

Op-Ed Forget big ships and fighter jets, we need mules and ropes for mountain warfare



An Afghan soldier on the hunt for Osama bin Laden in the White Mountains of Tora Bora in Afghanistan on Dec. 10, 2001. Bin Laden escaped. (David Guttenfelder/Associated Press)

By **Judith Matloff**

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President Trump has called our military “a disaster,” and he wants to remake it with a \$54-billion increase in defense spending. He imagines the cash infusion will go toward big ships, aircraft carriers and fighter jets.

Most experts believe that the world’s largest expeditionary force is actually in good shape. But if a partial overhaul is inevitable, the new administration would be wise to limit flashy, big-ticket items and consider stocking up on mules and ropes for specially trained mountain troops.

Remember how Osama bin Laden, then America’s Public Enemy No. 1, hid out in the mountains of Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks? Remember how we failed to capture him in the Battle of Tora Bora?

Many of our current adversaries still lurk in mountainous regions — that’s where rogues and militants often go. All the groups that our government has attempted to suppress with drones and special forces and military

advisers — Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Islamic State, Boko Haram and the “bad hombres” of Mexico among them — take to the hills when other sanctuaries fail. We can expect drug cartels and jihadists to continue to dig into mountain redoubts.

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Looking beyond counter-insurgency efforts, tough talk about North Korea raises the specter of fighting in that bumpy peninsula. And then there's the Norwegian High North, where 330 American troops recently were deployed to bolster NATO's Arctic front against an increasingly aggressive Russia.

At the moment, the U.S. military churns out one-size-fits-all generalists who can fight in cities or deserts. There's some logic to that approach, of course, and yet it ignores the fact that high-altitude combat is fundamentally different. At over 14,000 feet, most of us — soldier or civilian — can't function. The majority of American soldiers have never climbed that high, and gradual acclimatization is needed to adapt to even 10,000 feet. It's not just the human body, besides, that fails in the mountains. Tanks and helicopters often can't operate in rugged and extreme heights. Manned airplanes can't land.

Because advanced technology may disappoint or is simply not useful at harsh elevations, troops need to know how to rappel and shoot guns on skis, how to pack an animal or use a hauling line to evacuate casualties.

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Consider Operation Anaconda, the United States' first major battle in Afghanistan and its highest ever. In the Shahikot Valley near the border with Pakistan in 2002, military brass didn't take into account the effect of a rapid rise from 5,000 to 10,000 feet, and their soldiers collapsed from altitude sickness. Throughout the troop-intensive portion of that ongoing war, our commanders didn't always know what mountain gear was available in warehouses, or soldiers didn't know how to use it properly or their superiors didn't let them access it.

Since that time, the military has tried to improve the situation. To enhance mobility, soldiers pack water-purifying tablets instead of heavy water canisters. The Army replaced boot models that fell apart quickly on rock and issued layerable clothing, the kind available in civilian camping stores that can wick moisture and adapt to rapidly shifting climates. But we remain the only major power that lacks a dedicated mountain force.

Many of our NATO allies have expert mountain units that train for months, as do India, Israel, Switzerland, Pakistan, Colombia, Russia and China. The latter two have been expanding their mountain preparedness in recent years. By contrast, only a few hundred infantrymen each year attend the U.S. Army's mountain warfare training center in Jericho, Ver., for just two weeks. Our Army spends approximately \$800,000 annually on the

school, which is not even a rounding error in a defense budget that tops \$600 billion. The Marines Corps, likewise, lacks dedicated mountain career units ready for deployment at any moment.

Mountain warfare preparation is not routinely part of the training a U.S. battalion or brigade undergoes before deployment, says Lester Grau, a retired lieutenant colonel who is one of our country's leading scholars on such combat. In his many articles and books, Grau asserts that most American soldiers and Marines lack the proper equipment or skills to move around mountain terrain.

Throughout history, mountain dwellers have resisted better-armed conventional forces not only because they hold the literal high ground but because they knew how to navigate the topography and brutal weather conditions.

Mountains have daunted generals since Hannibal lost half his men crossing the Alps in 218 B.C. For all his grand theories, Mao Tse-tung could not dominate the 16,000-foot ranges during his long march in 1934-35, and he was carried part of the way while his men died of diarrhea and exhaustion. The 1915 Battle of Sarikamish, in which Turkey launched a winter invasion of Russia in the mountains, provides another cautionary tale about conventional forces unschooled in mountain warfare.

In the near future, our troops could well be deployed to high terrain in the Middle East, Central Asia and beyond. They need to know how to fight in these environments — so that, quite simply, they don't get killed. We sent troops into Iraq under-equipped. "You go to war with the army you have, not the army you might want," Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld remarked in 2004. It doesn't have to be that way.

Judith Matloff teaches conflict reporting at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. Her latest book is "No Friends but the Mountains — Dispatches from the World's Violent Highlands."

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