

ROBERT B. ADOLPH JR.

Rangers bled in Somalia while the politicians bailed out



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Last year I read Mark Bowden's riveting book, "Black Hawk Down." It is an unusually intense and gut-wrenching tale of 15 hours of no-holds-barred infantry combat in the back streets of a stinking rat hole named Mogadishu, Somalia. This is a story that needed to be told.

If one reads between the lines, this book is also a cautionary tale of a president who carelessly and thoughtlessly placed America's best soldiers in harm's way for reasons the people of the United States would not ultimately support. The cost was dear.

Eighteen men of Task Force Ranger died on Oct. 3 and Oct. 4, 1992, performing a mission: conduct a "snatch and grab" of two of clan leader Mohamed Farah Aidid's lieutenants.

The mission was accomplished — a fact seemingly forgotten in the headlong rush to assign blame for American deaths in the aftermath of the operation.

The combat casualty tally was absurdly one-sided. Task Force Ranger killed at least 500 of the enemy and wounded twice that many. If the fight in Mogadishu were likened to Custer's battle at Little Big Horn, the 7th Cavalry won resoundingly.

Why, then, was the firefight thought to be a defeat? Why are many of the men who fought there still angry?

The fault clearly lies with our national leaders who made the political decision to enter the Somali quagmire. Although it was the Bush administration that launched the military into Somalia to ease the suffering caused by famine, it was the Clinton White House that approved the ill-conceived mission of capturing Aidid and his subordinates.

Soldiers don't have the luxury of choosing their enemies. When Clinton declared war on Aidid, he declared war against Aidid's powerful clan as well. White House ignorance of Somalia was at that time profound.

There was no government in Somalia in 1992. It was an utterly failed state. There were only well-armed and violent clans competing for dominance and profit.

The Pentagon didn't ask for the job and advised against it. But, once the decision was made, the nation's military saluted smartly and went about assigning forces to execute that mission. The task of command fell on the shoulders of Maj. Gen. Bill Garrison.

The core of Task Force Ranger consisted of the best the military had to offer — elements of the 75th Ranger Regiment, 160th

Special Operations Aviation Regiment, Air Force and Naval Special Operations personnel and a squadron of the Fort Bragg, N.C.-based Delta Force, America's secretive and elite counter-terrorist organization.

These are tough, dedicated professionals for whom risk is simply part of the job. Although many within Task Force Ranger questioned the mission, none balked at executing the orders of the new commander in chief.

The cost was the lives of 18 of their comrades. Dozens of other soldiers were wounded, many seriously — all in the pursuit of an objective that apparently nobody inside the Capital Beltway had thoroughly thought through.

In the aftermath of the battle, "Black Hawk Down" writer Bowden reports President Clinton convened a meeting with his closest advisers, ultimately deciding that "America was pulling out." Garrison and others wanted to continue the mission. Aidid and his followers had been dealt a serious blow.

Moreover, American blood had now been spilled. The sacrifices of the men who had fallen should not be in vain. But his pleas fell on deaf ears.

In Washington, it suddenly became politically unpalatable to remain in Somalia and continue the mission — meaning that the men of Task Force Ranger died needlessly. Five hundred Somalis also paid the ultimate price for presidential fecklessness.

Eventually, the American military was ordered out of Somalia battered but never beaten. State Department attempts at nation building were ultimately abandoned.

Later, when Garrison testified before Congress concerning the conduct of the operation, he took full personal responsibility for all operational decisions made. His honorable *mea culpa* shielded all those above him from blame.

The men of Task Force Ranger fought bravely and well. Despite their losses, they won against what Bowden calls "overwhelming odds." Many were prepared to go at it again.

The victory in Mogadishu was perhaps one of the most remarkable in the annals of American military history. □

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