The Growing Relevance of Special Operations Forces in U.S. Military Strategy

MATTHEW JOHNSON
Missouri State University
Springfield, Missouri, USA

Special Operations Forces (SOF) have transitioned from a marginalized force structure to a prominent part of U.S. military strategy. The gradual increase in status for SOF has been a long road. Historically, conventional military leaders have been skeptical of SOF and reluctant to use such forces. Political leaders, in contrast, have traditionally had an almost intuitive understanding of the capabilities and potential benefit of SOF. For the first time, military and political leaders are both convinced of the value of SOF. This shift has occurred for several factors: a dramatic change in the security environment marked by irregular threats, the declaration of the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), and the conduct of SOF in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In recent years, Special Operations Forces (SOF) have transitioned from a marginalized force structure to a prominent and vital part of U.S. military strategy. At present, SOF are considered the force of choice to confront a broad spectrum of irregular threats that dominate the current security environment. Many civilian and military leaders seem convinced that SOF is the best military solution to unconventional and asymmetric threats. The current level of support for SOF and irregular warfare among both civilian and military leaders is unprecedented in the history of the special operations community.

The stunning contribution of SOF in Afghanistan resulted in the collapse of the Taliban regime in only forty-nine days and greatly aided coalition forces in ousting Saddam Hussein from power. In response to these achievements, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced on 7 January, 2003 that Special Operations Command (SOCOM) would now be able to operate as a supported command, allowing it to plan and execute independent missions, as well as tasking it as the lead military organization to prosecute the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). SOCOM's new focus is planning, directing, and fighting the GWOT, hunting down individual terrorists, disrupting cells, and working with Host Nation (HN) forces to provide local and regional security. SOCOM's current mission statement summarizes its important role: "USSOCOM plans, directs, and executes special operations in the conduct of the War on Terrorism in order to disrupt, defeat, and destroy terrorist networks that threaten the United States, its citizens and interests worldwide."[1]

It is then, perhaps, difficult to recall a time when SOF units had a low status, its members passed up for promotions and with its budget miniscule. The gradual increase in status for SOF has been a long road. This work will describe the history of SOF, explaining the difficult journey to relevance within the U.S. military. This analysis will reveal a historic reluctance on the part of the conventional military to both understand and utilize the unique capabilities of SOF. In contrast, politicians have traditionally had an almost intuitive sense of the worth and value of SOF and its potential to solve a variety of security and policy problems. The conventional military has largely overcome its skepticism of SOF, allowing the capabilities of these units to match the political desire to utilize these units' unique skills. Currently, and for the first time in U.S. military history, both the conventional military and

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civilian leadership recognizes the value of SOF. This dramatic shift has occurred due to several factors: a dramatic change in the security environment marked by irregular threats, the declaration of the GWOT, and the conduct of SOF in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Origins of Modern SOF and the World War II Era

SOF have never played a prominent role in U.S. military strategy until recently. There are several historical reasons for this fact. First, the U.S. military developed according to the Jominian tradition of warfare, with an emphasis upon mass armies, maneuver warfare, decisive battles, and using extreme force against a conventional opponent. This tradition made understanding the concept of unconventional and nontraditional forces difficult for military leaders.[2] Second, there was among American military professionals a general distrust of SOF and skepticism concerning their utility. Special operations units' function was considered a supplement to conventional operations at best, and at worst an unimportant sideshow taking away manpower and resources from regular military units.[3] Furthermore, there was a perception that members of SOF units were military misfits, rogues, and undisciplined individuals willing to work outside the chain of command or even violate the law. Third, the infrequent use of SOF and the reluctance of military leaders to accept their function ensured that no formal concept of special operations would greatly influence U.S. military doctrine.[4] Fourth, the use of special operations units was never pivotal to the outcome of any U.S. military campaign or war—until Operation Enduring Freedom—and any use of these units was viewed as merely a sideshow. SOF units recruited the best and most capable soldiers from within the military for their ranks, leading to some resentment by other units. Added to this, SOF units captured the fascination of the American public and gained strong political patronage as well as generous particular funding. The concept of a "special" unit separate or even superior to a conventional one at times has also caused further distrust of SOF by the conventional military hierarchy. Highly publicized failures and scandals involving SOF confirmed the fears of many skeptics. As a result, many military leaders concluded that SOF, and special operations in general, were not worth the political or military risk.[5]

Modern SOF have their origins in World War II. Every major power formed special operations units during World War II to meet operational needs. The British developed numerous commando units to harass German forces, link up with partisan forces in Axis occupied territory, and conduct daring strategic operations on the European continent. In order to coordinate these efforts, the British established the Special Operations Executive (SOE), which effectively was an agency that performed intelligence gathering and sabotage missions. The United States developed a counterpart organization called the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). The OSS and its operations were controversial and unpopular with U.S. military leaders. In fact, if it had not been for the strong support of President Roosevelt, who was a close friend of OSS founder William Donavan, it is unlikely that the organization would have been created and maintained throughout the war. The history of SOF in U.S. strategy reveals a close association between political support and operational reality, for without the desire, and in some cases insistence, of political leaders to use SOF conventional military leaders would not necessarily have opted for such methods.

Both President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill were keenly interested in the promise that SOF could achieve significant results using limited numbers. In military terms this principle of economy of force, means that SOF can be used as a "force multiplier," with their actions achieving outcomes that greatly aid friendly forces. The appeal of SOF to political leaders is not surprising. Any solution presented that offers the potential to perform vital tasks with minimal personnel, money, and expenditure of overall resources

would appeal to a pragmatic leader. Negatively, Roosevelt and subsequent U.S. leaders would, at times, expect too much of SOF without fully comprehending their limitations or how to properly employ such forces. Despite this, political leaders such as Roosevelt, Churchill, and later Kennedy and Reagan were able to see the potential for SOF and the kinds of nontraditional operations they might perform when conventional military leaders either could not, or were not willing to, consider their use.

Special operations played an important but relatively small role in the overall Allied military campaign of World War II. Special operations–supported Allied efforts, primarily in North Africa, occupied France, Southeast Asia, and German-occupied Soviet Union. The use of these units did have significant operational and tactical benefits, such as harassing and inflicting causalities upon enemy forces, intercepting and damaging supply lines, and forcing Axis powers to divert forces in an attempt to confront the commando forces. However, American, French, and British political cultures were inherently more skeptical of specialized military units and special operations than their German and Soviet counterparts.[6] Overall, Allied commanders simply did not know how to utilize SOF units at their disposal, and this remained a persistent problem throughout the history of the special operations community. As a result, American SOF—Jedburgh and OSS detachment 101 teams—were often deployed behind enemy lines with too little time to create an effective resistance to German forces. Other SOF units—Army Rangers, Merrill's Marauders, and 1st Special Forces Service—were not effectively integrated with conventional units and operational plans to make any substantial strategic benefit. At other times, SOF teams were used incorrectly as shock troops or simply as well trained infantry, usually resulting in high causalities or tactical failures. In other situations, the ranks of SOF units were quickly expanded to meet operational needs, lowering the standards of the units and resulting in poor tactical performance. In addition, SOF teams were plagued with poor equipment, communication, and their coordination with conventional units was inadequate at best. David Thomas correctly states:

> The U.S. Army emerged from the second world war with no useful experience in commando operations, and without a coherent understanding of the value of commando forces. The suspicion of elite units, and the aversion to any form of irregular warfare which informed the military art of most senior American commanders in the second world war, persisted after 1945 and ensured that American military doctrine remained unaffected by the lessons of commando warfare in the second world war.[7]

Cold War Era and Insurgencies

These negative attitudes toward and misunderstandings of the role of SOF continued in the postwar years, resulting in the abolishment of most wartime special operations units. Furthermore, the OSS, with its paramilitary missions, was broken up and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) established. The military could have taken on the mission of conducting covert and paramilitary operations but opted to relegate it to the newly formed CIA, as it viewed such operations as undesirable for a professional military. This is ironic, given the 9-11 Commission's enthusiastic recommendation that all paramilitary activity be transferred to the Department of Defense.

