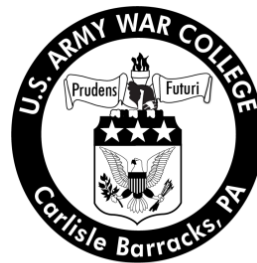


# Civilian Research Project Senior Service College Fellow

## Dimensions of Uncertainty in Presidential Decision-Making Involving the Use of Force

by

Colonel Anthony R. Hale  
United States Army



United States Army War College  
Class of 2012

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INVOLVING THE USE OF FORCE**

by

Colonel Anthony R. Hale  
United States Army

Dr. William A. Boettcher III  
North Carolina State University (NCSU)  
Project Adviser

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## ABSTRACT

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In an increasingly dangerous world, especially since the asymmetric terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the Commander-in-Chief is often faced with decisions involving military employment which could have enormous risk to the President politically, but for our Nation domestically, internationally and militarily. During the course of a crisis, leaders are presented with a broad set of military options ranging from a show of force to full mobilization and deployment of ground combat troops all having different dimensions of uncertainty and levels of calculated risk. Over the past two years, President Obama has made numerous decisions involving our military. This project will examine the dimensions of uncertainty in two major decisions by the Obama administration, the Afghanistan surge (2009) and the U.S. unilateral action to kill Osama bin Laden (2011), and the uncertainty involved in those decisions. Many would argue that the "Afghanistan Surge" was a political decision, while the decision to use unilateral force to kill Osama bin Laden in Pakistan was an operational decision. Both involved dimensions of uncertainty that led

to the President taking calculated risks which have shaped his role as our Commander-in-Chief.



# DIMENSIONS OF UNCERTAINTY IN PRESIDENTIAL DECISION-MAKING INVOLVING THE USE OF FORCE

## Section I - Introduction

*“A leader, once convinced that a particular course of action is the right one, must have the determination to stick with it and be undaunted when the going gets rough.” – Ronald Reagan*

In an increasingly dangerous world, especially since the asymmetric terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, the Commander-in-Chief is often faced with decisions involving military employment which could have enormous risk not only to him politically as an individual, but also for our Nation domestically, internationally and militarily. During the course of a crisis, leaders are presented with a broad set of military options ranging from a show of force to full mobilization and deployment of ground combat troops all of which have different dimensions of uncertainty and levels of risk.

As the only remaining superpower since the end of the cold war, presidential decisions involving the use of military force are inherent with dimensions of uncertainty which lead to outcomes with calculated risk. Over the past two years, President Obama has made numerous decisions involving our military in ways to dictate U.S. stated foreign policy. However, in some cases the decisions left professionals, both military and political analysts, wondering how a decision of such magnitude was derived. This project will examine two major decisions by the Obama administration, the Afghanistan surge (2009) and the U.S. unilateral action to kill Osama bin Laden (2011), studying their inherent risks and the decision making processes in relations to Graham Allison and Barbara Kellerman's models of foreign policy decision-making.

Many would argue that the “Afghanistan Surge” was a political decision already decided upon by then candidate Obama during the run-up to the 2008 election, while the decision to use unilateral force to kill Osama bin Laden in Pakistan was an operational decision clearly articulated in the 2010 National Security Strategy and made when sufficient intelligence was gained to “take a shot.” Experts and scholars would probably not agree on labeling military decisions by the Commander-in-Chief as politically related in discussing foreign policy implications; however, both decisions involved dimensions of uncertainty inherent with calculated risks which have shaped his role as our Commander-in-Chief.

### **Research Purpose and Organization**

The purpose of this research project is to review dimensions of uncertainty associated with and analyze the decision-making process of these two key decisions by the President and review the strategic calculated risks inherent to those decisions and implications for U.S. Foreign Policy. The primary research question this paper seeks to answer concerns decision making by the President in his role as Commander-in-Chief when involving the use of military force: Are there both “political and operational” decisions and how are those decisions made? There are two supporting questions that will guide the research to assist in answering the primary question.

- Which decision making model was used in decision making by President Obama in each of these two key strategic decisions?

- What are the dimensions of uncertainty and calculated risks associated with each decision?

Section 2, “Foreign Policy Decision Making” will focus on how the President is equipped to make foreign policy decisions, a review of Graham Allison and Barbara Kellerman’s decision making models and how most foreign policy decisions are imbued with calculated risks.

Section 3, “The Afghanistan Surge,” will take a look at the decision of surging U.S. forces in Afghanistan in 2009, the strategic risks inherent with the decision and how it could be labeled a “political” decision.

Section 4, “Operation Neptune Spear – A Risky Decision,” will review the decision to take unilateral action to kill America’s number one terrorist threat, Osama bin Laden, the inherent risks involved in such a mission and the labeling of an “operational” decision. The final section, “Leader’s and Decision Making” will offer some concluding thoughts on how President Obama made these two key foreign policy decisions as leader of the world’s only remaining superpower.

### **Scope and Limitations**

The scope of this research project is limited in several ways. First, this paper is unclassified and has been drafted using only open source information and a few interviews with persons who had first-hand knowledge of the decision making process of these two different cases. The majority of the National Security Council meetings and notes are classified for obvious reasons and limiting this paper to unclassified sources will prevent a comprehensive discussion. Secondly, there have been countless military

decisions made by the President during his time in office but I have chosen to focus on these two major, completely different, decisions that I label “a political decision and an operational decision” in examining President Obama’s decision making processes. The cases are also much different in the fact that the Afghanistan ‘Surge’ was a deliberate, detailed and inclusive process by the President, with the entire National Security Council and his Secretaries which took several months, while the bin Laden decision was initiated by critical, near-real-time intelligence that constituted a ‘crisis’ and a time-sensitive decision making process which lasted only a few weeks before execution.

