Potential US contingencies #5: Cornering of UBL at Tora Bora

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Abstract
A counterfactual analysis of the United States attempt to in late 2001 to capture Usama Bin Laden at Tora Bora, Afghanistan, as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. A look at the hardships we encountered and how we could have approached them differently to lead to a greater likelihood of success.
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Chapter 1

Overview

During the final days of the first phase of the Afghan War, it seems that Usama Bin Laden and many Al Qaeda fighters were cornered near the Pakistan border, at a place called Tora Bora. Many appear to have escaped. How did this occur? What might the U.S. military reasonably have done to try to prevent this escape? What risks would have been assumed in the effort? Would it have been worth it? Why or Why Not?

This paper attempts to analyze what would be necessary for the United States to mount a military campaign to capture or kill Usama bin Laden at Tora Bora, Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom\(^1\). Tora Bora is a highly mountainous, cave-filled region about 35 miles southwest of Jalalabad, and about 40 miles west of the Afghanistan/Pakistan border.\(^2\) (see map in Figure 1.1, p. 2, and the more detailed version in Figure 1.2 on p. 5)

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\(^1\)Operation Enduring Freedom is the given to the United States military operations responding to the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States.

\(^2\)[NYTFrantz2001] gives early initial speculation on bin Laden’s location, dating a sighting of Usama bin Laden exiting a Chevrolet Suburban to 9 October, 2001, two days after the United States began its bombing in Afghanistan.
Figure 1.1: Afghanistan map showing Jalalabad, with Tora Bora 35 miles southwest along the dotted line, from [NYTFrantz2001].

Tora Bora was previously a major base for the mujahedeen\(^3\), and is described as having “high mountains, forests, caves and bunkers ... bombing cannot be effective against it”\(^4\). A US colonel\(^5\) said, “You have to see it to believe it. I personally conducted a recon up to 9,000 feet and I was still in the foothills. Steep peaks, deep valleys, small foot trails, and that was the good part.” Nighttime temperatures are below freezing.\(^6\),\(^7\)

\(^3\)[NYTFrantz2001]. The mujahedeen freedom fighters in the Afghanistan fought against the Soviets during the 1980s in Afghanistan.

\(^4\)According Sohrab Qadri, then-intelligence chief in Nangarhar Province, quoted in [NYTWeiner2001a].


\(^6\)[GS:Anaconda] offers “between 15–20\(^\circ\)F” for a very similar geographic location in Operation Anaconda.

\(^7\)Ironically, [NYTWines2001] informs us that that the construction of the Tora Bora tunnel system was financed by the United States Central Intelligence Agency in 1986. Wines quotes a source, “They’re multi-level, dogleg tunnels. They have air vents and escape hatches out the back.” Wines also says the tunnel systems contain “heavily fortified
This paper analyzes the counterfactual that the United States would commit its own military force to the campaign to ensnare bin Laden. In actuality, the United States employed a new kind of warfare in Afghanistan, termed by Stephen Biddle as the “Afghan model.” In this model, the US used local allies (esp. the Northern Alliance) instead of conventional ground forces, and supplemented them with US special operations forces. While in general successful for fighting the Taliban, the Afghan model left much to be desired at Tora Bora.

In this counterfactual, the date ranges from October through December of 2001, but is primarily focussed on the early days of December. The United States is just completing its campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan (assisted by the Northern Alliance), and is attempting to learn the location of Usama bin Laden, and has gotten a few leads that point to Tora Bora, with varying degrees of certainty.

The major participants are the United States, Al Qaeda and Taliban forces, and the Northern Alliance (United States local allies). The Northern Alliance factor is a major element of the counterfactual: in reality, the US pushed much of the responsibility onto them. I examine an alternative

mountain bunkers built to withstand everything short [of] a nuclear attack.”

8[Biddle2005].

9Biddle finds “significant close combat with failure by inept allies.” He describes at some length examples how the Afghan model failed to avoid close combat, and in some cases the combatants were particularly inept. [Andres2005] describes cases where US local allies accepted bribes to allow Taliban fighters to escape. When fighting a war, allowing some of the enemy to escape is reasonable, but it is very problematic during a manhunt for a single individual.
scenario.

