original battle at Tora Bora, Operation Anaconda, and Operation Tora Bora as proposed here.

As noted throughout this essay, Operation Anaconda serves as the best available comparative case for the original battle at Tora Bora as well as OTB. In each engagement, the enemy numbered close to one thousand troops and was composed of a mix of *al Qaeda* and its allies. The enemy was entrenched in jagged mountains above eight thousand feet in eastern Afghanistan, with the general area of operations encompassing approximately thirty-six square miles. Most importantly, the basic American plan in each scenario was a block and sweep maneuver that required both effective assaulting and blocking forces to strike and contain the enemy until all of his forces were either

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>83</sup> Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare," 168.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 169–70.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>86</sup> Fighters from other groups allied to *al Qaeda*, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), also saw action against the United States and its allies, although in far smaller numbers than the Taliban. Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 46.

killed or captured. However, significant differences in the forces employed in each scenario provide the best estimate for varying degrees of success.

At the original battle of Tora Bora, the skill and training of the *al Qaeda* forces surpassed that of the Eastern Alliance, who served as both hammer and anvil in the attempted block and sweep. As described above, Eastern Alliance forces eventually occupied the Tora Bora complex, although most of the *al Qaeda* casualties were caused by initial airstrikes called in by American Special Forces troops. Little contested territory was actually seized by the Eastern Alliance, and bin Laden and surviving *al Qaeda* troops successfully fled the scene through the lines of the indigenous forces.

Although conventional U.S. forces were employed in considerable numbers at Anaconda, indigenous troops of equal or lower quality than the *al Qaeda* and allied defenders served as the hammer in the planned block and sweep because CENTCOM still wanted to follow the “guiding principles” of the Afghan Model.<sup>87</sup> After a difficult approach to the enemy positions led by untrained local drivers in inferior trucks, the indigenous troops of Task Force (TF) Hammer (the assaulting force) and their Special Forces advisors took casualties from *al Qaeda* troops entrenched in the high ground and friendly fire from an American AC-130 (although the latter was not fully discovered until after the battle). In disarray and unwilling to push the advance further, the TF withdrew at the behest of their Afghan commander, leaving the block and sweep operation with no sweep to push the enemy back or keep their attention away from the blocking forces deploying to their rear. Initially, the American blocking forces had a similar experience, as none served their originally envisioned role, and they took unexpected casualties within minutes of disembarking from their helicopters. Some U.S. troops deployed on low ground within range of unexpected enemy positions in the high ground, others mistakenly deployed directly on top of enemy positions, and all were engaged with a well-positioned enemy ready to fight rather than a scattered foe looking to flee.

In both cases, Helmuth von Moltke’s maxim held true: “No plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force.”<sup>88</sup> The difference in effectiveness stemmed from how each group responded to adversity and accompanying changes in the plan. U.S. conventional troops assigned to serve as blocking forces became pinned down initially and suffered casualties, but their superior training, skill, and equipment helped them kill many more of the enemy and drive them from the high ground. By contrast, the indigenous troops fled the battlefield demoralized after their initial mishaps and played little role in the remainder

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<sup>87</sup> Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 46–47, 184–209.

<sup>88</sup> Daniel Hughes, ed. *Moltke on the Art of War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1993), 92.

of the operation.<sup>89</sup> Therefore, it is apparent the employment of U.S. troops at Anaconda ensured greater success than otherwise would have been possible, although the lack of an assault force, due in part to the ineffectiveness of the U.S.'s indigenous allies, prevented the operation from achieving many of its objectives.<sup>90</sup>

As proposed in this essay, Operation Tora Bora includes the insertion of highly trained, well-equipped U.S. forces as both hammer and anvil in its block and sweep. These forces, combined with the superior airpower that at times proved devastating to the enemy at both the original battle of Tora Bora and Anaconda, would have significantly increased the likelihood of more enemy killed, fewer total casualties (although perhaps more American casualties due simply to a greater percentage of American troops), and more territory taken in less time. These conclusions are based on Biddle's model and a comparison to Anaconda and the original battle of Tora Bora. The ability of American troops to suppress fire and take defended territory would allow them to launch the assault earlier, foregoing a week or more of initial airstrikes that would remove any element of surprise and allow the defenders more time to escape before the assaulting ground troops closed in.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, the demonstrated ability of U.S. troops to adjust better than their indigenous allies to unexpected obstacles makes OTB more resistant to the inevitable emergence of friction on the battlefield, which hindered the success of Operation Anaconda.

Biddle's model has its limitations for predicting the outcome of OTB. His unit of analysis is the operation, which he defines as "a series of interconnected battles resulting from a single prior plan," such as Operation Desert Storm or Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in its entirety.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, his model focuses more on taking territory than on capturing or killing specific individuals. As previously mentioned, the objective of OTB was the enemy, not the land. Finally, Biddle himself would admit that although his model provides significant insight into the relative impact of key variables like troop skill and technology on combat outcomes, a number of

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<sup>89</sup> It should be noted inferior equipment helped contribute to the indigenous Afghans' troubles, as their lack of night vision goggles and use of inferior vehicles made it more difficult for them to negotiate the rough terrain approaching the battlefield than their Special Forces advisors. Furthermore, some of their Special Forces advisors claim the lack of close air support for Task Force Hammer gave them little choice but to withdraw. Nonetheless, the fact that U.S. forces would have had better equipment and air support only increases their likely effectiveness, even if those factors are not the same as superior training. Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 187–88, 281.