## **Section II - Foreign Policy Decision Making**

*“When you see how the President makes political or policy decisions, you see who he is. The essence of the Presidency is decision-making.” - [Bob Woodward](#)*

The President of the United States, as Commander-in-Chief, is ultimately the key decision maker when decisions are made involving the commitment of U.S. forces around the world as an instrument of foreign policy. To assist him in his decision making, “the National Security Council (NSC) was established under President Truman in 1947 by the National Security Act and later amended by the National Security Act Amendments of 1949 and the Reorganization Plan and placed in the Executive Office of the President.”<sup>1</sup> The NSC is chaired by the President and although there are no permanent members, its regular attendees include the Vice President, Secretary of State, Secretary of Treasury, Secretary of Defense and the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs (APNSA) , also known as the National Security Advisor. There are several statutory advisors to the council, such as the Chairman of the Joint

Chiefs, the Director of National Intelligence, etc. but the attendees vary depending upon the topic of discussion and decision to be made. It primarily functions as a coordinating mechanism to ensure the president receives the benefit of the views of the principal members of his national security team. On May 26, 2009, President Obama merged the White House staff supporting the Homeland Security Council (HSC) and the National Security Council into one National Security Staff (NSS) with over two-hundred staff members supporting the president.<sup>2</sup>

While the decision-making process within the NSC has become less formal, the influence of the council has become stronger. As stated by David Rothkopf in 2005, the NSC represents what is probably the most powerful committee in the history of the world, one with more resources, more power, more license to act, and more ability to project force further and swifter than any other convened by king, emperor, or president.<sup>3</sup> Further, with his merger of the HSC and NSC staffs, President Obama felt that the “White House must be organized to effectively and efficiently leverage” the personnel supporting the principles and “allow the president to make better decisions even more rapidly” integrating all instruments of power.”<sup>4</sup> The influence and importance President Obama places on this body of advisors can be seen by the frequency of these meetings over the past three years, nearly twice as many as during the second Bush administration.<sup>5</sup>

### **Decision-Making Models**

In the 1999 book *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), by political scientist Graham T. Allison, Allison proposes three models by which

governmental decision-making are analyzed; the “Rational Actor” model, the “Organizational Behavior” model, and the “Governmental Politics” model.<sup>6</sup> While analysts can ignore facts in order to make their analysis fit their particular models, Allison’s three different “lenses” to examine a decision help explain the crisis. Further explanation of these models consider the assumptions, advantages, disadvantages, constraints and personal views of the decision maker in the outcome of the ultimate goal or in this case decision. Later in chapter three, we will review how the “Afghan Surge” decision uses elements of both the “Rational Actor” and “Governmental Politics” models.

Expanding on the Allison theory, Professor Barbara Kellerman introduced three additional models in 1983 that also help us understand different decision-making situations. These models include the “Small Group Process,” the “Dominant Leader,” and the “Cognitive Process.”<sup>7</sup> As in Allison’s case, the models are not exclusive alternatives and there could be variants of each as distinctions among them may blur. Kellerman explains that “Small Groups” (less than twenty people) have important decision-making roles in our government such as Cabinet Secretaries of the NSC or Senate or House Committees; however, a “Dominant Leader” such as the President could maximize his clout to have more influence on decision-making than any other single individual. Further, since individuals are incapable of taking in every piece of information without bias, the “Cognitive Process” should be viewed as an alternative to rationalist’s models of choice.

The decisions we will review in the next two sections appear to be the product of different decision-making styles, however elements of the NSC and the decision-making

models above were utilized during both decisions to assist President Obama during the process. During the “Afghanistan Surge” decision, the President utilized an expanded NSC staff lead by an outside moderator during the NSC meetings. He also consulted with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) during a session at the Pentagon and with members of the JCS separately during NSC meetings and memorandum coordination. Therefore, one could assert elements of both the “Rational Actor” and “Organizational Behavioral” processes were at play. On the opposite end of the spectrum during the bin Laden raid, the President only consulted with a hand full of his closest advisors and kept the discussions “secret” from many of his personal staff, close advisors and family. Thus, the “Small Group” and “Dominant Leader” models attribute heavily to the decision outcomes.

### **Decision-Making & Risks**

As the Commander-in-Chief, the President is faced with numerous decisions during his Presidency concerning the use of force and the employment of our armed forces as an element of national power. When faced with these decisions, the President along with his closest advisors carefully considers numerous political and operational risks before a final decision or course of action is selected. In this era of “Persistent Conflict” as described by many national security strategists, we “operate in a complex and uncertain world where they (decision makers) are forced to anticipate and respond to the actions of enemies and allies.”<sup>8</sup> In the military, we say “the enemy always has a vote,” meaning we must be prepared to react to the enemies actions and to execute

different courses of actions, sequels or branches, from our intended planned action in response to the enemy reaction.

Although not articulated as the Military Decision-Making Process (MDMP), the President and the NSC weigh calculated risks during their discussions of a particular decision as they analyze each critical event. Decision-making is both science and art – Decision-making is knowing *if* to decide, then *when* and *what* to decide; it includes understanding the consequences of the actions and translates the vision of the end state into action.<sup>9</sup> Many aspects of a decision are quantifiable and therefore part of the *science* of war, while other aspects such as the leader (in this case the President), the complexity and the uncertainty of risk belong to the *art* of war in decision-making. “Foreign policy decisions are typically characterized by high stakes, enormous uncertainty, and substantial risk.”<sup>10</sup>

*Uncertainty* can be defined as the lack of complete certainty, that is, the existence of more than one possibility of the true outcome with the results not known at the time, while *risk* is normally associated with known probabilities where the possibilities often involve loss, catastrophe, or an undesirable outcome. Thus, every decision in foreign policy and especially decisions made while discharging the duties of Commander-in-Chief exercising the use of military force as an element of national power are inherent with calculated risks, often quantified probabilities and quantified losses.

In both my discussions and research on the decision-making process by the President in national security matters, President Obama is definitely a leader who is personally involved in the decision-making process and noted as a “hands-on” leader.<sup>11</sup>



The president's method of decision-making can be characterized as analytical and careful where he pulls "together the best people and has them work as a team; insisting on analytical rigor in evaluating the nature of the problem; making sure that dissenting voices are heard and that a range of options are explored."<sup>12</sup>

How the President structures his regular morning national intelligence briefings is one such way to measure his personal approach. It is noted that the Obama morning meetings involve two parts; one dealing with the latest intelligence with the President leading the questioning and a second part of extensive policy discussion focusing on how to handle immediate national security issues that require the President's attention.<sup>13</sup> These sessions do not discuss Presidential decisions; rather focus the White House staff to work on present and future issues that lead to a NSC meeting where the President will directly ask department heads their view on the subject.

Theories that treat state governments as unified rational actors generally develop mathematical models based on the expected-utility tradition that assumes actors are risk-acceptant, risk-neutral, or risk-averse.<sup>14</sup> As will be shown in the two case studies that follow, the Afghanistan Surge and the bin Laden raid, President Obama could be labeled as a "risk-neutral" decision maker taking into account all sides of an issue for fear of losses he may face both politically and operationally. He is also seen as a "dominant leader" not only in using his position as Commander-in-Chief, but being personally involved in both shaping and driving the discussions which lead to candid, disparate views from his closest advisors while discussing in detail the inherent risks of every decision to ensure all aspects of the situation are studied as thoroughly as

possible before putting our military men and women in harm's way and exercising this tool of U.S national power.