With the dawn of the Cold War, military and political leaders quite understandably were consumed with preventing, if possible, and fighting, if necessary, a third world war. The advent of the nuclear age and large-scale Soviet conventional build-ups seemed to leave

little room for serious discussions about the use of unconventional forces for operations that few military leaders understood or appreciated. Most discussion of SOF centered on deploying small teams to lead guerilla bands behind Soviet lines or set up resistance groups in Soviet-occupied Western Europe. Given the strategic circumstances, it was not surprising that the beginning of the Cold War saw a primary emphasis upon strategic nuclear forces and not SOF.[8]

At the same time, the postwar world witnessed an increasing succession of limited insurgencies, many of them driven by Communist ideology. Communist insurgencies plagued numerous nations in the years after World War II. British and French forces found themselves facing communist or nationalist insurgencies in their colonial territories. These counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns saw extensive use of special operations units. The British SAS played a vital role in the COIN strategy in Malaya, Aden, Oman, and Borneo. French SOF, including the French Foreign Legion and Groupement de Commandos Mixtes Aeroportes (GCMA), played a prominent role in Indochina and Algeria.

Allied SOF had developed theories of unconventional warfare based upon experiences during World War II. A foundational principle was the importance of working with indigenous personnel, which required the ability to understand local languages and cultures. These skills, while important in supporting partisan movements against Axis powers, were all the more essential in confronting and defeating ideologically driven insurgencies against established governments. The British SAS gained extensive operational experience during its COIN campaigns and demonstrated how to work successfully with indigenous forces. Likewise, one of the few positive experiences of French forces in Indochina came out of the GCMAs and their work with various Vietnamese minority groups against the Viet Mihn.[9] U.S. military leaders, however, did not view COIN as a significant addition to military doctrine. Guerrilla conflicts and insurgencies, now included in the broad category of low-intensity conflicts, were not considered a major threat compared with the potential of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union.[10]

Nevertheless, by the time of the Eisenhower Administration, U.S. strategists were searching for ways to offset the expansion of Soviet influence across the globe. President Eisenhower desired a low-visibility and politically sensitive military option to respond to the numerous "proxy wars" inspired by the Soviet Union. Thus, in 1952 he ordered the Army to activate the Special Forces. Again, Army Special Forces had its roots in the wartime OSS. Although an oversimplification, it can be said the capabilities of the OSS were divided between the military and the CIA. The Special Forces group's original mission focused on unconventional warfare—working with indigenous forces to overthrow a hostile government—along with long-range reconnaissance and sabotage operations behind enemy lines. President Eisenhower, while somewhat skeptical of the value of SOF during World War II, found their unique skills more desirable when other military options were either unfeasible or undesirable. President Eisenhower came to see the value of having a force that could operate in the grey area between peace and war, and he grew more favorable towards both SOF and covert action overtime.

Ironically, U.S. leaders and officials reevaluated the need for unconventional soldiers and special operations due to the continued use of commando units by the Soviet Union. Moscow used its specialized units on numerous occasions to secure foreign policy objectives during the Cold War. Soviet military doctrine placed more emphasis upon commando operations than did that of any other polity, including Israel.[11] Soviet military doctrine did not draw clear lines between war and peace; diplomacy, covert action, subversion, and force blended together in Soviet thinking. The various communist insurgencies around the world which were led, supported, directed, or inspired by the USSR provide vivid examples of

the lengths to which Moscow was willing to go to achieve foreign policy objectives. It became alarmingly clear to U.S. officials that even if a nuclear confrontation between the superpowers was unlikely, "proxy wars" in the Third World were certain to occur regularly.

In 1959, President Eisenhower sent Army Special Forces and CIA agents to Laos to support the government against the communist insurgency in an operation that came to be known as "White Star." This program involved U.S. advisors, mostly Army Special Forces, led by the famous Arthur "Bull" Simmons. White Star was relatively successful and succeeded at training thousands of Laotian soldiers and even managed to run operations against the Ho Chi Minh trail. The area of Laos Simmons was responsible for remained free of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) control until the Geneva treaty of neutrality, which barred any foreign troops from operating in Laos, was signed in 1962.[12] However, despite President Eisenhower's tacit acceptance of a limited role for SOF in sensitive operations, overall, SOF was an insignificant part of U.S. military strategy in the years immediately following World War II.

President Kennedy attempted to elevate significantly the role of special operations units in U.S. military strategy by making counterinsurgency the cornerstone of his Flexible Response doctrine. Kennedy was a firm supporter of unconventional warfare and believed that SOF could be effective in countering Soviet inspired or led insurgent movements around the world. During his presidency, Kennedy increased funding to the Special Forces and established the Navy's Sea, Air, and Land (SEALs) commando force.

Kennedy envisioned using SF units to combat communist insurgencies around the globe. The president viewed the use of SOF as a proactive measure short of direct conflict with the Soviet Union, but critics complained that Kennedy was looking for a panacea for fighting global communism; indeed, Kennedy's vocal support for SOF and their irregular capabilities did seemingly promise, at times, unrealistic results. Regardless, military leaders did not share Kennedy's enthusiasm for SOF and therefore did not actively seek to make special operations units a prominent aspect of military operations. Andrew Krepinevich summarizes the viewpoint of the conventional military leaders concerning guerilla warfare: "any good solider can handle guerrillas."[13] Specialized units with nontraditional training and funding seemed unnecessary to many military leaders of the time.

Vietnam: The Test Case for SOF

Vietnam was the test case for special operators in U.S. military strategy. SOF performed two basic roles in Vietnam, working with indigenous forces and local populations, and performing direct action missions against the enemy. Army Special Forces working with the Montagnard tribesmen in the Central Highlands of Vietnam and other ethnic minorities along the borders of Laos and Cambodia were successful both in providing local security against the Viet Cong and producing loyal allies of the United States. Army Special Forces established 254 outposts and trained more than sixty thousand Montagnard, Nung, and Cao Dei tribesmen into Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs) to help defend the outposts.[14] Navy SEALs, Rangers, and other Special Forces personnel proved to be just as successful in tracking and eliminating enemy forces. In addition, SOF personnel participated in one of the most successful and controversial programs of the war, the infamous Phoenix Program. After the war, communist leaders admitted that Phoenix had been one of the most destructive and effective operations of the war.[15] However, the program also caused considerable controversy and was accused of killing numerous innocent Vietnamese.[16] This tarnished the reputation of the SOF, particularly Special Forces, among the American public and seemed to reinforce criticisms by military leaders that such SOF were troublemakers

that operated outside the law. The connection of the Phoenix Program and the special operations community would cast a dark shadow in the post-Vietnam era.

Kennedy favored comparing the Vietnam conflict to the British Malayan Emergency and wanted to use Special Forces to implement his version of the "strategic hamlets" program.[17] SOF units proved able to work with and fight alongside indigenous forces and win over the hearts and minds of a fearful and skeptical population. Army SF working in Darlac province went from village to village providing local security and training forces to remove the Viet Cong (VC) from the area. This program was under the control of the CIA and was successful in eliminating most VC in the area.[18]

The regular military, however, saw such projects as too time consuming and a waste of military resources. Operation Switchback was enacted and transferred authority over SF teams from the CIA to Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV), which limited SF contact with indigenous forces and frequently assigned these units to special reconnaissance and direct action missions.[19] By 1965, military commanders began using Army Special Forces and other SOF units almost exclusively in direct action missions against enemy forces and positions, including the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam.