<sup>90</sup> Interestingly enough, Naylor notes that although U.S. commanders had learned the importance of a backstop after Tora Bora, they may have used indigenous forces again to fill that role if they had been available in sufficient numbers. *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>91</sup> Biddle, *Military Power*, 37–38. Despite the skill of American troops in fire suppression, this plan may risk a larger number of American casualties than extensive early bombing, although this is not certain due to the advantage of surprise. Even if this were the case, the target was worth such a risk.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

other factors could tip the balance in a specific case. At Operation Anaconda, it was not simply the skill of various forces that led to their success or failure. Friendly fire from U.S. aircraft and the tenacity of the enemy helped stop the advance of Task Force Hammer. Flawed intelligence and communication led to the insertion of U.S. troops in suboptimal positions in the vulnerable low ground or on top of enemy positions, and the extreme terrain made every action more challenging. These other variables—*al Qaeda's* strategy, the performance of the blocking forces, and the challenges posed by foul weather and difficult terrain—also must be examined for OTB in order to make the most accurate assessment possible, since each has the potential to significantly alter the outcome despite the superior balance of OTB forces compared to those of previously discussed operations.

### *Al Qaeda's* Strategy: Fight, Flight, or a Little of Both?

Although getting all of the correct units in the correct positions at the correct times would be a daunting challenge that would test the limits of U.S. Armed Forces in OEF, the fight to come would be no less difficult. The superiority in the American troops' training, technology, and employment of combined arms, coupled with the improved motivation of U.S. soldiers, leads one to predict a victory for U.S. forces.<sup>93</sup> However, true "victory" in this operation represents not capture of the ground but the capture or killing of large numbers of the enemy (and one in particular). Biddle's model would predict that the United States in OTB would be able to drive *al Qaeda* forces out of their positions, however, the original operation at Tora Bora also led to the departure of *al Qaeda* troops from the field. To get a better estimate of the likely result of OTB, one must go beyond theoretical models and identify additional make-or-break points of the operation.

The first make-or-break point involves a previously unmentioned issue: *al Qaeda's* strategy. As the saying goes in any war plan, the enemy always gets a vote. In this case, the most significant decision *al Qaeda* forces would make is also one of the simplest: fight or flight? Did *al Qaeda* plan to use the considerable advantages Tora Bora offered them to bloody the noses of U.S. forces (should they come calling), or did they simply return to the area to escape the larger defeat unfolding before them, staying only as long as it was safe, all the while preparing to flee to Pakistan or elsewhere should they be put in danger? From all available evidence, it appears the *al Qaeda* fighters had a mixed strategy at Tora Bora: fight the (hopefully) American attackers from their prepared positions on the high ground, but look to slip away from the battlefield if and when the tide turned against them. This is in line with the tactics of most irregular forces throughout history, including the mujahideen who fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s

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<sup>93</sup> Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare*, 43–53.

and were the strategic forebears of the *al Qaeda* troops at Tora Bora, at least where more conventional fighting was concerned.<sup>94</sup>

Some accounts indicate *al Qaeda* actually sought a fight with U.S. forces and had entrenched at Tora Bora to get one. Right before the shooting began, Eastern Alliance members claimed to have met with *al Qaeda* troops who told them, “‘You are our Muslim brothers and we will not fight with you, we are waiting for the infidels [non-Muslims] to arrive with their own ground troops.’ After that, the Arabs and Chechens had withdrawn farther into the mountains to hunker down and await the expected ‘arrival of the Americans.’”<sup>95</sup> This story is supported by the simple fact that *al Qaeda* forces were still at Tora Bora two weeks after their arrival and remained there amidst U.S. airstrikes, despite the fact Berntsen estimated it was only a twenty-four-hour climb from Tora Bora into Pakistan.<sup>96</sup> Although not necessary in this case, the lessons of hindsight reinforce this conclusion, as the *al Qaeda* forces at Tora Bora engaged the Eastern Alliance troops for weeks before withdrawing instead of taking flight after the initial attack.<sup>97</sup> Further evidence for the fighting spirit of *al Qaeda* troops comes from Paul Hastert, who notes *al Qaeda* forces began streaming into the Shahikot Valley after U.S. troops arrived during Operation Anaconda.<sup>98</sup>

*Al Qaeda* troops often did not fight to the death, however. They and their Taliban allies had fled Kabul, Kandahar, and other areas instead of resisting until all achieved martyrdom, just as hundreds of *al Qaeda* fighters and their allies would later flee the battlefield during the latter portions of Operation Anaconda. Even if *al Qaeda* forces had planned to fight U.S. troops at Tora Bora, it is unlikely they would have chosen to stay if and when the tide of battle turned against them. Had U.S. planners been certain *al Qaeda* wanted to make Tora Bora their last stand, then the use of extensive blocking forces would have been unnecessary. However, the uncertainty surrounding *al Qaeda*'s initial strategy and subsequent moves in the face of an American attack required actions designed to prevent an escape.