### **Section III - The Afghanistan Surge**

*"We allowed the Taliban and Al Qaeda to regenerate itself when we had them on the ropes. That was a big mistake, and it's one I'm going to correct when I'm president."*  
– Senator (and Presidential Candidate) Barack Obama, July 2008

As early as 12 February 2007, one day after launching his election campaign, candidate Obama was already voicing his opposition to the war in Iraq stating "Even at the time, it was possible to make judgments that this would not work out well," indirectly contrasting his stance with presidential rivals then Senator Hillary Clinton and John Edwards, who both voted to authorize the war in 2002. He further promised to begin to withdraw troops from Iraq in order to deploy at least two additional brigades, possibly three, to Afghanistan to reinforce counterterrorism operations and NATO efforts against the Taliban.

Throughout his presidential campaign, he consistently reiterated on numerous occasions how the Bush administration had taken "its eye off Afghanistan" and focused too much of a priority on Iraq. Obama compared the "dumb war" in Iraq to the "good war" in Afghanistan, in which he argued that between 2003 and 2009 the U.S. situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated; the mission and necessary resources neglected in its buildup for the war in Iraq; and that the Taliban was making a comeback which challenged the central Karzai government and tribal leaders for control of the country.<sup>15</sup>

Senator Obama didn't make the decision to begin either of the two wars he would take charge of once sworn into office as president, but throughout his campaign made it

clear that he believed Iraq was “not justified” and he would refocus U.S. efforts towards Afghanistan once President. By the time the election was held, that position was reflected by more than half of Americans, politically distancing himself from his primary opponent, Senator John McCain, who had supported both wars. Clearly, one could argue that the decision to “surge” in Afghanistan and refocus our counterterrorism efforts from Iraq played politics on both sides. The Republicans, quick to claim victory as tough on national defense and sympathetic to military commanders in the field requesting more troops, were supportive of the President’s ‘surge’ decision and even led efforts to approve the funds to support the troop increase in record time. On the other hand, Democrats could claim victory as the President had clearly set a ‘timetable’ for the ‘surge’ troop withdrawal and they could claim that the war would be “winding down” and the troops would be “coming home.” All the while, military commander’s received the necessary combat support they were requesting to take back Taliban strongholds during a set period of time which would preclude further “stress and strain” on the forces.

Immediately following his inauguration on 20 January 2008 the President went right to work on what he perceived as the two biggest foreign policy issues at hand; Iraq and Afghanistan. On his first full day in office, he ordered an extensive review of the Iraq mission and on his second day in office, 22 January, he ordered a parallel review of the Afghanistan campaign lead by Bruce Riedel.<sup>16</sup> Riedel, a former CIA official and harsh critic of President Bush’s handling of Afghanistan, had the assignment of bringing together the various strategy proposals from U.S. Central Command, the Joint Staff, the State Department and various think tanks to guide a White House assessment (along

with Ambassador Richard Holbrooke and Michele Flournoy, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy). The outcome of this thirty-day assessment was announced on 22 March by the approval of outgoing President Bush's recommendation of an additional 21,000 troops to Afghanistan; 17,000 combat troops and an additional 4,000 troops to assist in training the Afghan Army. This brought the total number of troops to 68,000. Having approved the additional forces, President Obama thought he had addressed the "means, ways and ends" to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" al Qaeda in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> However, in May he replaced the U.S. Commander in Afghanistan, General David McKiernan, with General Stanley McChrystal and in the summer it became clear that the U.S. was continuing to lose ground and as such a request for additional troops was forthcoming.

Thus, the Obama administration actually conducted two assessments on the mission in Afghanistan during his first year in office; the first as noted above from early February – March 2009 prior to the NATO summit in Europe commemorating the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the alliance and the second from August – November after General McChrystal's request for additional forces which would be used to implement a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. General McChrystal's request on 30 August 2009 described the situation in Afghanistan as "grave and deteriorating" and presented the President with three options ranging from an increase of 40,000, 30,000 to 10,000 U.S. troops.<sup>18</sup>

Over the next twelve weeks, President Obama personally led a series of ten formal meetings elevating the assessment team to the top decision-makers, Cabinet Principals. Being skeptical of the McChrystal request, President Obama wanted to

conduct a full assessment of the entire mission in Afghanistan beginning with an understanding of the “nature of the conflict” through the “means” (troop numbers), in which to accomplish the U.S. stated objectives – core goal, to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda” in order to prevent their return to Afghanistan.<sup>19</sup> Some of the additional options being discussed inside the beltway included a force of 80,000 U.S. troops in order to implement a robust COIN strategy across the entire country. This option was never considered by the Obama Administration as it was deemed non-supportive by the Service Chiefs, especially the Chief of Staff of the Army and Commandant of the Marine Corps.

To assist in ensuring all decision-makers understood the Afghanistan situation, Dr. Peter Lavoy, Deputy Director of National Intelligence for Analysis (DDNI/A) and Chairman of the National Intelligence Council began every session with an “Afghan 101” lesson discussing everything from its history, culture, tribal system, etc. for a full understanding of the problem set. One key session explained the linkage of al Qaeda and the Taliban. After the “Afghan 101” lesson, the meetings continued with a review of the previous session questions and feedback loops, facts and factors that impacted the discussion at hand, thorough consideration of the option being discussed during that session, other approaches vice a COIN strategy and fact based analysis.<sup>20</sup> The President pressed the logic of each and every discussion topic, clearly leading the debate of the assessment as he insisted that given a METT-T (Mission, Enemy, Terrain, Troops available and Time) condition, the United States could not afford to write a blank check for the mission in Afghanistan.