The introduction of large-scale conventional forces in 1965 meant that the previous military strategy highlighting SOF and unconventional warfare was deemphasized in favor of large-scale conventional operations. The use of SOF in a direct combat role was arguably a misuse of their unique skills, particularly in the case of Army Special Forces. Although quite adept at eliminating the enemy, the skill set of the Special Forces would have been better utilized in a continuation of the CIDG mission in the Central Highlands. Although U.S. officials and military leaders frequently reiterated the need to "win hearts and minds," conventional military leaders had difficulty with this concept and opted instead to focus upon a strategy aimed at the destruction of the Viet Cong and NVA with clear criteria—body counts. Measuring the effectiveness of SF's operations with indigenous Vietnamese was difficult to quantify, causing some to question its relevance. Overall, as Colonel John Waghelstein correctly summarizes, "the Special Forces were too few in number or too limited in breadth of mission to seriously affect the course of the war."[20]

Likewise, many of the most ambitious and dangerous "black" operations of the war, in Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam conducted by the Studies and Observations Group (SOG), many of whose U.S. personnel were SOF, suffered from inadequate political and military support and did not have a significant strategic impact. While tactical accomplishments were not lacking, the inconsistent U.S. strategy concerning enemy sanctuaries in neighboring countries undermined the efforts of elite military units and CIA forces. Nevertheless, the numerous SOF units had abundant operational experience to translate into official doctrine and methods. However, as James Hayes states:

> Despite the overall successful employment of special units in Vietnam, the United States still did not possess an organization that could mesh the capabilities of U.S. SOF into a cohesive entity, or even standardize training, equipment procurement, and doctrine. Additionally, without a high-ranking flag officer to serve as its advocate in Congress and the Pentagon, SOF units often fell victim to the whims of their respective services."[21]

Certainly, without the strong support of Kennedy SOF would have remained marginalized from the regular army and likely played a smaller role in Vietnam. Yet vocal and public enthusiasm for the abilities of SOF, particularly Army SF, did create a backlash. Many

conventional military leaders grew to resent the preferential treatment, including funding, received by SOF units. Likewise, since President Kennedy had placed so much faith in SOF to fight a conflict like Vietnam, the outcome of the conflict counted for a great deal more than did the actual performance of SOF during Vietnam. The SOF community would not find the post-Vietnam landscape inviting or welcoming to their unique skills and abilities.

Immediate Post-Vietnam Era

The United States, including its military and political leaders, sought to distance itself from the unpleasant Vietnam experience. This included discontinuing serious development of counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and psychological warfare doctrine and cutting the manpower of those units that fought these kinds of conflicts. Conventional military leaders returned to studying the problem of confronting the Warsaw Pact and defending Western Europe. The military underwent a dramatic change in the post-Vietnam years, transiting to an all-volunteer force and finding its budget reduced, its reputation tarnished, and its morale low. Hardest hit of all were the special operations units. Service branches reduced, and in some cases almost eliminated, their SOF units after Vietnam. So far-reaching were the reductions to SOF that the Navy contemplated moving its Naval Special Warfare (NSW) assets to the reserves and by the mid-1970s Army Special Forces "funding was just five percent of what it had been during Vietnam."[22] The post-Vietnam strategic culture did not seem promising for SOF.

During this period, the rise of international terrorism provided the special operations community a much-needed role. Hostage taking became a popular terrorist tactic against Western nations. Specialized SOF units, called special mission units, were developed and used for hostage rescue situations by Israeli and Western European nations. The success of Israel at Entebbe and the West German counterterrorist unit at Mogadishu in hostage rescue missions convinced the United States that it required a similar capability.[23] In 1977, the new U.S. counterterrorist unit, the First Special Operational Detachment—Delta, known as Delta Force, was formed. The Navy's equivalent, SEAL Team Six, was created in 1980.[24]

On 4 November, 1979, Iranian extremists stormed the United States embassy in Tehran, taking fifty-three American hostages. In April of 1980, after six months of attempted diplomacy and an attempt to gather international support for action against Iran, the Carter Administration contemplated a rescue mission.[25] However, numerous organizational and bureaucratic difficulties arose in the run-up to the mission's execution.

An ad hoc coalition of military and civilian agencies was put together to create a joint task force.[26] Aside from the complicated nature of the operation, each service had requested involvement in some aspect of the mission. Unfortunately, the various units involved had not conducted extensive joint mission planning or training in the past. Ultimately, the operation was aborted after the mechanical failure of several helicopters made it unfeasible.[27] To make matters worse, one of the remaining helicopters collided with a C-130 aircraft, killing five air crewmen and three Marines. The failed effort caused considerable embarrassment to the administration and military, and its impact proved to be far reaching for the SOF community.

The failure of Operation Eagle Claw helped to reinforce a bias against SOF and special operations within the military and political leadership. The botched rescue attempt in Iran seemed to confirm negative assessment of SOF, and after Operation Eagle Claw military, intelligence, and political leaders were more hesitant to use such units on high-risk missions.[28] More positively, Eagle Claw revealed the need for highly trained special units, proper organization, and a coherent command structure. The recommendations of

the Holloway Commission, set up to investigate the failed mission, resulted in the creation of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) in 1980 and contributed to the eventual creation of the SOCOM itself.[29]

The Restoration of SOF in U.S. Strategy

President Reagan's unrelenting quest to roll back Soviet advances, stop the spread of Moscow's influence, and ultimately defeat the Soviet Empire resulted in the resurrection of SOF in U.S. military strategy. Reagan and U.S. military leaders of the 1980s were painfully aware of the extent to which the Soviet Union would go to thwart U.S. interests abroad. The president and his administration believed that U.S. strategy towards Soviet expansion needed significant revision. This included a renewed appreciation for low-visibility and politically sensitive military units. Reagan authorized the CIA and the Department of Defense to increase their capabilities in low-intensity conflicts, including counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and psychological operations.[30]

The use of SOF to achieve foreign policy objectives came at a crucial time for the special operations community. By the late 1970s, the special operations capabilities of the United States had begun to atrophy and it possessed little capacity to fight low-intensity conflicts. The move to increase the low-intensity conflict capabilities of the United States was in part a reaction to the success of communist insurgencies in Latin America. The administration chose to intervene overtly in El Salvador after Nicaragua fell to Sandinista forces.

In 1981, Reagan ordered Army Special Forces to train and assist El Salvadorian military personnel in battling the communist insurgency. This move was controversial. Critics warned that the administration was involving itself in another Vietnam, even though U.S. advisors would not be allowed to engage in combat and the number of personnel in El Salvador was very small. Army Special Forces would be active in combating the insurgency until it was finally defeated after more than a decade. This program is widely cited as a model for U.S. intervention and held up as a template for deployments in the GWOT.[31]

SOF personnel participated in the military operations in Grenada in 1983 and in Panama in 1989. Both these operations were quick victories for the United States but also revealed a dangerous lack of coordination between SOF and conventional units and a general lack of understanding of how to use such units. In Operation Urgent Fury, which overthrew the Marxist government of Grenada, SOF units found conventional military commanders from Atlantic command clearly unfamiliar with special operations. Coordination between SOF and conventional units was dismal and resulted in unnecessary casualties. SOF were assigned missions that were not coordinated with the main effort, resulting in confusion. Operation Just Cause in Panama saw a significant improvement in overall planning and coordination. SOF was allowed a significantly larger share of responsibility for the mission. SOF performed numerous roles, including airfield seizure, hostage rescue, and direct action missions, and participated in the hunt for Manuel Noriega. Perhaps the most significant role was performed by the Army Special Forces, which remained in Panama for the next year training the national police force and ensuring that a stable and democratic government would endure.[32]

The most significant enhancement to SOF during the Reagan Administration was the establishment of SOCOM on June 1, 1987. This critical organization was the fruit of operational failures and consistent efforts by many individuals in both Congress and at the Pentagon. The failure of Desert One and the chaos of Grenada served as important case studies of the need for coordination of SOF operations. After a long and intense struggle, the

formulation of SOCOM ensured that SOF would receive adequate funding, standardized training for all SOF units, and specialized equipment for its missions. The performance of SOF in Panama seemed to confirm SOCOM's value. SOCOM also became an important organization for the development and dissemination of joint doctrine and training procedures. Years before the conventional military seriously addressed the need for joint service mission and combat procedures, SOCOM, with units from every branch but the Marine Corps, had to develop proper and workable joint doctrines for SOF missions and training. These procedures later became a template for the entire armed forces.