The entire operation would have been unsuccessful if *al Qaeda* decided to flee to Pakistan at the earliest opportunity, that is to say before

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<sup>94</sup> For in-depth descriptions of mujahideen tactics during the war with the Soviets, see Ali Jalali and Lester Grau, *The Other Side of the Mountain: Mujahideen Tactics in the Soviet-Afghan War* (Fort Leavenworth: USMC Studies and Analysis, 1994).

<sup>95</sup> Smucker, *Al Qaeda's Great Escape*, 94.

<sup>96</sup> Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 299.

<sup>97</sup> Malcolm MacPherson claims that “In their desire to face the Americans in a fight, the Chechens had tried to stop Arab *Al-Qaeda* fighters from fleeing Tora Bora and heading across the Pakistani border.” He goes on to argue these same fighters moved to the Shahikot in Afghanistan instead of the tribal regions in Pakistan because they sought “a showdown with the Americans in a place of their own choosing.” Malcolm MacPherson, *Robert's Ridge: A Story of Courage and Sacrifice on Takur Ghar Mountain* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2005), 94–95. If this is indeed the case, they got what they were looking for in the Shahikot with the initiation of Operation Anaconda by American forces in March of 2002.

<sup>98</sup> Paul Hastert, “Operation Anaconda: Perception Meets Reality in the Hills of Afghanistan,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 28, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 16.

U.S. conventional forces even arrived in the region. Success would have been unlikely had the enemy fled soon after the appearance of the Americans on the battlefield. Available evidence both before and since indicates neither was likely. Instead, the main challenge the Americans faced regarding *al Qaeda's* strategy at Tora Bora was the early detection of its blocking forces and a swift decision by the enemy to attack or bypass them. This possibility represents the second major make-or-break point upon which success of the operation hinged.

### Performance of Blocking Forces

Although *al Qaeda* troops may have welcomed the arrival of their most hated enemy on the battlefield, their desire to avoid trading their lives for too cheap a price meant they might not have been pleased to learn of the deployment of American forces behind their positions. If they had discovered the blocking troops while their deployment was still in its early phases, they may have decided to flee the battlefield before it was too late. Alternatively, they may have decided to strike these isolated troops while they were still vulnerable, either in their helicopters or soon after disembarking. A concerted attempt to flee the field before all blocking forces were in place would likely have doomed the operation, while the downing of a few helicopters or the ambush of a blocking platoon or two could have quickly shifted the operation from one of block and sweep to one of search and rescue, with blocking forces having to redeploy to extract or support their comrades, causing confusion on the battlefield and opening holes for potential escapees.

Operation Anaconda is instructive in this regard. After the failure of the initial assault by indigenous forces, many of the American soldiers that were supposed to serve as a blocking force around the Shahikot Valley were deployed into positions that were immediately targeted by *al Qaeda* troops.<sup>99</sup> Some units deployed directly on top of previously unidentified *al Qaeda* encampments on the ridge of Takur Ghar, the highest mountain in the Shahikot Valley, which led to a number of American casualties and the downing of multiple Chinooks by enemy fire. Although CAS from fixed-wing aircraft and a number of Apache attack helicopters as well as subsequent U.S. reinforcements eventually destroyed *al Qaeda* positions on the ten thousand-foot peak, this scenario illustrated two significant challenges for the blocking forces of OTB. First, the entire operation could be put in serious jeopardy if the enemy focused its attention on the blocking forces from the outset. Second, intelligence on enemy troop levels and positions was far from perfect, despite the best efforts of U.S. sensors. This meant identifying safe landing zones for the blocking troops was far from assured, an even larger problem since the harsh terrain already limited the potential numbers of LZs.

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<sup>99</sup> For a map of blocking force positions at Anaconda, see Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 227.