This operation is not simply a straightforward balance of forces — it is manhunt to capture one man: bin Laden. As such, there are additional operational constraints placed on the United States forces. They need not prevail overwhelming in combat, but they must prevent a single man from escaping. Success in this requires either extremely good intelligence about the location of that man, or an extremely tight operation to ensure that no Al Qaeda escape. The better the intelligence of bin Laden’s position, the smaller the region that needs to be tightly held. Unfortunately, in this case, the intelligence about bin Laden’s position was neither good nor precise, making this operation extremely difficult.

I assume that a defense ratio of 10:1 in favor of the defender\textsuperscript{10}, accounting for the terrain and the difficult nature of guerilla warfare.

I assume this is siege warfare. That is, the United States job is first and foremost to contain, and then to break the siege. Unlike a classic siege, there is not a single monolithic fortress to be breached. Instead, it is a

\textsuperscript{10}This is derived from a review of [Grau1998], which consists of many vignettes of the Soviet/Afghan conflict compiled by the Russian Frunze Military Academy and translated into English with some commentary by the author. In several blocking and sweeping operations in valley and mountain regions, forces of 2 or 3 companies (perhaps 100 soldiers each) succeeding in capturing or killing 10–20 mujahedeen. In many ways, this number is not at all satisfying, and should be regarded as low. Grau’s final commentary notes, “Example after example shows block, sweeps, and raids into areas supposedly containing hundreds of guerrillas. At the end of the a battle or operation, the mujahideen casualties are in the dozens and the action is termed a success because the guerilla force has been smashed. . . . After very rough handling, the majority of them seem to bounce back. It seems that what the Soviets were normally engaging were the rear guards and the slow or uninformed guerrillas.”
network of mountain caves, which presents unique challenges. The perimeter
to surround is larger and potentially more porous. It is difficult to know
effectively where that perimeter is—there is no clear boundary that is visible
from air or ground.

![Diagram of Tora Bora region](image)

Figure 1.2: The region around Tora Bora. From [NYTShanker2001].

Time to field is also quite critical. If the United States cannot field troops
quickly enough to contain him, bin Laden can easily escape.\footnote{As early as 25 Nov., before action had even commenced, \textit{The New York Times} had reported, that the Afghan law and order minister for Eastern Shura “said it was possible}
that Mr. bin Laden would ‘slip into Pakistan’ if Tora Bora came under heavy attack” [NYTWeiner2001b]. Depending on how much stock you put in this, perhaps this engagement was futile from the start.
Chapter 2

Orders of battle

Ground force requirements

Estimates vary\(^1\), but we will assume 2,000 Al Qaeda forces, armed with Soviet rifles, machine guns, and some number of surface-to-air missiles.\(^2\)

Based on our defense ratio of 10:1, the United States needs to field a force of 20,000 for parity, or perhaps 10 brigades.\(^3\)

In the actual operation, the United States used 800 Special Operations

\(^1\)[IISS201] estimated Al Qaeda as 1,000+, pre-conflict. [NYTFrantz2001] estimates 1,200 according to an anonymous “anti-Taliban leader.” [NYTWeiner2001a] estimates as many as 2,000, attributed to Afghan law and order ministry aides.

\(^2\)[NYTWeiner2001a] discusses the weaponry. This is consistent with [IISS201] estimates of the small arms equipment in Afghanistan, and the assumption that much of it left over from the 1980s Soviet conflicts. [O’Hanlon2002] estimates there were SA-7 and SA-13 portable SAMs, as well as 200–300 Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. It’s difficult to get solid numbers for a guerilla paramilitary force, so this seems a reasonable level of confidence.

\(^3\)Force-to-space ratios don’t seem to directly apply to guerilla warfare. Or rather, we will assume they are effective accounted for in the 10:1 ratio, which was derived empirically from [Grau1998], rather than calculated in a vacuum.
Forces airlifted from Pakistani bases, of whom only 100 were commandos, the remaining being support troops\(^4\).

**Troop transport**

Any sort of troop transport of this magnitude is a complex undertaking. Kuperman gives us a realistic framework for analyzing troop transport issues, and the results are anything but timely\(^5\): a single 15,000-troop division is estimated to take at least 40 days\(^6\). Extrapolating, it would take 53 days to position a 20,000-strong ground force.