The End of the Cold War and the Gulf War

Idealistic expectations of a new era of global harmony following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War proved to be short-lived. Far from creating a "new world order," the post–Cold War world was a chaotic scene of ethnic, tribal, and religious violence in many regions of the globe. At the same time, the United States and its major NATO allies were significantly downsizing their conventional militaries. Likewise, the United States found itself in the unique, and arguably uncomfortable, position of being the sole world superpower.

The end of the Cold War resulted in the disappearance of a true peer military competitor and the most significant threat to U.S. national security. Likewise, the primary purpose of many SOF missions also seemed to vanish almost overnight. However, regional military commanders and policymakers came to recognize the value of having SOF units readily available. SOF units have many capabilities that make them ideal in situations that blur the lines between peace and war. In the period after the Cold War, the United States was primarily concerned with maintaining global stability while encouraging democratic political reforms and open economic markets. A host of problems, including ethnic conflict, terrorism, drug trafficking, and religious rivalries threatened to disrupt this order. National leaders quickly realized that the conventional military was ill-equipped to deal with nontraditional and asymmetric threats, and thus increasingly turned to SOF.

The SOF community was forced, along with all service branches, to demonstrate its relevance in the post–Cold War environment. After Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, SOCOM was anxious to make a significant contribution to the campaign to remove Iraqi forces from that country but was disappointed when it became apparent that General Schwarzkopf had little time for high-risk SOF missions, although he did favor using SOF for psychological operations and liaison work with Arab allies. However, as the war progressed, Schwarzkopf allowed SOF to perform other roles as well.[33]

SOF's mission changed after Iraq fired Scud missiles at Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. The essential strategic concern was Israel. The Israeli public demanded retaliation; the standing policy of the Israeli government was to respond to any attacks against its soil.

The Israeli plan to enter the war would have had disastrous political consequences. Israeli fighters would have been required to fly over the airspace of Jordan, Saudi Arabia or Syria in order to reach Iraqi airspace. Arab nations that had joined the coalition had made it clear that they would pull out of the war if Israel entered it. This was unacceptable to the United States.[34] The Scud issue was a considerable political problem. The Israelis continued to put pressure on Washington, which in turn put pressure on Schwarzkopf to deal with the situation.[35] Schwarzkopf consented to send U.S. and British SOF teams into Iraq to locate the Scuds, disable or destroy them, and/or to call in air strikes against the Scud launchers.[36]

The Scud hunt proved to be a difficult task.[37] Nevertheless, SOF units claimed to have destroyed several launchers, although a postwar Pentagon report questioned these claims and asserted that the teams had only destroyed decoys and other military vehicles. This report remains the official position of the Pentagon, but has received criticism by U.S. and British officials and SOF members who participated in the operation, and the truth may never be certain. A number of lessons resulted from the experience of the Scud hunt. The use of small units to search for NBC weapons over large territories with little specific intelligence as to their whereabouts appeared to be both highly risky and operationally dubious. The United States lacked the ability to both detect and track mobile Scud launchers effectively. Coordination between SOF teams and conventional units was deficient, and time presented a critical problem. When SOF teams identified suspected Scud launchers, air strikes would not take place for up to an hour later, decreasingly the chances for overall success.[38] The "sensor-to-shooter time" problems largely nullified the benefits that SOF teams provided on the ground. Close air support became necessary to several SOF teams engaged in the Scud-hunting mission, but communication between SOF teams and air-support units was also imperfect.

Despite these shortcomings, SOF remained the logical choice for these and similar missions. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, SOCOM began an effort to eradicate many of the aforementioned problems through increased joint training with conventional units and research and development (R&D) programs to develop new technologies. The lessons of the Scud hunt would be applied in the next Iraq war.

Overall, despite the performance of its units during the Gulf War, SOCOM was disappointed with the role it was given. SOCOM's limited role in the Gulf War served as a wake-up call, providing a clear indication that conventional U.S. commanders did not see SOF as providing any key capabilities to a conventional military campaign like Desert Storm. SOCOM began an aggressive, and ultimately successful, campaign to demonstrate its usefulness to the conventionally oriented military hierarchy. By the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom, many conventional commanders' minds had been changed concerning SOF, with ambassadors and regional Commanders-in-chief (CinCs) frequently requesting SOF for a variety of missions, and joint training between SOF and conventional units became more frequent.[39]

The Rise of Asymmetric Threats

The conventional military's skepticism of SOF in the immediate post–Gulf War period stood in direct contrast to politician's willingness to use SOF to address nontraditional security problems. In 1986, President Reagan paved the way for U.S. military action against drug cartels by issuing a directive citing them as a threat to national security.[40] In 1998, President Bush campaigned on the idea of using direct military force against drug traffickers in other countries.[41] President George H.W. Bush announced during his term that international drug cartels were a danger to the national security of the United States. The Columbian government, after years of seemingly fruitless attempts to disrupt the Medellin cartel, became willing to adopt a more aggressive strategy against its leader Pablo Escobar.

In the early 1990s, Columbian authorities asked President Bush for additional assistance in tracking down Escobar. In response, President Bush deployed members of Delta Force, SEAL Team Six, and Centra Spike.[42] Their mission was to train a unit specifically designed to hunt down Escobar—known as the Search Bloc—and to aid in this capture through intelligence gathering and cooperation with the Columbian government and other U.S. agencies involved.

Ultimately, the manhunt ended after sixteen months of searching. The intelligence provided by Centra Spike enabled the Columbian SOF unit to finally locate and kill Escobar.[43] The example of Columbia is important because U.S. officials have reported that lessons learned against drug cartels are now being employed in the search for al Qaeda members in "Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and the Philippines."[44] However, little-known or unacknowledged victories of the SOF community were overshadowed by a very public failure.

On October 3, 1993 members of Task Force Ranger suffered eighteen fatalities while attempting to transfer two top lieutenants of the Somalia warlord Mohamed Farrah Aidid. The fallout from what became known as the "Black Hawk Down" incident was profound and long lasting for the SOF community. U.S. officials and the media rightly questioned why a humanitarian mission aimed at feeding starving Somalis ended with eighteen dead U.S. serviceman. The debacle illustrated the dangers of urban operations, the limitations of technology, and the real potential of "mission creep" when assigning aggressive and highly trained soldiers to humanitarian missions. The Senate committee tasked with investigating Task Force Ranger concluded that: "One of the weaknesses of a unit like Task Force Ranger, whose combat capabilities are unparalleled, is the belief by the unit members and its commander that they can accomplish any mission. Because of the supreme confidence of special operations forces, the chain of command must provide more oversight to this type of unit than to conventional forces."[45]

Although SOF provide a low-visibility and discreet military option, as Somalia clearly demonstrated, if an operation fails it can cause considerable embarrassment for the United States and the politicians who supported the mission, as well as emboldening the enemies of the United States. Public statements from Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda figures have made frequent references to the "weakness" of America demonstrated in Somalia.