At the conclusion of over three months of intense discussion and analysis, the President had pressed his advisors to “say exactly what you think. And I want you to ask the toughest questions you can think of,” he decided to increase the U.S. troop strength in Afghanistan by an additional 30,000 troops.<sup>21</sup> This increase would be labeled a ‘surge’ with troop deployments beginning in early 2010 for a period of 18 months and beginning their redeployments by July of 2011. President Obama implied the decision was in America’s “vital national interest,” we would deploy these forces at “the fastest pace possible” with a mission to “target the insurgency and secure population centers,” and “begin the transfer of our forces out of Afghanistan in July of 2011.”<sup>22</sup>

In some circles, the President was praised by his deliberate and careful reevaluation of the U.S military mission and posture in South Asia, while in others he was criticized for not acting sooner on the request from a U.S. military commander in the field. The outcome led to the escalate-then-exit strategy “included intense, methodical, rigorous, honest and at times frustrating sessions led by the President described by one participant as something between a college professor and a gentle cross-examiner.”<sup>23</sup> This was not an easy decision taken carelessly, but one that brought with it numerous strategic, calculated risks which had the ability to impact the entire course of our campaign if not considered with the appropriate rigor. The dimensions of uncertainty involved in escalating the troop levels during the Afghan ‘surge’ include the following:

1. The situation in Pakistan,
2. Afghanistan Governance,
3. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF),
4. The Coalition,
5. Sustaining Popular Will,
6. Stress and Strain on U.S. military.<sup>24</sup>

The taking of these calculated risks shaped the final course of action decided upon by the President as Commander-in-Chief and implemented by the National Command Authority. Each one takes into consideration a number of factors that help shape our strategy.

### **Dimensions of Uncertainty in the Decision to “Surge” in Afghanistan**

**Uncertainty #1: The situation in Pakistan.** A vital country to the U.S. efforts in Afghanistan after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks of 2001 has been the country of Pakistan. Despite billions of dollars spent on Pakistan through military, governance, and humanitarian support, their relationship with the United States is strained and based on both short and long term demands. However, the U.S. has continually acknowledged Pakistan’s strategic importance, sometimes going out of our way to keep relationships tepid and maintain them as best as possible.

Key to understanding why Pakistan is so important is the fact that Pakistan is the epicenter of U.S. vital interest in Afghanistan. Pakistan is the key to protecting U.S. enduring interest, which include denying safe haven to terror groups, ensuring nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction (WMD) do not fall into the hands of terrorists, and preventing a substantial interstate war that could possibly escalate into nuclear war.<sup>25</sup> Pakistan is believed to be the home of senior al Qaeda leadership, as seen by the raid that killed bin Laden; is a nuclear state in which the administration is concerned about the possibility of ‘rogue’ nuclear weapons falling in the hands of terrorists; and has a fragile and unstable central government that relies heavily on the authority of the Pakistani Army. Though the Pakistani government presents a façade of maintaining

order, in reality the second state, its military establishment possesses the real power and rules the country.

In addition, not only is the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan considered a safe haven to al Qaeda; but, other potentially transnational terror groups as well. The nexus of al Qaeda and Taliban insurgents converge in the FATA and are likely supported by elements of a corrupt Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) who have almost unrestricted cross-border access into Afghanistan. Further, in recent years the growing concern of groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) have demonstrated their increasing global reach, even though they were once thought to be focused only on regional adversaries.<sup>26</sup>

For the U.S., threats posed by these terrorists groups will remain dominant concerns. As stated by President Obama's top advisor on Afghanistan, General Lute, Afghanistan is in fact a supporting role to what is going on in Pakistan; in other words, Afghanistan is a supporting effort with the real priority being the close proximity of U.S. military force to Pakistan. With respect to preventing extremists from obtaining nuclear weapons, it is important to recognize that Pakistan has the fastest growing nuclear arsenal in the world. In recent reports, it is believed that Pakistan is moving nuclear warheads around the country in unmarked, unsecure vans in order to hide them from U.S. surveillance.<sup>27</sup> What a dangerous combination. Although the situation with Pakistan remains strained, stability in the region requires stability in Pakistan.

**Uncertainty #2: Afghanistan Governance.** For all intents and purposes, Afghanistan's government has been plagued by instability since the reign of Amanullah Khan ended in 1973. This relatively stable period of over six decades was followed by



power struggles, bloody coups and unstable transfers of power which included the turbulent Soviet invasion of 1979, a decade of occupation and war, the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and the brutal murder and hanging in 1996 by the Taliban of the once popular President Mohammad Najibullah (87-92).

Depending upon the source, Afghanistan is listed as the fourth poorest country and in the top five most corrupt countries in the world ranking near or at the bottom of virtually every developmental indicator including nutrition, infant mortality, life expectancy, and literacy.<sup>28</sup> Despite these difficulties of war, enhancing Afghan governance has been a key element in the U.S. strategy since the 2001 coalition invasion. However, addressing governance is enormously challenging when consumed by corruption in a state emerging from failure like Afghanistan.

One of the key factors impeding governance is the corruption cycle influenced by the country's opium production, the greatest source of income from farming, especially in the South. The high rate of return on investment from opium poppy cultivation has driven an agricultural shift in Afghanistan from growing traditional crops to growing opium poppy. This cash crop causes warlords, tribal leaders and power brokers to pursue their own agendas, even when they occupy positions in the government, and disregard any attempt at establishing a government of national unity. Last year, the United Nations estimated that Afghan leaders across the country paid roughly \$2.5 billion in bribes in 2009 – roughly one quarter of the country's gross domestic product.<sup>29</sup> Although President Karzai's government has made efforts to curb corruption by establishing an anti-corruption unit, a recent Department of Defense (DOD) survey

noted that 83 percent of Afghans admit their daily lives are affected by government corruption.<sup>30</sup>

The second most impeding factor of Afghan governance is the support of their population. In the same DOD survey, one third of the Afghan districts “did not support their government” and another one third expressed a “neutral opinion,” while the remaining third of districts were at least sympathetic to the Taliban.<sup>31</sup> The Karzai government’s main problem, as shown during the ‘Afghan 101 sessions’ stems from a lack of infrastructure and capacity to be an effective client state in providing goods and services to the people of its country.