Operation Tora Bora includes three significant steps to avoid the early detection of blocking forces by the enemy. First, the assault would come from the north, which should focus the *al Qaeda* forces' attention away from their flanks. If they chose not to engage the assaulting troops, *al Qaeda*'s other major option would be to hunker down in the caves, as the air barrage would make it very difficult for them to maneuver freely for any period. Second, the flight paths of the helicopters carrying the blocking forces were designed to avoid proximity to *al Qaeda*'s known positions, meaning arrival in their landing zones would be the closest the blocking forces would get to the enemy, up to three to five miles away from the main force. Third, if all went according to plan, the entire blocking force would be deployed within a twenty-four-hour period, making it unlikely the enemy could detect their arrival, decide en masse, locate a gap in the line, and hike through the difficult terrain to get through that gap before the arrival of the rest of the American force.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, these precautions do not remove the possibility of American blocking forces deploying to hostile landing zones. As Biddle noted, by early November 2001 *al Qaeda* forces had demonstrated their ability to use camouflage discipline, cover and concealment, and dummy positions, all of which improved their ability to resist detection by American sensors and destruction by American airstrikes.<sup>101</sup> As Anthony Cordesman observed, "Tora Bora was the first major demonstration after the fall of Kabul that an enemy can disperse in ways that even the most advanced U.S. ISR capabilities cannot detect, characterize, and target."<sup>102</sup> American troops would likely have the skill and firepower at their disposal to avoid being overrun, but a Takur Ghar-like incident would focus attention and resources away from the main force and create greater opportunities for *al Qaeda* forces to escape.

In addition to the previously mentioned problems of downed helicopters or ambushes, the challenge of deploying forces to block all escape routes while resisting the urge to advance and engage the enemy presents further potential problems.<sup>103</sup> The force-to-space ratio of blocking troops ranges from approximately forty to eighty soldiers per mile, which is in line with CENTCOM's estimates for how many troops would have been needed to secure the area, but not such an overwhelming force as to have guaranteed success.<sup>104</sup> The blocking forces should have been adequate to interdict small

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<sup>100</sup> Due to the fact the blocking forces would be deployed one by one, enemy forces would have only a couple of hours at most to exploit a gap in the line close to their position. They may have had more time before the line closes around them on the other side of the cordon, but it would also take them a longer time to travel to that area.

<sup>101</sup> Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare," 169.

<sup>102</sup> Cordesman, *The Lessons of Afghanistan*, 26.

<sup>103</sup> Operation Anaconda demonstrated the desire of blocking forces to advance and get in on the action. See Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 283–84.

<sup>104</sup> Using information provided by CENTCOM, Michael O'Hanlon claims that one thousand to three thousand American troops would have been needed to close the 100–150 potential escape routes out

groups fleeing the scene; however, the difficulties of attempting to detain large numbers of civilians would decrease the effectiveness of the blocking forces and make detection of their presence by *al Qaeda* more likely. Should a concentrated force of a few hundred *al Qaeda* fighters have attempted to break through the line, U.S. troops might have had a hard time preventing their escape due to their inferior numbers and spread formation. Therefore, the effectiveness of the blocking forces relies in large part on the main assault force of Group N engaging the majority of enemy troops and preventing them from organizing a concentrated attack on the American troops on their flanks.<sup>105</sup> Additionally, the presence of significant numbers of forward air controllers among the blocking forces would be an absolute necessity to ensure accurate close air support and ameliorate such risks to the blocking troops.

Finally, sustaining the blocking troops in their positions might have been a challenge equal to that of deploying them to the battlefield. Resupplying four battalions of troops at high altitudes would require a combination of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft to drop food, water, and ammunition as well as evacuate any American casualties. Most troops would be deploying with only three days worth of supplies, which would not be adequate for an operation that could take one to two weeks. During the initial operation at Tora Bora, U.S. Special Forces commanders hesitated to commit their troops when medical evacuation (MEDEVAC) for casualties was lacking; conventional forces would likely have been even more cautious.

Sustainment becomes an even greater challenge when one considers it is difficult to determine when a block and sweep operation is over due to the ability of the enemy to hide for a significant period of time, especially in the caves around Tora Bora and surrounding villages sympathetic to *al Qaeda* and the Taliban. Anaconda took three weeks from the deployment of the first Special Forces teams until the last enemy positions were cleared. It is uncertain how long OTB would have lasted and how long blocking forces would have needed to man key routes in the region to intercept fleeing *al Qaeda* forces. Suffice it to say a real commitment to capturing or killing bin Laden and the rest of the *al Qaeda* leadership at Tora Bora may have required sustaining hundreds of U.S. troops in the region for weeks following OTB.

Despite some delays for MEDEVAC and resupply at Anaconda, most of the sustainment needs of the two thousand Coalition troops involved (over half of whom were American) were met at high altitude amidst heavy enemy fire.<sup>106</sup> Many of the helicopters used to transport blocking forces to their positions

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of Tora Bora. Michael O'Hanlon, *Defense Strategy for the Post-Saddam Era* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2005), 32–33.

<sup>105</sup> The reserves of Group N would likely be needed to reinforce the blocking forces in the event of a concentrated *al Qaeda* assault to the south, east, or west.

<sup>106</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this key point.



in OTB could have been used for resupply, and CENTCOM had a significant number of fixed-wing aircraft in the theater to assist further. Still, sustainment of troops would have been made more challenging by two factors outside of American control: the harsh terrain of Tora Bora and the potentially harsh weather.