There remained serious questions among military leaders concerning the utility of SOF beyond low-intensity conflicts and clandestine or covert operations. Official military doctrine articulated the role of SOF as supporting conventional military operations and conducting discreete, often covert, missions to achieve specific strategic objectives.[46] Despite this, many military leaders doubted whether the promise of SOF was worth the potential political cost.

Starting in 1995, the United States became active in the Balkans, first in Bosnia and then in Kosovo. Initially, Army SF served the role of liaison between NATO forces and the various ethnic groups in the region, living among the population and gathering intelligence. As Operation Allied Force progressed, and SF demonstrated their abilities, such units were allowed to conduct higher-risk missions, including strategic reconnaissance and intelligence gathering.[47] Conventional U.S. commanders in Bosnia, initially skeptical, and even hostile, toward SOF operations, eventually were convinced of their utility. This trend continued in Kosovo, where conventional commanders actually requested SOF units because they could generate accurate intelligence from the local population, conduct battle-damage assessment, and rescue downed pilots.[48]

Overall, despite a tenuous beginning, SOF operations in the Balkans were a major step towards integrating SOF and conventional forces at the tactical level. Tactical and operational lessons learned in Bosnia and Kosovo, such as the ability of close-air support to greatly enhance the effectiveness of SOF, better integration and coordination with conventional forces, and the ability of SOF to generate accurate intelligence from local populations, were immediately applicable to operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.[49] Throughout operations in the Balkans, tactical and operational innovations were formulated and doctrinal procedures were updated. This would form the rough template for Operation Enduring Freedom.

SOF units were not, however, allowed to perform certain missions. Army SF requested to be allowed to accompany Ushtria Clirimtare Kosova (UCK) guerrillas from Albania into Kosovo on combat operations to increase their effectiveness. U.S. SOF petitioned commanders to allow them to direct air strikes with laser designators and conduct battle damage assessment in Kosovo, a mission that NATO SOF, primarily French and British, instead performed. These missions were denied to U.S. SOF primarily due to force protection concerns. Policymakers were extremely reluctant to put U.S. troops into possible combat situations, fearing domestic political fallout from casualties. Because of similar concerns, U.S. SOF were not allowed to hunt for war criminals in Albania and Bosnia. The Clinton Administration instead tasked the CIA with the job.

The popularity of SOF continued to increase with politicians and policymakers during the 1990s. Policymakers increasingly needed rapidly deployable and adaptable forces to address situations ranging from evacuating embassies from hostile crowds to delivering humanitarian supplies to refugees to clandestine operations. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the military saw a series of budget cuts and base closings as it significantly downsized in the aftermath of the Cold War. However, SOCOM's budget actually increased during the 1990s. In addition, missions assigned to SOCOM and its authority to conduct operations expanded throughout the decade.

The use of SOF to train other nations' militaries had occurred periodically since the end of World War II, but the 1990s witnessed a rapid expansion in such operations. In 1991, Congress passed the Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) program law. This law specified that SOCOM had the legal authority to spend its funds on joint military training programs.[50] The law specified only that SOCOM would have to submit its annual spending on training programs as a part of the overall Department of Defense budget. This law granted the Department of Defense, via SOCOM, significant but subtle power. The JCET program was not subjected to Congressional oversight. The Defense Department had complete control of the program and sent U.S. SOF to the nations which had agreed to the exchange program. Critics believed that this program enabled the Defense Department to conduct its own foreign policy and establish military relationships with questionable regimes.[51] Despite these criticisms, military officials and politicians alike viewed these activities as efficient and cost-effective ways to establish and strengthen military-to-military relations, to say nothing of gaining diplomatic favor and influence in the country or region.[52]

Counterproliferaiton and Counterterrorism

Counterproliferation was another important mission added to SOCOM during the 1990s. The dissolution of the Soviet Empire left various Soviet satellite states with sizable military stockpiles of conventional and nuclear weapons. Significant fear existed that weapons or materials could fall into the hands of various groups opposed to the United States. U.S. leaders were especially concerned that terrorist groups, drug cartels, and even international crime syndicates could obtain these weapons.

Preventing rogue nations such as Libya, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, and Syria from acquiring WMDs was seen as one of the highest national security priorities. Counterproliferation was a new and important military mission.[53] SOF was seen as a means to locate, recover, or destroy enemy or stolen WMD weapons or materials if other avenues had failed. Airpower, coupled with SOF ground teams, generally was seen as the most feasible means of counterproliferation. Despite PGMs, ground SOF would be required for confirming the weapons' destruction.

Counterproliferation was given to the SOF community due to a lack of other military alternatives and a belief the CIA did not posses the paramilitary capability to perform this mission. The SOF community turned to its "Scud hunt" experience of the Gulf War for lessons and counterproliferation became important in the SOF community's search for relevance.

Counterterrorism became another major mission for the SOF community. As noted above, specific counterterrorism SOF units had been created in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but the purpose of these was primarily hostage rescue. By the mid-1980s, hijacking and similar terrorist acts were in decline, but throughout the 1990s experts warned of the growing danger presented by Islamic terrorism. Terrorist acts against U.S. targets in the 1990s led some to conclude that the various SOF units should be used in direct-action missions against terrorists such as Osama bin Laden. A variety of factors, including a lack of political will, the strong possibility of a negative international reaction, and fear of mission failure contributed to the decision not to use the United States' elite counterterrorist units against terrorism in a preemptive manner prior to September 11, 2001.[54]

In response to the attacks on U.S. Embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998, and the USS Cole in 2000, the Clinton Administration contemplated a mission directed at Osama bin Laden. Numerous operations were proposed in both 1998 and 2000, but one such scenario involved the use of special mission units to hunt down bin Laden and capture him. These operations were cancelled due to a lack of actionable tactical intelligence. The CIA had contacts in Afghanistan dating from its assistance to the mujahedin against the Soviet Union. These contacts included resistance elements such as the Northern Alliance and others hostile to the Taliban regime. Originally, the Clinton Administration asked the CIA to use its covert action and paramilitary capabilities to capture bin Laden.[55] At the time, the CIA did not possess the paramilitary capabilities and therefore had to rely on local forces resisting the Talbian. In the minds of many Clinton officials and military leaders, these forces did not have the training to conduct such an operation. Largely because of legal concerns, President Clinton ordered that efforts be made to capture—but not kill—bin Laden. Yet Clinton Administration officials and military leaders believed that a mission involving a SOF raid would likely fail due to a lack of reliable intelligence, especially human intelligence, and qualified personnel.[56]

Ultimately, the failed experiences of SOF in Iran and Somalia significantly reduced the likelihood that military or political leaders would conduct a high-risk raid on terrorist targets. The direct result of the Somalia experience could be seen in mission planning; force protection became the top priority to the extent that a risk-adverse culture began to develop. In fairness, the proposed operations against bin Laden would have been difficult and could have resulted in U.S. casualties, collateral damage, and mission failure; this certainly would then have caused considerable controversy in the region. In addition, changes in technology seemed to make the wisdom of such raids dubious. As Charles Dunlap notes, "few commanders will seriously contemplate ordering a direct action mission against a high-value target if it can be destroyed with standoff systems."[57] Succinctly put, bin Laden was not viewed as a significant enough threat to generate the political will necessary to use SOF in an aggressive manner.