Outside of local and in some provinces the district level, the typical Afghan doesn’t sense that the government is providing any services and generally has a feeling of widespread mistrust towards the government. Most commander’s on the ground realize that the central government’s span of control is about a 100 kilometer radius around Kabul, with only minor influence in major cities like Kandahar, Herat, and Jalalabad. Therefore, in order to move Afghanistan forward in the area of governance and create a stable government for the transfer of control, U.S. and international coalition policy must achieve the following: provide clarity of purpose, increase sustainability and reduce dependence, put Afghans in the lead, push for institutionalized power, and civilianize development assistance.<sup>32</sup>

**Uncertainty #3: Afghanistan National Security Force (ANSF).** Developing the ANSF, which includes both the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP), is one of the coalition’s top priorities in Afghanistan in order to allow the capacity and capability of the Afghan government to meet the needs and expectations of the

Afghan people. However, many challenges confront the completion of this mission which began with the 2001 Bonn Agreement of 50,000 ANSF and has continued to grow during each assessment to the current 305,000 person security force.<sup>33</sup>

As previously mentioned, Afghanistan is the fourth poorest country in the world, has a literacy rate of less than 25%, and a life expectancy of males, making up the majority of the ANSF, of 44 years. Taking these facts into consideration, coupled with the lack of infrastructure across the country, quality leader challenges, and capital in which to invest and sustain a force of over 300,000 creates a daunting task and huge challenge to the coalition mission of handing off security as we exit the country. Not only are we trying to build a professional security force from the ground up, but we're also trying to build the ministerial capacity to support these forces all while fighting a COIN campaign. Additional challenges for the ANSF include the resourcing (i.e. training, equipping, manning, housing, feeding, paying and educating) of this force to create a professionalized, capable Army and police and the continued problem of excessive corruption and influence of Afghan power brokers which all impact the quality of the force.

To help mitigate this risk of a beleaguered ANSF and improve the overall mission of developing a professionalized ANSF capable of securing the country, President Obama approved the deployment of an additional 4,000 Soldiers to support the training mission. The U.S. also supported the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) formation of NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTMA) and Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) under a U.S. three-star general. In November 2009, this organization assumed the responsibility of a 37 country coalition of

1,800 trainers in a combined-joint effort of professionalizing the Afghan force and improving the quality of training for both the ANA and ANP. Ultimately for our mission to be successful, Afghans must be able to secure and stabilize their country.

**Uncertainty #4: The Coalition.** A key risk concerning the legitimacy of the mission in Afghanistan was support from the international community in building and sustaining a coalition of nations. In 2009 at the time of the ‘surge’ discussions by the U.S. government, we were already eight years into the war effort with costs rising domestically, politically, financial, and in casualties for all countries involved.

After 9/11, during the initial stages of Operation Enduring Freedom, the UN Security Council established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in December 2001 which included troops from 43 countries, with NATO members providing the core of the force. However, just prior to the ‘surge,’ only 33 countries retained forces in Afghanistan with only 10 other than the U.S. providing more than 1,000 troops.<sup>34</sup> Most of the countries with “boots on the ground” were western democratic countries; the top five including the U.S. (90,000+), Great Britain (9,500), Germany (4,800), France (3,900) and Italy (3,800).<sup>35</sup> In addition to the dwindling coalition, as noted above, the mission was becoming more U.S. centric by more than ten times the number of other troops in country.

Further, with the drawdown in Iraq on the horizon, Afghanistan was about to become the longest war in U.S. history at a time when the impact of the Global War on Terror (Afghanistan and Iraq) had contributed to the overall financial strain on the U.S. economy. European countries supporting Afghan efforts were also faced with historical financial crisis of their own with the downturn of the Euro and mounting concerns for

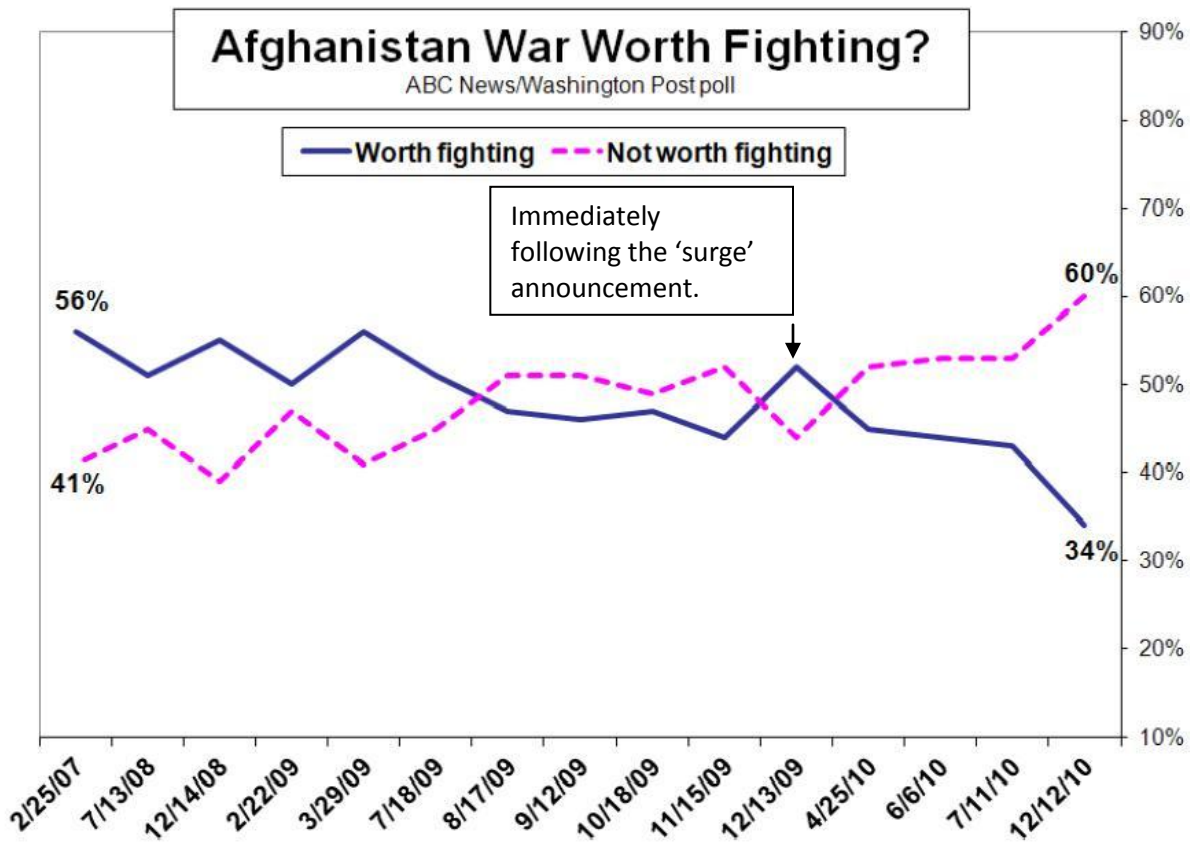
both Italy and Greece. The President knew that if the 'surge' was going to be supported across America, in Congress, and by our Allies, it would not be with an open-ended "blank check."<sup>36</sup> The cost of each additional Soldier on the ground in Afghanistan for a year was estimated at one million dollars and we were about to 'surge' by 30,000. The cost of the war was already averaging the U.S. one billion per day.