### Weather and Terrain

The final major make-or-break points involve two factors that have the potential to make the already daunting challenges of the operation all but impossible: terrain and weather. Although the first of these is not a variable per se, because the physical landscape of the region does not change significantly from one day to the next, the extreme terrain around Tora Bora acted as a force multiplier for many of *al Qaeda's* assets and further complicated the already challenging issue of weather. Insertion of U.S. conventional forces by air on such a scale, at such an altitude, and in hostile territory was simply unprecedented, making its outcome, as well as that of the operation for which it was such a key part, unpredictable.

Tora Bora is located about twenty-five miles southwest of Jalalabad, which had a small, poorly serviced airport that was not under control of the United States at the time (see Figure 1). The closest major airport was at Bagram, approximately eighty-five miles away, and the airstrips there were substandard although improving. The roads from Jalalabad were poor at best and marked by villages full of Taliban and *al Qaeda* sympathizers, making the deployment of troops to the region difficult to pull off clandestinely or efficiently. The mountainous terrain seriously limited the number of potential LZs and DZs for air insertion and made the enemy's somewhat primitive air defenses far more dangerous, since the cover and altitude provided by the mountains made helicopters and low-flying planes exceedingly vulnerable. The extensive cave complexes beneath the mountains and the defenders' knowledge of them gave them advantages in concealment and maneuver, as well as significant protection against even the most powerful American ordnance. Despite Pentagon claims to the contrary, it does not appear that a BLU-82 or the variety of bunker busters employed at Tora Bora were able to knock out the vast majority of fighters entrenched in the region.<sup>107</sup> Operation Anaconda was the highest altitude in which U.S. conventional forces had ever fought a battle, OTB would have been a few thousand feet higher.<sup>108</sup> It was called, "the most formidable terrain that we fought in," for good reason by one soldier who was involved in the original battle.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> For a discussion of the difficulties of target acquisition and destruction in OEF, see Biddle, *Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare*, 26–37.

<sup>108</sup> Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror*, 199.

<sup>109</sup> Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 19.

Weather to an airman is like terrain to a soldier, and the thinner air in Afghanistan, especially at the high altitudes around Tora Bora, could have a major impact on flight effectiveness. Although November in Afghanistan is generally not brutally cold, the onset of winter does bring increased cloud cover, precipitation, and high winds, especially in the mountains. Gary Schroen, a CIA officer who led the first group of Americans into Afghanistan for OEF, offers numerous examples of helicopter insertions of CIA and SF troops facing delay after delay due to weather conditions at high altitudes.<sup>110</sup> At Anaconda, half of the conventional troops slated to engage in combat on the first day of the operation were not inserted until the following day due to inclement weather.<sup>111</sup> If bad weather delayed the onset of the operation for a day or two, it could allow *al Qaeda* more time to learn of the deployment of larger numbers of U.S. conventional forces in the region, but the operation would not likely be seriously threatened. Should severe weather appear during the early or middle stages of the operation, however, then the likelihood of significant problems would rise dramatically. Some subset of the blocking forces might have to be held off and troops already deployed in the mountains might be forced to deal with a lack of food, ammunition, or medical supplies until the skies cleared. Extraction of wounded or those suffering altitude sickness, a near certainty given the sustained deployment of thousands to such heights without acclimatization, would also be put in jeopardy.<sup>112</sup>

Poor weather could also make aerial observation of the enemy via Predators and some satellites difficult (not to mention visual observation by troops on the ground), making it tough for the blocking forces to know what is going on around them. Limited visibility would hinder the efforts of forward air controllers, since laser-guided bombs are notoriously less effective in harsh weather, leaving American forces with decreased air support for both the assaulting and blocking forces. In short, Operation Tora Bora could overcome some severe weather, but more than a couple of days at the wrong time would make success unlikely and/or raise the costs of the operation significantly.

## THE AFGHAN MODEL RECONSIDERED

The anti-submarine units of the Allies learned many valuable lessons during World War II; one in particular is relevant to the matter at hand.<sup>113</sup> Sightings

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<sup>110</sup> Schroen, *First In*, 146–47, 232, 242, 286.

<sup>111</sup> Lambeth, *Air Power Against Terror*, 180.

<sup>112</sup> Colonel Frank Wiercinski claimed only a single case of altitude sickness in eleven days of combat during Operation Anaconda, which he attributes to great planning and leadership at the junior noncommissioned officer level. See Bay, “A Full Report on Operation Anaconda, America’s First Battle of the 21st Century: A Complete After Action Interview with Colonel Wiercinski.”

