



Joint Special Operations University and the Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

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Special Operations Theory

Foreword by Professor Colin S. Gray

Essays by

Charles Cleveland

Tom Searle

David Baratto

Emily Spencer

Robert G. Spulak Jr.

James Kiras

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Francisco R. Wong-Diaz, Esq.

Travis Homiak

Harry (Rich) Yarger

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A Social Marketing Analysis for Suicide Prevention Initiatives in USSOCOM: A Framework for Future Research and Success, JSOU Report 17-2, R. Craig Lefebvre

A Unified Theory for Special Operations, JSOU Report 17-1, Richard W. Rubright

IS and Cultural Genocide: Antiquities Trafficking in the Terrorist State, JSOU Report 16-11, Russell D. Howard, Marc D. Elliott, and Jonathan R. Prohov

On the cover. In August 2016, JSOU held a symposium to examine the notion of special operations theory and whether such theory is valid, suitable, and necessary. GRAPHIC BY JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY.

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From the Director

This is the third of three volumes that follow from an August 2016 JSOU symposium on special operations theory. This compendium is not a comprehensive or exhaustive treatment of special operations theory. Rather, it is intended to continue the conversation and, at least, bring to a culminating point the argument over whether a theory of special operations is necessary and if the suggestions are suitable, feasible, and acceptable. The editors of this compendium, JSOU resident senior fellows, highlight opposing views and conclude with an academic, joint special operations perspective on the status of the theory argument.

There is no official or accepted general theory, but there is a strong desire for one and there is evidence that parts of such a theory have existed for decades at various headquarters, schools, and team rooms across the enterprise. On the other hand, some regard theorizing in general as a necessary intellectual exercise, but of little operational value. No matter where you stand on the subject, this monograph is worthy of your time and consideration.

The Center for Special Operations Studies and Research is especially pleased to welcome Professor Colin Gray's contribution and foreword. Combined with references to other seminal works and JSOU Press monographs on special operations theory, we trust that this will serve as a benchmark until there is a change of conditions, authorities, doctrine, or operations.

Francis X. Reidy
Interim Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

Foreword

Professor Colin S. Gray

I find myself considerably challenged by the authors of this work to locate, and then sometimes explain, what I am able to make of the interest in special operations theorization recently. My modest contribution in this foreword is simply to offer nine comments that pertain to many, indeed most, of the chapters written by expert contributors. I will answer and comment on the fundamental questions: Should there be a theory of special operations at all? And, if so, why? I state plainly that I have no institutional interest to satisfy with my opinions. What follows, for good or ill, is strictly personal.

First, it is noticeable that the chapters have steered well away, too well I believe, from necessarily political judgments about the high policy choices handed down to Special Operations Forces (SOF). Up to a point, this is simply prudent. Nonetheless, those choices surely all but demand critical attention in a theory of special operations. Of course, national choices are far above and beyond the competence and responsibility of SOF—who are required to obey the orders they are given. As an elementary pragmatic matter, the proper path is clear enough; you must do what you are told to do by proper authority. However, a theory of special operations needs to signal very clearly indeed just how important it is for the United States Special Operations Forces to be committed only to worthy and winnable enterprises. Those who doubt my need to emphasize this point, I recommend they read the tragic tale about the United States in Vietnam told by General H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty*.¹ The over-familiar mantra of ‘ends, ways, and means,’ typically does not allow (political) ends the analytic prominence they merit.

Professor Colin S. Gray is a political scientist and expert in national security policy, defense policy, strategy, theory, and military history. He is a professor of international politics and strategic studies and director of the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, England. He also serves as a senior fellow at the National Institute for Public Policy in Fairfax, Virginia.

Second, I must admit I find myself undaunted by the wide variety of demands that SOF can attract. There is a core of competencies that serve, if not quite a myriad, at least many tasks in many different places. Versatility and adaptability generally serve well enough. The SOF soldier has to be a warrior athlete who can think strategically. Those are tough requirements to pose for SOF selectors, but that is what needs to be. This may well be somewhat contrary to the norm in American popular culture, but SOF have to be physically, mentally, and emotionally superior. That is why selection needs to be arduous.

Third, a working theory of special operations provides essential guidance on the context for their professional military duties, and also as to the categories of action that may impinge upon them. Another way of expressing this would be to say that theory provides vital historical and strategic mapping for SOF. Nothing lasts forever, but theory can identify political and strategic phenomena that persist.

Fourth, theory identifies core skills essential for the conduct of special operations. The need for these, though they have to be somewhat adjusted and adapted for a changing technical context, persists generically for generations. The basic attributes required for the successful conduct of special operations have persisted over time and are relevant to many tactical contexts. SOF doctrine should not be limiting in its necessary influence.