To help mitigate this risk, the President's strategy clearly stated that we would begin withdrawing the additional troops within 18 months, setting a clear timetable. The decision of July 2011 also coincided with the beginning of the election cycle; however insiders state that the date was not politically driven. The timeline also put the government of Afghanistan and to some extent Pakistan on notice that the U.S. would begin its drawdown in the very near future transferring security responsibility to the Afghans, while at the same time ensuring our Allies that their commitment would also not last forever.

**Uncertainty #5: Sustaining U.S. Popular Will.** During the two reviews conducted by the White House on Afghanistan during the President's first year in office, both U.S. popular will for the war in Afghanistan and congressional support, both democratic and republican, weighed on the minds of those in the decision cycle. After nearly nine years at war, U.S. leadership in Afghanistan had been a revolving door having seen seven U.S. Ambassadors and ten U.S. military commanders rotate through the top positions resulting in a lack of continuity and a "steady hand" at the helm of the mission.

Shouldering part of the blame by reverting resources and troops to Iraq, the U.S. continued to see mounting casualties and a huge financial burden during the Iraq war years (2003-2009) in Afghanistan. As shown by the chart below, popular support for the

mission continued to decline after President Obama's initial review in March of 2009 through the second review which concluded with the announcement of the 'surge' in December of the same year.



ABC News/Washington Post Poll.<sup>37</sup>

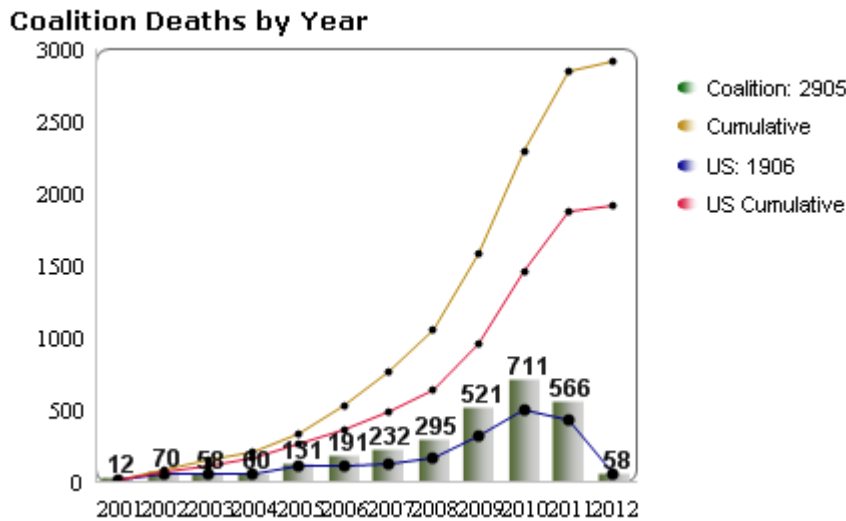
The graph above shows a continual collapse from the near 56% approval rating of the Afghanistan campaign in February 2007. Prior to the election the trend line of disapproval continues to grow from the inauguration date until the survey six months after 'surge' forces were on the ground. Also shown is the "slight uptick" above 50% in public approval after the President's 'surge' announcement.

Congressional support during this same period of 2009 was nearly split between Democrats and Republicans, however, Republicans in an unusual twist provided the

President with political cover after an October 6<sup>th</sup> bipartisan meeting at the White House where he indicated he might increase the troop levels in Afghanistan. Republican leaders were fully in support of General McChrystal's request for an additional 40,000 troops, while Democratic leaders were split with many skeptical of the plan. The Democrats wanted answers as to "how much money we were willing to spend on the effort and how long we were committed to keeping troops in Afghanistan."<sup>38</sup> Both questions were answered during his 'surge' announcement.

Additionally, when military planners begin to discuss operations which would involve putting "boots on the ground," obviously the "C" word came into play – casualties. The number and rate of casualties is calculated during the planning phase of the MDMP process according to the type of operation being planned, i.e. offensive, defensive, and humanitarian, etc. This projection allows military planners to inform the chain of command an estimate of the number of potential deaths that could occur during the operation. As noted by John Mueller's (1973) work *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, the best-known and most cited study of the effect of war deaths on popular support, there is a strong connection between public opinion and casualties and further, the number of casualties in a conflict has an impact on whether or not the public ultimately supports the U.S. stated foreign policy goals.<sup>39</sup> When the U.S. involves themselves in military action, the "blood and treasure" of the country is at stake in every death of each U.S. soldier. More recent work in 2006 by Professors Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler note that the public support for military operations is more tolerant of casualties under certain circumstances, especially considering the benefits of the conflict and probability that success will be achieved.<sup>40</sup> As shown by the next chart, the number of

U.S. casualties in Afghanistan continued to rise from 2003 until 2010 by over 12 times the number of deaths.<sup>41</sup>



Over the course of the war in Afghanistan, public support has continued to drop sharply from an all-time high of 94% in 2001 as the war is now the longest in U.S. history. The President knew going into the announcement of the ‘surge’ that he would only be given limited time to make a difference in Afghanistan.

**Uncertainty #6: Stress & Strain on U.S. military.** The U.S. military has been at war for over ten years and is currently in the longest war of our history, Afghanistan. While the military has been resourced quite well over the course of the campaigns in the conduct of operations, the physical and mental toll of the numerous deployments on Soldier’s and their Family members caused by Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom may not be totally realized for some time. As the 36<sup>th</sup> Army Chief of Staff, General George W. Casey, Jr. stated in his confirmation, the military in this time of “persistent conflict” is becoming “stretched and strained.” Not long after that confirmation and statement in February of 2007, the terms “stress and strain on the



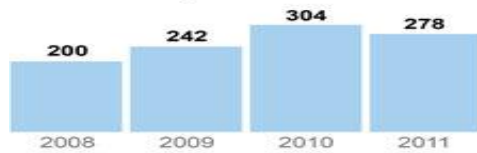
force” became major concerns for the service chiefs dealing with the impact of sustained combat deployments on their troops.