Growing Recognition of SOF

On the whole, the relevance of SOF in U.S. military strategy did increase during the post–Cold War period. The ability of SOCOM to adapt to the new security environment, which included adding new missions to support nontraditional operations, leveraging new

technologies to increase the effectiveness of its units, and providing a low-visibility and politically sensitive option to asymmetric challenges, convinced policymakers and many military leaders of the value of SOF. Although many conventional military leaders remained skeptical, or even ignorant, of SOF abilities and limitations, the campaigns in the Balkans proved to be a significant step forward in integrating conventional forces and SOF. In addition, SOCOM officials went to great lengths to conduct joint training exercises with conventional units in order to educate conventional commanders on the value SOF can bring to a contingency.

The positive attitude toward SOF continued with the election of George W. Bush, who brought in civilian leaders open to giving SOF an increased role. Foremost among these was Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who believed that overly cautious civilian and military leaders prevented the deployment of SOF against terrorist targets during the Clinton era. Secretary Rumfeld had a firm belief that the future security environment would be dominated by asymmetric threats and challenges suited to the skills of SOF. He thought that counterproliferation and counterterrorism were two likely and important ongoing missions for the U.S. military. Rumsfeld was convinced that while the military was primarily equipped and trained to fight a conventional Soviet-style army, it was unlikely the United States would fight such an enemy in the foreseeable future. He wanted the military to transform and adapt to the new security environment and saw SOCOM as providing a useful model to other military forces.

September 11, 2001, and the GWOT: SOF on Center Stage

The events of September 11, 2001, caused a dramatic change is U.S. military strategy and were the catalyst that pushed SOF to the forefront of the military response to the GWOT. The desire for retribution among the American public and policymaking class, combined with the unconventional threat posed by an elusive and dispersed terrorist network, pushed aside the majority of objections to the proactive use of SOF against terrorists. These changes, combined with the declaration of "war" against terrorism and the "Bush Doctrine," paved the way for the dramatic use of SOF in the early part of the GWOT.[58]

The refusal of the Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar to turn Osama bin Laden over to U.S. custody resulted in the first military campaign of the GWOT. Local conditions and logistical realities resulted in the first "Special Operations War."[59] In Afghanistan, SOF, along with CIA paramilitary operations, coordinated with the local anti-Taliban forces, who provided the great majority of the ground troops. After forty-nine days, the campaign resulted in the end of the Taliban regime.[60] The stunning success of SOF in Afghanistan resulted in a historic elevation of SOCOM's authority. In January 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared SOCOM was now a supported command. Historically, SOCOM had only been a supporting command, and thus subordinate to regional commands. This shift gave SOCOM the authority when authorized by the president or secretary of defense to plan and conduct independent operations supported by regional commands.[61] In 2004, President Bush added further to SOCOM's responsibility by tasking it as the lead agency to prosecute the GWOT.[62]

The performance of SOF in Afghanistan led to a significant role for these forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom. General Tommy Franks gave a prominent role and enormous responsibility to these special operators. SOF led Kurdish forces in the north, searched for Scud launchers and WMD in the west, and enabled forces in the south to proceed rapidly to Baghdad. SOF operations occurred simultaneously in all parts of the country, complicating the enemy's countermeasures. As Andrew Krepinevich summarizes, "to the Iraqis, SOF

seemed to be everywhere and yet nowhere in particular."[63] Many of the SOF units entered Iraq prior to the official start of the war in order to conduct reconnaissance and provide up-to-date intelligence. The impact of these operations led Pentagon officials to claim that "the intelligence was so up to the minute and accurate . . . that it not only allowed U.S. military commanders to take action but was in many cases 'predictive' about what Iraqi leaders would do next."[64]

The Iraq campaign was important in demonstrating the utility of SOF both in conducting sensitive independent operations and providing critical support to conventional units.[65] The successes of joint SOF-conventional missions were seen as a model for future operations.[66] The bold assertions frequently made by SOF supporters seemed to be justified by operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The combination of advanced technology, increasing both battlefield awareness and lethality, and SOF ground units proved to be an effective combination in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Conventional-SOF integration ensured that small units of special operators also would have sufficient support and ample firepower. Close-air support procedures improved, saving the lives of SOF personnel and inflicting causalities on the enemies.

The conduct of SOF in Afghanistan and Iraq dramatically and rapidly elevated their role in U.S. military strategy. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and his civilian staff have frequently expressed their firm support for SOF. Politicians on all sides of the political spectrum enthusiastically support using SOF for the GWOT. The current popularity of SOF in Washington is so high it has led one SOF officer to claim that, "Everyone is infatuated with SOF . . . to do anything against SOF would be absolute sacrilege on both sides of the aisle."[67] Few could have predicted how quickly SOF's status would increase. Seemingly overnight, SOCOM, which had to lobby strenuously even to participate in the Gulf War, suddenly found itself with an increased budget, new authority, and a global mandate.

SOCOM's Rapid Expansion and Inevitable Difficulties

The increasing relevance of SOF in U.S. military strategy has not come without growing pains. The rapid expansion of responsibilities and authority to SOCOM has reportedly resulted in tensions between conventional commanders and SOF units. A classified Pentagon report claims that there is "broad resistance" from regional military commanders and other government agencies with responsibility for the GWOT to SOCOM's new authority. SOCOM is one of the only agencies that does not report to the new director of national intelligence, John D. Negroponte, but instead to the Secretary of Defense. SOCOM's new global counterterrorism responsibilities reportedly have angered some geographic combatant commanders, who previously had this role. Although SOCOM now is able to act as a supported command, this new authority has not yet been tested and its actual application may prove difficult.[68]

SOCOM has worked quickly to develop the Center for Special Operations (CSO), which will plan for its global mandate, coordinate its activities, and aid interagency cooperation. However, its role to plan and coordinate for operations in the GWOT seems to overlap and conflict with the authority of the National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC). Counterterrorism efforts of the CIA and DoD currently are not integrated. Even efforts within the DoD reportedly are separated from one another; white SOF—unclassified operations—and black SOF—classified operations—are planned in isolation from each other. In addition, although there is a coordinated global direct-action counterterrorism strategy being conducted by SOCOM a similar plan does not exist for unconventional warfare.[69] Even among the

units engaged in aggressive counterterrorism activities, a confusing chain of command exists, further complicating efforts.[70] These organizational problems and jurisdictional issues will need to be resolved.

The SOF community currently is faced with manpower shortages that could affect its ability to conduct the GWOT. Although the total number of SOF personnel exceeds 47,000, only approximately 16,000 of these are "shooters," who are directly assigned to combat special operations. In addition, SOCOM "currently can sustain only about 5,000 of those on deployment in the global war on terror."[71] Today, around 80 percent of SOF deployments are in either Afghanistan or Iraq, along with other assignments in Columbia, the Horn of Africa, and Pakistan. Added to that, as official Thomas W. O'Connell has recently hinted, are numerous and unacknowledged clandestine and covert SOF operations.[72] There are new plans to add manpower to most SOCOM units but it will take time to train quality personnel. Sacrificing training standards to rapidly expand SOF ranks historically has proven disastrous, and SOCOM is adamant about not repeating this mistake.

These difficulties have been answered in part by the addition of a permanent detachment from the Marine Corps to SOCOM. This will include a foreign military training unit, a direct-action unit, and an intelligence and support unit. This expansion by the Marine Corps is a significant move, given the historical reluctance of the Corps to relinquish its elite units to SOCOM. Marine Corps leaders have cited a desire to remain relevant and a desire to "get the Marine Corps fully involved in the . . . war on terrorism" as the main reasons for the change. The move further demonstrates the growing relevance of SOF in the current security environment.[73]

There are also retention problems within SOCOM's ranks. An alarming number of SOF personnel, especially those with over twenty years of experience, are leaving the military, most often for higher-paying civilian security jobs and, to a lesser extent, to the CIA for paramilitary activities. These losses are in addition to SOF members retiring. The reasons for this are understandable. Financial difficulties are common among those in the SOF community.[74] In response to this serious problem, Congress has allocated $168 million to retention, with promises of increased pay and up to a $150,000 bonus for seasoned veterans if they agree to stay in SOF for an additional six years.[75] Thus far, it appears that the program is having the intended effect.

