



The US Continues to “Trump” the UK on Special Forces Transparency

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There were a number of serious problems with the Navy SEAL raid on the 29th of January in Yemen, but at least we know it happened.

Chief Petty Officer William “Ryan” Owen died during a raid by his squadron, Navy SEAL Team 6, in Yemen on the 28th January. Chief Owens’s death marks the first of a US serviceman in President Trump’s three-week old administration, but its announcement marks the first signs that the Trump administration is going to maintain transparency over US special force’s missions.

According to senior US officials, the mission was planned under President Obama, but President Trump – aided by his senior advisers – authorised it four nights earlier. Defence Secretary James Mattis reportedly monitored the raid as it unfolded.

It appears that there were a number of problems with the mission, such as a “hard landing” by a US aircraft injuring a number of servicemen and resulting in the aircraft being destroyed and a surprising attack by AQAP forces. At first, US officials denied there had been civilian casualties but later said it was assessing reports that women and children had been killed, following witnesses claiming civilian deaths and large scale damage to the town. One of the reported deaths

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was the 8-year-old daughter of Anwar al-Awlaki, a US-born Yemeni preacher targeted by a US strike in 2011.

However, Trump has, like Obama before him, released a number of details about the operation. Trump and his senior advisers have defended the mission as a “success”. They claim it achieved its aim: the recovery of “laptop computers, cell phones and other information that could help fill gaps in its understanding of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula”. Trump and his Press Secretary Sean Spicer have answered a number of questions about the incident from the news media.

A number of lawmakers were also provided with a classified briefing on the mission. This briefing drew mixed reviews, with some simply stating “they got what they wanted” and others, such as John McCain the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, concluded the raid was a failure.

While numerous UK papers have covered the story and criticised the actions of Trump, not one has asked the glaring question: Would we even know if the UK did the same, never mind receive this level of detail?

While the US has joined a number of other UK allies in releasing information on the deployment and missions of Special Forces, the UK Government adamantly maintains a “no comment” policy over all Special Forces operations. For example, in June 2016, it was reported that British Special Forces were on the front line in the fight against ISIS in Syria; however, the MOD responded that “It is our longstanding policy that we don’t comment on Special Forces operations.”

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Like the US, the UK is also adopting a “light footprint” approach; investing heavily in Special Forces and avoiding conventional deployments by relying on special forces to operate as the only “boots on the ground”. In 2015, the UK committed to double special forces funding to £2 billion and evidence suggests they are playing sustained roles alongside the US in its war against terrorist groups – including in Libya, Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

However, unlike the US and other UK allies, the changing role of UK Special Forces has not been accompanied by a modernisation of British policy towards their blanket opacity; potentially endangering UK personnel, UK democracy and the effectiveness of UK operations abroad.

In the US, there is evidence that long term deployments are having a negative impact on special forces. The father of a US Green Beret who was killed last year said that many of his colleagues were “showing the wear of constant deployment. Many were divorced; others talked about getting out of the Army” – he said “I worry all this reliance on them is really using them up.” The secrecy over UK Special Forces means it’s hard to know whether it is experiencing the same strain.

There has also been a growing belief within among the UK public and parliament that the UK must move away from an “outdated” model of military engagement, whereby the decision to go to war lies solely with the Prime Minister and Cabinet. This is evident in the Parliamentary debate over whether to go to war in Syria in 2014 – as well as in Prime Minister David Cameron’s respect of Parliament’s decision. However, if the bulk of UK operations abroad are covered by a “no comment policy” then there can be no oversight over these operations and the outdated model remains and the UK’s democratic oversight is at risk.

There are a number of serious concerns with what the Navy SEAL raid on the 29th January mean for the future of US involvement but the only reason we can discuss it is because Trump has, like his predecessor, committed to greater transparency than the UK.

Image credit: [United States Navy SEALs](#)

About the Author

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