At the height of deployment in 2005, “boots on the ground” numbers climbed above 200,000 for both Iraq and Afghanistan, not including those deployed in the surrounding countries or international waters providing support to combat operations. Further, it is estimated that over 1.1 million military personnel (both active and reserve) have deployed to war since 9/11 with some deploying as many as a fifteen times during a ten year period, making it not uncommon for military personnel to be deployed five out of the last ten years. As noted by Vice Chief of Staff, General Peter Chiarelli, troops fighting in Afghanistan are “experiencing some of the greatest psychological stress and lowest morale in five years of fighting,” continuing to clarify that we have never “fought for this long with an all-volunteer force that’s 1% of the population – we are in uncharted territory.”<sup>42</sup> With deployments so frequent for such an extended period of time, the constant “stress and strain” on individuals and Families further increased the likelihood of those dealing with marital issues, suicide, Traumatic Brain Injury, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Since the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, the divorce rate in the military has increased from 2.6% in 2001 to 3.6% in 2009 and remained constant in 2010. Further, the divorce rate for women in the military is nearly three times as high at 7.8%.<sup>43</sup> These rates have consistently remained above the national average of the civilian rates by almost one whole percentage point.

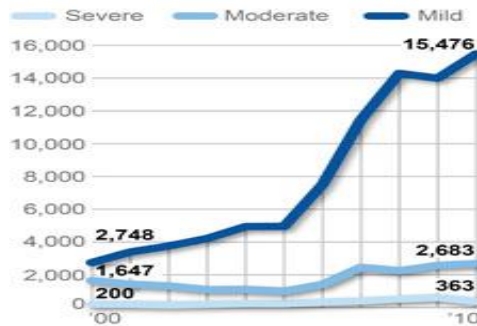
#### Suicides by year

The number of suicides involving active duty and non-mobilized soldiers fell for the first time in four years:



#### Brain injury trend

The number of Army soldiers with identified traumatic brain injury:



Note: Active duty includes Army Reserve and National Guard soldiers.

Source: U.S. Army

By Frank Pempa, USA TODAY

As seen by the charts on the left, the Army suicide rate and traumatic brain injury rates have also continued to increase over the course of the wars as Soldiers deployed dealt with their experiences in combat and redeployed from war to face the uncommon enemy of boredom and less-risky activities. Suicide rates began increasing in 2004 and peaked in 2010, while mild brain injury rates have continued to climb since 2000. Further, the

Army continues to deal with an increasing population of those affected by PTSD, estimated at 20% of the force. Researchers also believe that PTSD illnesses have led to the increase in sexual assault and domestic violence incidents, up by 32% since 2001 and domestic abuse and child-abuse also up by 50% and 62% respectively over the same period.<sup>44</sup> The Army in particular is trying to deal with these issues pouring over \$9 billion into its Army Family Covenant program in at the same time our 'surge' forces were deploying to Afghanistan.

Throughout the Afghanistan decision, President Obama can be seen as a "rational actor," operating within the "organizational behavior" model of decision making. The process emphasized a thorough review in which trade-offs and judgments were made regarding the numerous dimensions of uncertainty in order to derive the best possible course of action in keeping with U.S. foreign policy and our interest in the region.

## Section IV - Operation Neptune Spear – A Risky Decision

*“If we have Osama bin Laden in our sights and the Pakistani government is unable or unwilling to take them out, then I think that we have to act and we will take them out. We will kill bin Laden; we will crush Al Qaeda. That has to be our biggest national security priority.” – Candidate Barack Obama, October 7, 2008.*

President Obama addressed the nation at 11:35pm on May 1, 2011, informing the American people and the world that the founder of al-Qaeda and America’s most wanted terrorist had been killed during a raid that took less than 40 minutes. Nearly ten years after the attack against the United States on September 11, 2001, a team of Special Operation Forces (SOF) launched from Jalalabad, Afghanistan on a helicopter assault to kill/capture al-Qaeda’s leader, Osama bin Laden, in his lair in Abbottabad, Pakistan. This decision came after numerous intelligence and operational planning updates, National Security meetings with only his closest advisors, and personal deliberation. The Commander-in-Chief had just made one of the toughest decisions of any presidency – to send members of the military, in this case a Navy Seal Team, into harm’s way on a mission with extreme risks. In his own words, the Commander-in-Chief stated in a CBS interview that *“At the end of the day, this was still a 55/45 situation...Had he not been there, there would have been some significant consequences.”*<sup>45</sup>

Although the raid required high-risk decisions filled with uncertainty by the President as the primary decision-maker and Commander-in-Chief of the United States, he was making a rather careful and calculated risk/reward decision. As celebrated by all Americans after learning the news of the successful operation, the gains eclipsed the potential losses. We had finally, after nearly ten years brought to justice the mastermind

of 9/11 and leader of the infamous al Qaeda terror organization, America's #1 Most Wanted. However, the President had just made one of the most daring decisions in a time constrained "crisis" decision making process of any President. The dimensions of uncertainty included the risk of the lives of American Special Operation Forces, political backlash from Pakistan, and potentially the support of the American people.

**Uncertainty #1: Boots on the Ground.** The decision to execute with ground forces was made simultaneous to the decision to proceed with the mission. According to statements by the Director of the CIA, Leon Panetta, the President was briefed on three options: a ground raid, a B-2 Bomber mission, or a "direct shot" cruise missile.<sup>46</sup> Each option had clear pros and cons with differing opinions articulated by his close circle of advisors on which course of action to pursue.

The ground team afforded three major advantages over the other options considered – that of minimizing collateral damage, the ability to "say that we definitely got the guy" and enabling the team to collect intelligence in the compound.<sup>47</sup> While the options to conduct a B-2 or cruise missile strike could have produced the same result, that of killing bin Laden, the disadvantage of an indirect "use of force" could have had far more consequences.

The ground team offered a "surgical strike" capability that would, by nature of the operation, limit collateral damage in the residential area. An air or missile strike could offer no such guarantee. If the bombs from an airstrike or cruise launch were not directly on target, significant Pakistani civilian and military casualties would have resulted.

*“According to participants in the closely held Abbottabad debate, Admiral William McRaven (Commander of Joint Special Operations Command, JSOC) spoke thoughtfully about the risks....One of the things we made clear to the President and the national leadership was, “This is what we do, we do raids. We fly in by helicopters, we assault compounds, we grab the bad guy or whatever is required, and we get out. So admittedly that particular operation was a lot sportier, a lot further, a lot more political ramifications, a lot riskier for a lot of reasons, but basically similar to things that we do every night.”<sup>48</sup>*

Further, positive identification of bin Laden or his death could not have been confirmed for days if not months pending cooperation from the Pakistani government if an air or missile strike were conducted. The use of a ground team enabled the President to say within hours of the operation that not only was bin Laden in the compound, but was killed during the operation.