The Long War

The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review has confirmed what was already known to most after the fall of the Taliban and Saddam Hussein; SOF is now a prominent part of U.S. military strategy. How much of a part is still a matter of debate. Some defense analysts have proposed that in the future conventional units primarily will *support* SOF in the field, although others believe this is an overstatement.[76] Regardless, the newest QDR has confirmed the value and necessity of SOF in fighting the "Long War" against terrorism and other "irregular" threats. The QDR also proposes an ambitious plan to expand the force structure of SOF and increase the budget of SOCOM to fight the GWOT.[77]

At present, SOF operations overwhelmingly are in active war zones (Iraq and Afghanistan). There also are numerous operations in allied or friendly countries, providing training and support to combat Islamic insurgencies and terrorism within their respective borders. It is likely, however, that over the next several decades SOF increasingly will operate in and against countries with which the United States is neither allied or at war, but which have not granted permission to U.S. troops to operate on their soil. Although numerous SOF deployments in support of GWOT are known, SOCOM officials have admitted

that "there has been a substantial investment in low-visibility and clandestine activities."[78] These operations may cross the line between clandestine and covert action and could involve coordination with the CIA's paramilitary units. Although the recommendation of the 9-11 Commission to transfer all CIA paramilitary activity to the Defense Department has been rejected, a heightened level of coordination and integration is possible, given the successful joint operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

More broadly, there is debate on how to employ SOF in the GWOT. Critics both inside and outside the SOCOM community have expressed concern that direct-action missions aimed against insurgents and terrorists—referred to by some as offensive counterterrorism—have far outpaced unconventional warfare, civil affairs, and psychological operations. Critics complain that too little emphasis is placed upon "winning heart and minds" in the Muslim world and too much upon using SOF to track, locate, and capture or kill terrorists. Donald Rumsfeld has made no secret of his support for using SOF hunter-killer teams to eliminate terrorists. This model has scored many successes, many of which surely are not reported. However, critics counter that while direct action may be important, the United States should concentrate upon the training of foreign militaries to enable them to combat terrorism within their own borders. This is viewed as ultimately being more important over the long term than is the use of special mission units and direct action missions. Enabling nation's militaries to fight terrorists within their own borders and prevent new groups from forming is a goal of the United States in the GWOT.

Critics also point to the overemphasis of direct action for SOF in the current COIN campaigns in Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Afghanistan. Policymakers slow to understand and recognize situations in Afghanistan and Iraq only implemented COIN campaigns after the insurgencies had taken root. Despite being fought by SOF, the actual conduct of the early phases of Afghanistan essentially was conventional. As Kalev Sepp states, "paradoxically, once the enemy was beaten in open combat and had transitioned to guerrilla warfare, the U.S. Central Command placed conventional division and corps commanders in overall charge of military operations in Afghanistan."[79] After the fall of Kabul, conventional forces took over mission planning and operations, and SOF performed raids against remnant Taliban and al Qaeda forces and devoted only limited resources to the population. The period from 2002 to 2003 witnessed a resurgence of the Taliban in many provinces.[80] Finally, in 2003, the United States adopted a comprehensive COIN strategy aimed at winning the hearts and minds of the population, including the introduction of the successful Provisional Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) program.[81] This strategy, which has undergone a series of modifications, also stresses the need to capture or kill the leadership of the insurgency and confront the growing narcotics problem. SOF currently has a wide variety of roles and is allowed to work with and among the Afghan population.

In the chaotic period after the fall of Baghdad SOF were busy tracking down the infamous Iraqi "deck of cards"—high ranking members of Saddam's regime—and searching for WMDs. In other areas, where SOF had begun to reestablish governance, units turned these projects over to the conventional military.[82] SOF in Iraq continue to be used primarily in direct-action roles against terrorist and insurgent forces and not on engaging the population. Army SF have only a limited role in training and acting as advisors with Iraqi units. Civil action programs involving SOF, while numerous, are subordinated to regional commanders and often come second to confronting enemy forces.

Overall, these issues reflect the difficulties conventional commanders are having in facing insurgencies. As one Special Forces officer stated, "most guys in the Army are taught to kill people and destroy things, but COIN warfare is about how to protect people and build things."[83] Conventional commanders, for the most part, have grasped the advantages of

SOF direct action capabilities. For example, a recent report indicates that SOF units gather 80 percent of all actionable intelligence in Iraq.[84] Alarmingly, however, commanders still largely fail to appreciate SOFs, much less their own, critical role in working with and among the population.

As a general rule, indirect SOF missions aimed at the population are problematic for military leaders because such missions tend to take considerable time and results are difficult to quantify. The 2006 QDR is significant because it articulates the importance that irregular warfare will play in the future and the need for the U.S. military to adapt effective COIN tactics. SOCOM officials, aware of this debate, have recently reaffirmed support for winning hearts and minds in the GWOT. On April 5, 2006, Admiral Eric Olson, Deputy Command of SOCOM, testified before Congress that while SOF were performing numerous raids to disrupt enemy forces, "it is Special Operation's unique, less visible ability to help establish the conditions to counter and defeat terrorism through Unconventional Warfare, Psychological Operations, Foreign Internal Defense, and Civil Affairs that will become increasingly vital to our long-term success in the GWOT."[85]

It seems that a combination of these two approaches is the most pragmatic solution, although determining the proper mix will prove difficult and controversial. Working with local populations in an attempt to address the root causes of terrorism/insurgencies and provide security has proven successful in the Philippines, Georgia, Columbia, and Africa, and continues to show signs of progress in Afghanistan and Iraq. Therefore, foreign internal defense will remain an important function of SOF in the GWOT. Likewise, aggressive actions by SOF against terrorists and insurgents in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Horn of Africa, and Pakistan are also a vital means of fighting the GWOT. Despite the controversy surrounding high-end operations, there is legal authority for a president to conduct preemptive strikes, order targeted killings, and utilize hunter-killer teams. These operations have demonstrated their utility in preempting terrorists at the tactical level. Likely, the proper balance between these approaches will have to be tailored for the region, even subregions, and modified as conditions dictate.

Future of SOF and U.S. Military Strategy

This work has explored the difficult journey of SOF toward relevance in U.S. military strategy. The conventional military's skepticism of SOF was gradually replaced with an understanding of its capabilities, to finally recognition of the value of these units, matching the already existent desire of political leaders. The catalyst for this transition has been a marked change in the security environment dominated by asymmetric threats, the declaration of the GWOT, and the conduct of SOF in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The present security environment indicates the role of SOF will remain important for U.S. military strategy. This viewpoint is dependent upon several factors. As established previously, political support is crucial for SOF to either remain or even increase in importance in U.S. military strategy. However, political support can be a two-edged sword, as the example of President Kennedy reveals. Presently, civilian leaders on all ends of the political spectrum have placed enormous responsibility and confidence in the skills of the SOF community. Eliot Cohen cautions, "elite unit prominence occurs only during a politico-military crisis, for it is then that the public searches for heroes and politicians look for panaceas."[86] More negatively, the use of SOF may be substituting for a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy. Leaders determined to destroy terrorist networks have limited options available to them, in this void they have latched onto the promises and even mystique of SOF. The

temptation of limited investment with substantial return continues to make SOF an attractive offer to policymakers, even if this understanding sets up a false expectation.