<sup>113</sup> I thank Barry Posen for suggesting this apt historical parallel.

of enemy submarines were such a rare, valuable commodity that the Allied navies learned the correct response was not to drop a few depth charges and steam off, but rather to pursue the hunt to the utmost by blanketing the entire area with all available antisubmarine planes and surface ships as quickly as possible. Following up initial contacts in such an aggressive manner turned out to be more profitable than any other strategy in regard to subs destroyed relative to effort expended. The chance of escape was high without the employment of overwhelming force from above the surface, and the likelihood of encountering the same submarine again was low enough to make the expenditure in time and ordnance more than worthwhile.<sup>114</sup>

U.S. military efforts in the “War on Terror” have some striking similarities to those of the hulking fleet that dominated the surface of the Atlantic in World War II but had to be constantly on guard for the enemy submarines that hid underneath the waves. In both cases, the enemies’ main advantages lay in secrecy and surprise using the advantage of terrain, since they were little match for U.S. forces in a stand-up fight. American strategy therefore had to bring to bear overwhelming force when the opportunity arose. It took the U.S. Navy many failed encounters before its commanders learned that lesson. U.S. planners seemed to have begun to grasp the need for blocking forces and American boots on the ground in certain scenarios soon after the failure at Tora Bora, as both played a role in Operation Anaconda three months later. Still, the employment of comparatively poorly skilled indigenous allies as the assaulting force contributed to the failings of that operation. Osama bin Laden was and will continue to be surrounded by highly motivated, well-trained troops that, absent a lucky strike from the air with high quality actionable intelligence (which would necessitate ground assets in the first place), will require similarly highly motivated, well-trained troops on the ground to capture or kill him.

The difficulty in adjusting to the demands of antisubmarine warfare was due in large part to significant differences with more conventional conflict between surface fleets. Similarly, moving from engagements with conventional armies to unconventional insurgent forces to terrorist groups has posed significant challenges to the U.S. military since 9/11. Each type of combat involves distinct combinations of intelligence assets, force size and training, objectives, and strategy. Shifting rapidly from one type of warfare to another inevitably causes problems in planning and preparedness. Operation Enduring Freedom’s most interesting characteristic may not be the Afghan model itself, but rather the fact that the campaign combined elements of all three forms

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<sup>114</sup> For a discussion of Allied antisubmarine efforts, see Charles M. Sternhell and Alan M. Thorndike, *Antisubmarine Warfare in World War II*, OEG Report 51 (Washington, DC: Operations Evaluation Group, Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1946), esp. 147–52.

of warfare almost simultaneously, as enemy forces included concentrated conventional units, dispersed guerrilla fighters, and trained terrorists.<sup>115</sup>

The Afghan model proved useful in scenarios involving concentrated enemy units fighting conventionally over significant amounts of territory, but was less successful when applied to adversaries whose value as targets outweighed the ground on which they were engaged. Major General Charles Dunlap is largely correct to note that in the early months of OEF, “This new, high-tech air power capability unhinged the resistance without significant commitment of American boots on the ground.”<sup>116</sup> However, scattering the enemy and ensuring they will not live to cause havoc another day are two different things. Joseph Collins is correct to point out that “It was the lack of expert infantry that allowed Osama Bin Laden to escape at Tora Bora, even as our mighty air power—previously so devastating against the Taliban—shook the mountains for miles around to little effect.”<sup>117</sup> Make no mistake; airpower is a vital component in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism (in addition to conventional conflict) for its ability (at times) to precisely deliver devastating force in a rapid fashion at little risk to U.S. troops. Airpower often requires eyes on the ground to locate enemy positions and call in strikes, however, and in the case of operations like those of Tora Bora and Anaconda, also requires forces to kill or capture those fleeing the battlefield. Therefore, the Afghan model in its purest form becomes less effective when an operation shifts from that of conventional attack for territorial gain to block and sweep tactics designed to capture or kill specific individuals or groups, in large part because of the significant challenges facing the blocking forces and the need to have the best trained and motivated troops possible to fill that role.

This is the lens through which the original battle at Tora Bora should be viewed, and perhaps the biggest reason why it was unsuccessful. In many ways, the outcome was similar to previous engagements: the enemy left the disputed ground after suffering a far higher number of casualties than the assaulting forces, which is why some have claimed Tora Bora and Anaconda were in fact significant victories. However, the main objective of killing or capturing the majority of the *al Qaeda* leadership (and fighters)—which is often the objective of counterterrorist operations as opposed to conventional ones—was not achieved. This should not necessarily come as a surprise given that the previous victories of the campaign at Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, and Kandahar did not result in such high levels of killing or capturing of the enemy either, in large part due to the lack of significant blocking operations. Nonetheless, if the U.S. military is going to (correctly) set such objectives as central to its operations, then Tora Bora and Anaconda must be judged in

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<sup>115</sup> It should be noted, of course, that many trained in terrorist methods fought the United States in small-unit fashion early in the war, rather than making extensive attacks on civilians.

<sup>116</sup> Charles Dunlap, “America’s Asymmetric Advantage,” *Armed Forces Journal* (September 2006): 24.

<sup>117</sup> Joseph Collins, “From the Ground Up,” *Armed Forces Journal* (October 2006): 46.

large part in light of these goals. Anaconda demonstrated the need to involve U.S. troops in all phases of a plan concerning high-value targets if the highest probability of success is desired. However, Anaconda revealed that even with significant numbers of U.S. troops on the battlefield, such operations face difficulties concerning intelligence, terrain, and other factors that can play a significant role in the ultimate outcome.

