

The Special Ops Mission in Niger Was Routine and Common. Stop Politicizing It.

The loss of four special operations soldiers in Niger is a tragedy. We grieve as a nation, rightly, whenever we lose any of the brave young men and women who serve in uniform.

That said, politicians and news media are turning the event into a farce.

Having served as an Army Green Beret for 28 years, I cannot let the mischaracterizations—many by leaders who clearly know better—continue without a comment.

The mission in Niger, which began in 2013, was a classic special operations operation. The type of operation is called foreign internal defense.

That's an old school term for the most fundamental task we give our Green Berets. A small team of them goes into a foreign country to work with that nation's military to better prepare it to deal with its own problems.

This is done during the period the military calls "phase zero," which is prior to when a bigger conflict emerges. It is done in coordination with the host nation civilian government, and the entire country team at the U.S. Embassy, which is led by the U.S. ambassador and supported by the intelligence community station chief.

This is not a clandestine Hollywood commando mission, or a suicide raid. It is overt and open. Its purpose is to build rapport with the host nation military, to improve its capabilities, to gather open source intelligence, and to get to know both the lay of the land and the local players.

The U.S. has conducted these kinds of missions around the world since the 1950s. At times we have had as few as a dozen of these operations, and at others several hundred in as many as 80-plus countries simultaneously.

These missions are routine and have short-circuited conflicts on nearly every continent in the world at one time or another.

They are also inherently dangerous. The teams are small, ranging from a pair of operators up to a few dozen. There are seldom more than 100 U.S. troops.

Some might ask, why do we put such small teams at risk?

The answer is simply that the return is worth it. Often, the use of a small, mature, and low-profile group of quiet professionals can have greater success than a large, high-profile deployment on a massive scale.

Particularly today as terror groups like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda move to numerous small or underdeveloped countries, these phase zero special operations missions allow the U.S. to mitigate the threat before it grows—and they do so without making the U.S. the “world’s policeman.”

Instead of fighting the terrorists everywhere ourselves, these missions help our friends to better police their own backyards.

These missions have been extremely common since 9/11, so it is ludicrous that legislators now claim ignorance of both their existence and purpose.

Were these legislators asleep during the last 10 years that they were briefed by the commander of U.S. Special Operations Command and the combatant commanders of U.S. Africa, Central, Pacific, or Southern Commands?

Nothing about these missions is new, little is “hidden,” and none of it should surprise anyone who has spent more than a

week on Capitol Hill.

To repeat, these missions are dangerous. The teams that execute them lack the huge support mechanisms Americans have come to associate with military operations. Our troops know this, and regularly volunteer for the opportunity to participate in the missions simply because they know they work.

They also know these are the kinds of missions they have trained for, and which they execute with greater skill than anyone in the world.

They know that if trouble occurs, support is further away than in conventional operations. Intelligence is superb, often better than in regular military activities, but the logistical and response functions are thin and distant.

That's why we only send professionals on such missions. These are not "kids" who just joined the military six months ago. They are hardened professionals who, yes, "know what the risks are," and go without hesitation.

Yes, we need to know what happened in Niger. Any time military members die in action, a full investigation occurs. The Department of Defense does not need Congress or the media to "provoke" that.

The military is always working to make our troops as safe as accomplishing the mission will allow. A full post-mortem of the deadly ambush in Niger needs to take place so that we can do better on the next mission.

That would have happened if no one in Washington had said a word.

The media and politicians should stop the showmanship and game-playing. Let Defense Secretary James Mattis do his job, and let the brave men and women of the U.S. military do

theirs.

Grandstanding senators and talking heads don't help make America safe, but missions just like the one in Niger do.

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