The current security environment will continue to be dominated by asymmetric threats from nonstate and small lethal groups employing unconventional tactics for at least the next several decades. SOF is likely to play a prominent role in future operations involving terrorism, unconventional threats, and counterproliferation of WMD.

SOCOM officials and military experts have expressed their desire to expand the use of SOF as "global scouts" for the GWOT. This use of SOF involves not only clandestine intelligence gathering but other traditional military activities under the broad category of preparation of the battle-space. A large part of the overt mission of "global scouts" falls to Army SF, with their extensive contacts and experience with foreign militaries.[87] Such operations would involve cooperating with host nations to identify new or emerging terrorist groups and provide rapid response to any crisis.[88] The clandestine aspect of SOF mission as "global scouts" will likely involve intelligence gathering and limited direct action missions with possible operations involving the CIA paramilitary and special mission units. At present, SOF are reportedly operating intelligence-gathering missions from U.S. embassies, an issue that has caused tension between the Defense Department, the State Department, and the CIA.[89]

Others believe that SOF units, particularly SF units, must have much longer deployments overseas and that there should be permanent assignment of SOCOM assets to "watch the hundred-plus terrorist groups and insurgencies around the world."[90] The SOF units assigned to this task would ideally be in a position, along with CIA assets and resources, to both warn the U.S. national leadership and develop plans for missions that SOCOM would perform alone or in conjunction with other agencies. This approach has the benefit of placing a large emphasis upon cooperation with local allies and forces.

The threat of rogue states—particularly Iran and North Korea—and the possibility of a coup in Pakistan makes SOF role in counterproliferation even more urgent. The ambivalent future of U.S.-Chinese relations is an open question and the role of SOF facing a potential Chinese advisory is not yet fully formulated. The prominence of SOF beyond the GWOT is uncertain. Ambiguity surrounding when or even if an end to the GWOT can be declared may ensure continued prestige and new responsibilities. SOF may also transition to address other non-state actor threats such as transnational criminals or significantly increase their current role against drug traffickers. Fortunately, the history of SOF has demonstrated the ability of these units to adapt to new challenges and situations.

The performance of SOF in the field has, for the time at least, negated many of the previous arguments against such units. The change in the security environment after the Cold War was suited to the skills and adaptability of SOF and gradually convinced policymakers and skeptical military leaders of their value. The attacks of September 11, 2001, ushered the United States into the GWOT and paved the way for SOF to be rapidly elevated in U.S. military strategy. Subsequent conduct in Afghanistan and Iraq further expanded the authorities and roles of SOCOM, but the rapid expansion of authority and growing demand for SOF has caused numerous growing pains, many of which remain unresolved. Command relations difficulties, turf battles, and interagency squabbles are perhaps to be expected. New strategies and tactics will likely be tried and tested as Islamic terrorism changes and adapts to U.S. actions.

The continued use of SOF in U.S. military strategy ultimately will be dependent upon continued military and political support. A future administration could alter, limit, marginalize, maintain, or expand the use of SOF depending upon its willingness to use these tools.

In recent decades, political leaders have proven willing to use this unique means of national power. Given the probable continuation of asymmetric challenges, the United States increasingly will require the superb skills of SOF to address difficult and unconventional problems.

Notes

1. *Special Operations Command Annual Report 2005* (United States Department of Defense), p. 4. ⟨Available at www.socom.mil⟩.

2. Colin Gray, "Handfuls of Heroes On Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?" *Parameters* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 2–23.

3. Eliot A. Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Center for International Affairs, 1978), pp. 53–79.

4. David Thomas, "The Importance of Commando Operations in Modern Warfare 1939-82," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 4 (October 1983): 709.

5. Ibid.

6. Gray, "Handfuls of Heroes On Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?" 2–7.

7. Thomas, "The Importance of Commando Operations in Modern Warfare 1939-82," 709.

8. Bryan D. Brown, "U.S. Special Operations Command: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century," *Joint Forces Quarterly* 40 (1st Quarter 2006): 38.

9. Leroy Thompson, *Secret Techniques of the Elite Forces* (London: Greenhill Books, 2005), p. 21.

10. Bryan D. Brown, "U.S. Special Operations Command: Meeting the Challenges of the 21st Century," *Joint Forces Quarterly* (1st Quarter 2006): 38.

11. Thomas, "The Importance of Commando Operations in Modern Warfare 1939-82," 704.

12. Initially, the United States and the Soviet Union abided by the 1962 Geneva treaty. The NVA, however, never evacuated from Laos. In 1965, President Johnson begrudgingly allowed U.S. Studies and Observation Group (SOG) personnel to reenter Laos. Richard H. Shultz, Jr., *The Secret War Against Hanoi* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1999), p. 1–100.

13. Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 37.

14. Michael Lee Lanning, *Blood Warriors: American Military Elites* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), p. 110–112.

15. The program identified and removed Viet Cong infrastructure in the South. The program utilized a variety of methods, including hunter-killer teams, pseudoforces, direct action raids, sting operations, assassinations, and intensive intelligence gathering missions and arrests. The results were stunning, with over 26,000 Viet Cong agents and supporters killed, 33,000 captured, and 22,000 "turned." Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), p. 310–311.

16. One incident involved eight Special Forces soldiers who were ordered by the CIA to eliminate a South Vietnamese double agent. The soldiers were arrested for murder but the CIA refused to produce witnesses, citing security reasons, and the case was dropped. Later media stories claimed that SOF members had been involved in the assassination of over three hundred Vietnamese officials suspected of treason. Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1975), p. 1314–1316.

17. The British strategic hamlet program was intended to separate the population from the insurgents by physically relocating the former to areas under protection. This was suppose to prevent insurgents from engaging in recruitment, intimidation, or obtaining supplies from the population. In Vietnam, the concept also called for the army to "clear and hold" the area until local defense could be built up and security restored and maintained. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, p. 1006–1007.

18. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, p. 70.

19. Jonathan Graff, *United States Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Implementation in Iraq* (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 2004), p. 42.

20. Colonel John D. Waghelstein, "What's Wrong in Iraq? Or Ruminations of a Pachyderm," *Military Review* (January–February 2006): 114.

21. James E. Hayes III, *Honing the Dagger: The Formation of a Standing Joint Special Operations Task Force Headquarters* (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, May 26, 2005), p. 4.

22. Philip E. Kapusta, *A Comparison of U.S. Navy Sea Air Land (SEAL) Teams and U.S. Army Special Forces* (Monterey, CA: Naval Postgraduate School, June 2000), p. 5.

23. At Entebbe, Israeli SOF rescued all but three of 106 captives aboard a hijacked airliner. West German SOF at Mogadishu successfully rescued all 86 hostages aboard a Lufthansa plane. Paul R. Pillar, *Terrorism and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001), p. 98.

24. Lanning, *Blood Warriors: American Military Elites*, pp. 122–133, 168–171. Originally, the Navy's SMU was called SEAL TEAM Six but has undergone a series of name changes, most recently becoming Naval Special Wafare Developmenit Group (DevGroup).

25. Terry Griswold and D.M. Giangreco, *DELTA: America's Elite Counterterrorist Force* (Osceola: Motorbooks International, 1992), p. 13.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Billy Waugh and Tim Keown, *Hunting The Jackal: A Special Forces and CIA Soldier's Fifty Years on the Frontlines of the War Against Terrorism* (New York: Avon Books, 2004), pp. 156–160; Richard Shultz Jr., "Nine reasons why we never sent our Special Operations Forces after al Qaeda before 9/11," *The Weekly Standard* 9, no. 19 (January 26, 2004).

29. Jamie Hammond, "Special Operations Forces: Relevant, Ready And Precise," *Canadian Military Journal* (Autumn 2004): 19–20.

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