Although the original battle of Tora Bora certainly reveals some of the failings of the Afghan Model, the battle waged there from late November to mid-December 2001 happens to illustrate some of the model's strengths as well. Early in the battle, four American CIA and Special Forces troops with ten indigenous Afghan guides were able to kill hundreds of *al Qaeda* forces and destroy a great deal of their equipment by calling on massive American airpower that bombed the shocked *al Qaeda* defenders for days at no human cost to the Americans (although significant risk). This was the synergy of American airpower, indigenous fighters, and a small American troop presence that seems to have so much potential in the eyes of Andres et al. However, as previously discussed, hundreds of *al Qaeda* members, including bin Laden and Zawahiri, survived those initial strikes and proceeded to repel an assault by inferior Eastern Alliance forces before successfully fleeing through the lines of those same inferior forces. As Biddle points out, Andres et al. make a misleading claim that "U.S. airpower and Afghan allies rapidly routed the [al Qaeda] force and drove it from the region."<sup>118</sup> All available accounts of the battle suggest the Eastern Alliance had a very difficult time holding ground, let alone taking it.<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, Andres et al. admit "the battle ended when the enemy decided to leave," which certainly does not suggest they were driven from the region.<sup>120</sup>

Andres et al. acknowledge that the Afghan model may trade a degree of speed and efficiency for fewer American casualties, and go on to grant that "if the value of the new model were measured simply in terms of a comparison of military capability of proxy forces and a heavy deployment of U.S. troops, it would clearly come up wanting. The importance of the new model comes from its strategic value."<sup>121</sup> That may well be the case, but as previously discussed, the opportunity presented at Tora Bora did not allow several chances to get the operation done right. Tora Bora was a single tactical action that had significant operational and strategic consequences for the United States. OEF as a whole involved a number of tactical setbacks outside of Mazar-e-Sharif and on the Shomali Plains, but these did not have significant consequences for the campaign or U.S. strategy in the region because cities, unlike individuals, can always be located and captured another day. The Afghan Model

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<sup>118</sup> Andres et al., "Winning with Allies," 149.

<sup>119</sup> Berntsen, *Jawbreaker*, 291–94; and Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 19–21; and Smucker, *Al Qaeda's Great Escape*, 121–32. Author interview with American intelligence officer who deployed to Afghanistan.

<sup>120</sup> Andres et al., "Winning with Allies," 153.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 144, 153.

can therefore have significant strategic costs when conventional wars mix with unconventional ones and the same tactics are employed to fight both, as they often were in OEF.

Andres et al.'s claims about the strategic value of the Afghan model also revolve around the issue of avoiding U.S. involvement in protracted insurgencies. This was a major concern in Operation Anaconda—when U.S. planners insisted indigenous Afghan allies lead the assault in part to legitimate the operation—and a problem that exists in Iraq today, where American troops face a constant dilemma: do the operation yourself or let the Iraqi government forces do it for you.<sup>122</sup> In the latter case, the operation may be more likely to be done “right,” but it also risks backlash against American troops and prevents the maturation of Iraqi forces, which must someday provide security for their own country without the assistance of American troops. U.S. forces often cite a T. E. Lawrence recommendation, “Do not try and do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not win it for them.”<sup>123</sup>

There is a great deal of wisdom in this statement for American conduct of the conflict with *al Qaeda*, since ultimate victory over jihadi terrorism will only come when the societies in which they currently seek sanctuary collectively turn against them and their corruption of Islam without American pressure. Still, the elimination of the most prominent leaders and organizations that spread that ideology and have demonstrated considerable skill in harming the United States and its allies is another necessary step for success. There is certainly support for the claim that stationing large numbers of U.S. troops in certain regions may provoke increased hostility and perhaps full-fledged insurgencies. However, deployment of U.S. troops is not an all-or-nothing affair, and one does not have to choose one operational plan or the other for every engagement in a given campaign. In Afghanistan, it was possible to use the Afghan Model to topple the Taliban while leaving the elimination of the *al Qaeda* leadership to a relatively small number of the best-trained and most skilled troops available: the Americans.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> Even though claims of Iraq being a front in the “War on Terror” were originally false, they are unfortunately true today, in part due to flawed U.S. decision making. For accounts of the concerns expressed by some U.S. soldiers over the prominent role played by the Afghans in Operation Anaconda, see Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die*, 127–29, 144–45, 372.

<sup>123</sup> T. E. Lawrence, “The 27 Articles of T. E. Lawrence,” *The Arab Bulletin*, 20 August 1917, <http://net.lib.byu.edu/~rdh7/wwi/1917/27arts.html>.

<sup>124</sup> It is important not to oversimplify the lessons of this analysis. The struggle with transnational terrorists and other decentralized, nonstate militant groups should largely be carried out by small, highly trained units rather than massed concentrations of conventional forces. Such units are readily available to the United States from the CIA and Special Forces, and they successfully spearheaded the overwhelming success of the early stages of OEF. Nonetheless, the military response to terrorism should not consist of a single monolithic approach but rather a variety of options. There are situations where larger numbers of conventional forces are required, and Tora Bora was a prime example.