Clearly, some kind of interim blockade force would be required, hopefully air-based, to speed time-to-deployment and reduce personnel costs, in

\(^4\)[NYTFrantz2001]: “It appears that this total includes perhaps 100 commandos, but is largely made up of communications experts, helicopter maintenance crews, security forces and other support personnel.”

\(^5\)[Kuperman2001] analyzes the Rwandan genocide in 10 chapters, looking at how the United States could have responded to the genocide once it became aware. Disappointingly, Kuperman finds that troop transport would have been an extremely limiting factor, primarily because of the long distance and the lack of advance notice, both of which are key limitations shared by the Tora Bora operation. Kuperman looks at five past military interventions (Lebanon, 1958; Dominican Republic, 1965; Granada, 1983; Panama, 1989; Saudi Arabia, 1990) and finds only Operation Desert Shield (Saudi Arabia, 1990) is “analogous” because of the above distance and notice factors. In Desert Shield, the initial airlift averaged “500 tons of cargo and 250 troops per day,” though that rose to “1,400 tons and 1,300 personnel per day” after the US. began to load from multiple bases. Just as in Rwanda, Afghanistan is land-locked, and sea lift is unlikely to be available. (It seems highly unlikely that Pakistani politicians would permit sealift of US troops to cross the approx. 700 miles overland from the Arabian Sea to Afghanistan, much less the issues of suitable roads and terrain).

\(^6\)[Kuperman2001] Table 7-1 (p.76). Pakistan is slightly further from the US than Rwanda, making this somewhat of a best-case number. The close proximity the the Arabian Sea does mitigate this somewhat, suggesting it may be possible to run more tactical airlift between carriers on the Arabian Sea and Afghanistan.
keeping with the United States philosophy. Limited numbers of Marine forces were available on nearby aircraft carriers and could have been deployed within a few days.

**Air power**

The actual Tora Bora campaign made extensive use of air power, which was coordinated on the ground by US Special Forces, repeatedly bombing caves\(^7\). This bombing in of itself was insufficient to damage Al Qaeda forces, but did help to flush them out. It’s not clear how effective bombing alone would be without the ground forces — Al Qaeda may simply have stayed holed up in their caves and waited-out the bombings.

**Basing issues**

The US made heavy use of Pakistani air bases in transporting special operations troops, and also made use of aircraft carriers in the Arabian Sea. Use of Pakistani bases may be contingent on the precise political situation, and may not necessarily be feasible for all types of operations.

While similar political issues may exist with overflying Pakistani airspace, Pakistan is probably not in a good position to deny the US the ability to overfly it.

\(^7\)\[Andres2005\].
Chapter 3

Force-on-force engagement

Containment strategies

Usama bin Laden knew the US was hunting him\(^1\), and it is clear he would take action to avoid being captured. bin Laden would do one of two things: remain in a known stronghold he believed to be secure from attack, or flee to a hidden location. bin Laden had years of experience living on-the-run and avoiding capture.

If he was in fact present at Tora Bora\(^2\), upon hearing that the US was moving in, bin Laden would either flee immediately or hole-up secure. For the former case, the US must contain Tora Bora and its escape routes as fast as possible (hours), and in the latter, need secure them once the operation begins.

\(^1\)[NYTSanger2001] President Bush wanted bin Laden “dead or alive,” on 17 Sep.

\(^2\)and there is considerable question. See [NYTWeiner2001b].
Michael O’Hanlon\textsuperscript{3} estimates that “even 1,000 US troops would have been sufficient to close off the 100 to 150 major mountain escape routes into Pakistan.”\textsuperscript{4} In point of fact that US apparently had a minimum of about two weeks to act, and possibly as much as two months\textsuperscript{5}. That’s more than enough time to deploy Marines from nearby aircraft carriers\textsuperscript{6}, and certainly sufficient time to airlift troops from domestic US bases\textsuperscript{7}.

O’Hanlon also speculates that the US might have additional intelligence information on bin Laden\textsuperscript{8}, though these claims are open to debate.

In early December, the US massed 1,500 local Afghan fighters to attack Tora Bora\textsuperscript{9}. Given any reasonable defense ratio, this number does not make sense. What were they thinking?