Finally, the ground option allowed USSOF the ability to gather critical intelligence on al-Qaeda that would not have been possible with an “indirect” strike. Although the raid took just under 40 minutes – “roughly ten to get bin Laden, Special Operators spent much of the rest of the time gathering evidence: computer files, written notes and thumb drives that pointed to new al-Qaeda plots and previously secret operatives around the globe.”<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, the benefits of the ground team option outweighed the potential risks. In post-raid interviews, the President repeatedly remarked that the skill of America’s SOF gave him the confidence that a ground team was the right decision.<sup>50</sup>

**Uncertainty #2: A Covert Operation – Pakistani Reaction.** Several months prior to the operation, CIA Director Leon Panetta gained “Presidential Finding” approval, making the raid a Title 50, covert operation.<sup>51</sup> While the covertness of the operation was quickly discarded after the success of the mission by several public statements following the President’s announcement, the “finding” treated the decision-making process and the raid activities as part of a covert operation. The President stated secrecy was vital to the

mission; “I didn’t tell my own family...I didn’t even reveal it to some of my closest aides, so I sure as heck wasn’t going to reveal it to someone I didn’t know (referring to the Pakistani government).”<sup>52</sup>

The operation was launched from Afghanistan, crossing into the sovereign territory of Pakistan, to the quiet city of Abbottabad, home to the Pakistani military academy. While the U.S.-Pakistani relationship is termed “complicated and deteriorating” at best, the need for operational security was so important that the mission was conducted without knowledge or authority from government or military officials in Pakistan. This decision not only added risks to our service members; but caused additional geopolitical damage as “tensions with the Pakistanis were already elevated following increased anger over U.S. drone strikes and a CIA contractor killing two Pakistani citizens.”<sup>53</sup>

Pakistani newspaper headlines displayed a combination of embarrassment, anger, justification, and denial. The overarching theme was outrage and condemnation of the violation of Pakistani sovereignty.<sup>54</sup> However, from a strategic standpoint, the already fragile and damaged relationship with Islamabad was in no worse shape after the operation than prior to the operation. The Pakistani government continued their sentiments to value internal politics and distance themselves, while the U.S. government continued to encourage cooperation and refrained from condemning Pakistan. In fact, the President offered an olive branch during his raid announcement stating that cooperation with Pakistan helped lead us to bin Laden. Although cooperation continues to deteriorate between the two countries as Pakistan bases their relationship on short-term mutual interests, the President’s decision of a covert

operation was clearly correct having reasonable belief that informing Pakistan would have jeopardized the mission due to known ties between Pakistani intelligence and the Taliban.

**Uncertainty #3: Public Reaction.** Immediately following the President's announcement of the bin Laden operation, citizens flooded the streets of major cities chanting USA and waving American flags. However, during the course of the decision leading up to the operation, "President Carter's authorization of a similar daring helicopter raid and the ensuing debacle that helped bury his re-election hopes" weighed on the mind of Obama.<sup>55</sup> So many things could go wrong not only during the operation itself; but politically and diplomatically that could ultimately doom next year's re-election campaign.

Contrary to the failed Desert One Iranian Hostage Rescue, the Iran analogy should not have impacted the President's decision due to the numerous differences in the operations. They included the following: there were no U.S. hostages captive; Special Operation Forces teams had been conducting night-time raids for the better part of ten years in both Iraq and Afghanistan; the public was less casualty phobic; no sympathy for bin Laden; no other means to accomplish the objectives and further, the next election was almost two years away.<sup>56</sup>

To wait for better intelligence was to risk a leak of the covert planning which had taken place over the past six months. With an air or missile strike, the U.S. might never know if success was achieved. What would the American people think if 24 or more U.S. service members were killed during the raid? Would the public have supported taking the risk with "55/45" odds? Although this was a 'risky decision,' it was not a

gamble as some may assert. Special Operators had been conducting raids since 9/11 and their proficiency in their tactics, techniques and procedures was at a level never seen before. If an air strike or cruise missile had failed, bin Laden would have been on the run again and likely in hiding deeper than ever, only to search another ten years for credible intelligence just for a chance to “take a shot.”

In all likelihood, the probability of success was much higher than actually given credit and the downside of failure overemphasized. The President must have been confident that if he had to address the American people if the operation failed, they would have concluded the calculated risk were prudent and supported the decision.

### **Section V – Leader’s and Decision Making**

As seen by the two differing decision making processes of the studied events, there is a lack of what the military calls “unity of command” in decision making regarding foreign policy and the use of military force. In these particular instances, the President actually takes on the role of lead coordinator or director. One could argue that the National Security Council (NSC) is responsible for all such actions and is the mechanism by which our government makes decisions; but, the NSC does not have permanent members who are representative of the various departments and agencies responsible for carrying out presidential decisions. The sole purpose of the NSC is to develop and implement a whole of government strategy; however, during these critical decisions, there was no continuity that could manage the second and third order effects of the policy decisions nor ensure every tool across the government was being optimized on the situation at hand. A recommendation would be to create a deputy



secretary or director of a permanent, full-time NSC staff solely focused on foreign policy and decisions involving the use of force.

As Steve Tobak stated in his article “How to Make High-Risk Decisions,” one of the takeaways is that “it always comes down to a gut-level decision, but savvy leaders never make critical decisions on gut instinct alone; they’re always well-informed.”<sup>57</sup> Nothing could be truer in how President Obama made decisions in the two cases studied. The President’s decision making style is based on personal involvement, interpersonal relationships, trust, and human dynamics. In each case, he set the tone of the discussions and led the process by which the decisions were made. He was inclusive and welcomed dialogue and debate on the critical issues at hand, listening intently to differing opinions. In the case of the Afghan ‘surge,’ the decision included a very thorough and deliberate process debating a variety of options to ensure U.S. strategy was optimized to achieve the stated goals of deterring, defeating, and dismantling al Qaida and the Taliban providing the Afghan government with the necessary time and space to stand on their own leading their country.

Similarly, the Commander-in-Chief led crisis management, time-sensitive decision making process with his closest advisors in one of the most daring, high-risk operations in foreign policy history – the killing of UBL. As noted by Admiral McRaven, “The planning and decision-making for the bin Laden raid, was really everything the American public would expect from their national leadership.”<sup>58</sup>

In approaching the decisions of these two critical foreign policy objectives, the President clearly led a process reviewing even the minutest detail before deciding a course of action and employing military force. The American public can be confident

that a process is in place to make critical military decisions rationally and not arbitrarily under the Obama administration as the world's remaining superpower.

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