## TORA BORA: LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD

The logical question that follows from this analysis is why military leaders did not carry out an operation similar to the one described in this essay, assuming it was more likely to succeed. The conclusive answer to such a question would at the very least require access to classified discussions at the top level of political and military leadership that are not publicly available at this time. My analysis does provide a definitive conclusion, however, regarding factors that could not have rationally served as the basis for the decision not to insert larger numbers of U.S. conventional forces at Tora Bora. Timely intelligence on the whereabouts of bin Laden and *al Qaeda* forces was available and acknowledged by key members of the intelligence and military leadership, and so should not have been the reason for inaction. The United States had forces available that could have rapidly deployed to and successfully operated in such difficult terrain, making it impossible to contend that the right number or quality of troops did not exist at the time. Finally, commanders on the ground not only thought such forces could be of use, individuals like Gary Berntsen repeatedly requested them, and those requests reached the top levels of America's political and military leadership. Therefore, it cannot be argued that the move was not considered by at least some of those in command or favored by some of those on the ground.

What explanations remain? The military leadership could have been so enamored with the Afghan model that they thought its stunning success ensured a similar outcome at Tora Bora. In addition, they could have been so worried about Americans being perceived as an invading force that they believed a few thousand more troops would have made a crucial difference in the perceptions of the Afghan population. With Kabul taken and the Taliban on the run, they could have already shifted their sights toward the next step in the "War on Terror": Iraq.<sup>125</sup> Many considered the war in Afghanistan all but over by late November, and American officials may have been hesitant to risk the fallout from a Black Hawk Down-type episode in which a U.S. platoon or company could have been brought down in their helicopters or encircled and annihilated in the mountains.<sup>126</sup> We may never know the precise reasoning for the decision not to deploy a larger number of American forces at Tora Bora. Regardless, it is impossible not to question why the United States did not deploy a more significant portion of its impressive capability at Tora Bora if bin Laden and *al Qaeda* were truly perceived as the single most

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<sup>125</sup> This plausibility of this hypothesis is strengthened by Gary Schroen's observation that the United States began to pull troops out of Afghanistan in early 2002 for the coming war in Iraq. Schroen, *First In*, 359.

<sup>126</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this line of reasoning.

significant international threat to the United States, as claimed by the political and military leadership since 9/11.

I believe that a significant reason for the decision not to carry out the operation described here is that U.S. leaders were still trapped in the thinking of previous conventional wars where the big prizes of OEF in Afghanistan were thought to be Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, and Kandahar, that is, the toppling of the Taliban and control of country. Such a focus on seizing territory and the trappings of political control helped American leadership lose sight of the importance of eliminating *al Qaeda's* leadership; and that the best means for achieving the latter were not the same as the former. Ensuring that enemies of the United States do not gain control of key states is an important objective in U.S. grand strategy and the struggle against *al Qaeda*; however, many of the key players in this conflict are nonstate actors and different strategies are required to eliminate them and their influence. The disconnect between ends and means at the original battle of Tora Bora reveals a number of key tensions in the "War on Terror," including how to succeed in campaigns that contain elements of conventional warfare, insurgency, and counterterrorism, and how to balance concerns about the effectiveness of an operation with concerns over which individuals will carry it out.

The massing of such large numbers of enemy forces as at Tora Bora may be a comparatively rare occurrence, but it is precisely for this reason the U.S. military must have the plans and forces in place to efficiently execute an operation of this nature should the opportunity arise. If individuals like bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri and large groups of *al Qaeda* forces are high-value targets—and American political and military leadership has given no indication to the contrary—then the potential benefits of such an approach seem to outweigh the considerable risks. Past American experiences have taught us that such operations are difficult to carry out successfully. My goal, therefore, has been to provide further information for a problem with no easy solution, enabling clear-eyed decision making and analysis on an issue for which ideal options are nonexistent.

The insertion of a considerable number of U.S. conventional forces at Tora Bora could have been achieved in the time and space required, although the logistical challenges posed by swiftly transporting large numbers of troops to some of the most forbidding terrain on earth ensured it would have been no easy task. The vulnerability of U.S. forces, all of which would have had to be airlifted into the hostile region, coupled with the advantages enjoyed by the defenders in the extreme conditions, all but ensured that American forces would have suffered significant casualties over the course of such an engagement. Although most American civilians and military officials would have accepted such a loss as a tolerable, if difficult, price to pay for the



capture or killing of bin Laden and his lieutenants, U.S. experiences in similar scenarios reveal that success was by no means guaranteed.<sup>127</sup> Still, given the unique circumstance of actionable intelligence on bin Laden and large concentrations of *al Qaeda*, this was an operation that the United States should have carried out.

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<sup>127</sup> "A CNN and Washington Post sampling of U.S. public sentiment revealed that a vast majority agreed that they would be willing to accept 'considerable military casualties' to hunt down Bin Laden." Smucker, *Al Qaeda's Great Escape*, 138.