Air support also plays a critical role, and Americans aircraft bombed extensively\textsuperscript{10}, though civilian casualties are heavy, numbering in the hun-

\textsuperscript{3}[O’Hanlon2002b].
\textsuperscript{4}However, 2 years later in [O’Hanlon2004], he revises his estimate to “perhaps 1,000 to 3,000” American troops.
\textsuperscript{5}We know from [NYTFrantz2001] that there was good speculation as to bin Laden’s presence in Tora Bora as early as 9 October. [O’Hanlon2002b] summarizes a chronology from December Pentagon press briefings, with the US believing bin Laden at Tora Bora on 3 Dec., remaining about the same certainty on 10 Dec., and then by 17 Dec., moving to “we believed that he was in that area. And now we’re not sure”.
\textsuperscript{6}The Kitty Hawk was in the north Arabian Sea on 23 Nov.[NYTFrantz2001]. The Carl Vinson was also in the Arabian sea on 27 Nov.[NYTshanker2001b]. By December 14, the Peleliu was there as well.[NYTMyers2001]
\textsuperscript{7}[Kuperman2001]
\textsuperscript{8}[O’Hanlon2004] suggests that bin Laden’s satellite phone was traceable and that he probably used it during that time, and also that he might travel with 1,000–2,000 troops. Both of these claims seem somewhat of a stretch to me, but they either improve the US’s advantage or keep it constant.
\textsuperscript{9}[NYTWeiner2001c].
\textsuperscript{10}American B-52s bombed heavily with precision-guided AGM-142 HAVE NAPs, 3,000-lbs missiles with rock-penetrating tips. [NYTShanker2001].
Why did bin Laden escape?

bin Laden escaped because the US was ineffective at containment, and containment was both extremely difficult and critical to the operation. No real attempt was made to bring in high numbers of US forces, or even local Afghan forces. Furthermore, the Afghan forces that were involved had little incentive to continue the fight against Al Qaeda. When they were fighting for their own land, the United States was assisting them in a cause they felt was meaningful, and they were motivated. When they were forced to chase after the Al Qaeda through mountain regions and land they did not wish to claim, the activity became much less appealing. “They are just doing it for the money,” said the mayor of Jalalabad. Afghan fighters accepted bribes from Al Qaeda forces to slip through their lines, and apparently an Afghan commander “brokered a cease-fire at Tora Bora without consulting anyone.”

11[NYTWeiner2001c].  
12[Andres2005].  
13[Andres2005] supposedly quoting from [Donnelly2002].  
14[Andres2005].  
15[Donnelly2002].
Counterfactual analysis

Fundamentally, the United States needed to use its own ground forces and not rely on Afghan forces to secure the perimeter around Tora Bora. The US needed to move quickly and with precision to contain the area, and to prevent the escape of bin Laden.

There were many many options the US could have chosen, and there was a wide and forgiving time window where effective action could have been taken. Ideally, the US would have taken action as soon as it had a reasonable idea of bin Laden’s location (October, 2001), but it appears the window of available time extended into December, 2001.

Within that window, Marine Expeditionary Units could have helicoptered in rapidly (they can mobilize within a few days), as a preliminary measure. Estimates\textsuperscript{16} suggest that a few thousand troops would have been effective at blockading the trails and mountain passes leading out of Tora Bora.

Rapid response troops like the Army’s 101st Airborne division could have moved in initially to secure the perimeter, and, if troop levels were sufficient, to begin a blocking and sweeping of the Tora Bora region. In actuality, the 101st Airborne did not begin to deploy until just before New Year’s Day\textsuperscript{17,18}

\textsuperscript{16}[O’Hanlon2004].
\textsuperscript{17}[NYTDao2001].
\textsuperscript{18}In [Posen:24April], Prof. Posen suggested that “We should have dropped paratroopers,” and went on to criticize the United States ability to act rapidly and with commitment. “You have to be willing to prosecute vigorously, it’s a measure of your true interest in the war. One of the great failings [was that] that particular piece of it was not prosecuted with vigor.”
More serious ground forces could have been deployed in the coming weeks to begin the actual painstaking blocking and sweeping process. Here is where the 20,000-troop force becomes pertinent. If Al Qaeda were to stand and fight, then this could be a long protracted guerilla insurgency battle.

As it was, we hardly saw any of this. Al Qaeda forces managed to flee for the most part without engaging US forces. This makes it difficult to judge and appreciate the severity of this action. Would the US have been committing ourselves to a multi-year engagement, just in Tora Bora, in order to pin down Usama bin Laden? On the other hand, it is now 2007, six years later, and the US and NATO forces are still in Afghanistan.

I would propose removing the local Afghan/Northern Alliance forces from the equation entirely. Those forces were well-motivated to act against the Taliban in other parts of Afghanistan, and those actions were still needed in Dec, 2001. The hearts of minds of our Afghan allies were not in favor of prosecuting Al Qaeda, and the US was better off without them.

It may, however, have been appropriate to bring in special forces from our other allies. For instance, later on in Afghanistan, 800 British Special Forces units assisted the US, as did Italians and French, and ultimately additional NATO forces. If available, these units could have assisted in the rapid response to capture bin Laden.

It is also not the case that these counterfactual options were entirely outside the military’s thinking. It was reported that General Tommy R. Franks recommended deploying US ground forces to clear out caves near
Tora Bora\textsuperscript{19}. While a full analysis of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, we know that then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld held a strong bias against committing more troops than the minimum necessary (as we have seen in Iraq\textsuperscript{20}, so it is unsurprising that he may have found the Afghan model appealing, as it required fewer US troops).

It is worth noting that essentially the bulk of the US’s military problem in this scenario boils down to two areas: power projection capabilities and counterinsurgency. The ability of the United States to drop forces into hostile territory rapidly and effectively is governed by power projection, and counterinsurgency will govern what they do when they get there.

\textsuperscript{19}[Healy2001].
\textsuperscript{20}with General Eric Shinkseki’s testimony before the United States Congress about troop levels, etc.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

I’ve tried to summarize the issues with a campaign analysis of the US engagement with Al Qaeda at Tora Bora, and to present several options for how a counterfactual might have proceeded.

Initially, we asked several questions, and are now equipped to address them directly:

**How did the escape occur?** The United States depended on untrained and unreliable allies to secure a perimeter that we assert was critical to our national security interests. The unreliability showed itself, and the perimeter was loose and porous. bin Laden, if he was ever there in the first place, managed to slip out through it.

**What might the U.S. military have done to try to prevent this escape?** The United States military could have decide to act quickly. It could
have acted in October, 2001. Or November, 2001. Or even early December, 2001, rather than biding its time. The United States military could have sent specialized rapid-response troops into this incredibly brutalizing environment. The United States could have followed up those rapid-response troops with airlifts of professional infantry. The United States could have committed real resources, both human and equipment, to the task of killing or capturing Usama bin Laden.

**What risks would have been assumed in the effort?** Several:

- The risk of a long, extended counter-insurgency (counter-guerilla) campaign in a well-defended punishing high-altitude mountainous forest region with an intricate tunnel and cave network. While a multi-year campaign sounds bad, it does not sound so bad when you recognize that we in the middle of a multi-year campaign in Afghanistan, anyhow.

- The risk that the United States might have failed. In actuality, the US failed but could conveniently pin the blame on its Afghan allies. If it had acted with dispatch and full resources, and still failed, it would have looked even more foolish.

- The risk of limiting future flexibility. If the US indeed deployed tens of thousands of troops in this one region in Afghanistan, would it been able to maintain the operational flexibility to pursue conflicts in Iraq, and even in the rest of Afghanistan? Would it have felt the pressure to
similarly “staff up” to real counterinsurgency force levels in the rest of Afghanistan?

**Would it have been worth it? Why or Why not?**  This is fundamentally a political question, and difficult to answer in the context of a campaign analysis. I am personally ill-convinced of the value of Usama bin Laden as a target; setting ourselves up with an intention to take down a single person is incredibly difficult, especially one so mobile and secretive. Given the choice, I would not have supported the President’s decision to declare bin Laden an enemy that the US would capture, “dead or alive.”

However, having made such a declaration, the United States needs to put it’s money and resources where its mouth is. Otherwise, we risk catastrophic degradation of our ability to deter and the appearance of failing to follow-through on our commitments. If we have declared that bin Laden is worth going after, then he is worth going after with all the resources we can possibly bear upon him.
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