Fifth, concerning SOF personnel, the quality of the soldier must always be of superior importance over quantity. While a truly excellent large force may be preferable to a truly excellent small one, it should be understood that a notable increase in force size always must mean a reduction in the average quality of soldiers. This has always been true historically, with no significant exceptions. Leonidas of Sparta knew it, and we do not know it any better!

Sixth, while intellect is of high importance in the planning and conduct of special operations, it gains advantage by exercising that sometimes rare quality we can term 'strategic sense.' Historically, it is not obvious that this quality can be taught, but experience can trigger its appearance if it is already there intuitively. Strategic theory and its evidential backing at least can attempt to teach with some historical exemplars. It is important to note that although the quality of key personnel for SOF is vitally significant, the choice of appropriate targets for special operations is usually more significant still.

Seventh, while on one hand it is, of course, essential for SOF to exercise and develop teamwork to a high degree, it would be as well to remember that institutional loyalty can prove testing for the military discipline that operations frequently need for their contributions to overall strategic effect. In extreme dysfunctional mode, one can be troubled by evidence for what might develop into what amounts to a 'private army.' To some degree, tribalism is both inevitable and desirable in the military, but it can be taken too far and is hard to arrest.

Eighth, admittedly somewhat in contrast to the previous point, the global history of SOF misuse is all too rich. Especially in an ideologically egalitarian popular democracy like the United States, the very idea of truly special forces is something that is almost culturally unethical. A mass army, as was raised in WWII, and even as performed in Vietnam in the 1960s, proved that some examples of average soldiery were very average indeed. The Cincinnatus model of the citizen soldier rarely is a contemporary phenomenon (or most probably in ancient Rome also). However, it is only prudent for the planners of special operations to be engaged both in design and execution of SOF.

Ninth, and finally, I considered carefully the critique of a special operations theory developed and presented by one scholar in particular, James Kiras. His argument is impressively deep and wide in reach, but I suspect that it fails to empathize sufficiently with particular features that are unique to special warfare, even though they abut, if do not actually intrude, elsewhere also. What can and must be said, though, is that the chapter here generically hostile to theory creation for special operations, raises fundamentally important arguments that need unambiguous and preferably clear and certain answers, before further effort is expended upon this task. The highly critical chapter makes a vital contribution to the effort to consider theorization for special operations. I am confident that there are answers sufficient to reply persuasively to the critical chapter, but they need to be developed and engaged fully in the debate that this whole project needs to know in order to continue further. By way of a fairly generic very brief comment on the critique offered, I believe that the authors chose to categorize some activities in existing Services problematically and in ways that could, arguably should, belong under a special operations 'Eagle.'

The monograph produced for it can be regarded as essential training before probable, but only probable, deployment in action supportive for a dominant theory of special operations. Where should the venture drive next?

As a first step, I suggest that competent and plausible answers need to be provided in answer to the first-rate critiques offered in this volume. Following that necessary vital exercise, concentrated and focused work is needed to produce a draft that would be relevant to all institutional members of the broad special operations community. It is possible, even probable, that it would not be highly pleasing to the entire community, but ironically such may need to be the case.

Endnotes

1. H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997).

Introduction: Special Operations Theory

Peter McCabe

In August 2016, military and civilian personnel from various organizations convened for a Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) hosted symposium on MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. The purpose of this symposium was to foster an exchange of ideas through scholarly presentations by researchers, policymakers, and operators on the broad range of issues facing the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) enterprise today and in the future. The symposium theme takes into account that Special Operations Forces (SOF) have become an important instrument for the United States to address the security challenges of today. However, the pace of operations and the frequency of employment obliges professionals to again examine the notion of special operations theory and whether such theory is valid, suitable, and necessary. The symposium invited thought-leaders as participants and speakers to build upon previous discussions and writings to identify new insights to propel future research in service to the enterprise. Some of the key questions addressed during this symposium were: Is the popular employment of SOF a short-term trend or is special operations more appropriately regarded as another Service uniquely suited to hybrid threats or so-called 'gray zone' conflicts? Do current theories adequately address the role of special operations? How can existing theories be improved in the performance and effectiveness areas?

So, what is theory? Scientists use the scientific method in an attempt to create an accurate understanding and representation of the world. Theories and hypotheses are created as an attempt to explain scientific observations

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This volume presents divergent perspectives on special operations theory, which are not only to inform the reader, but also possibly to disprove existing special operations theories.

and are later tested through experimentation. It is commonly said that scientific theories can never be proven, only disproved, thereby allowing the possibility for new and more accurate theories to be created. This volume presents divergent perspectives on special operations theory, which are not only to inform the reader, but also possibly to disprove existing special operations theories.

A theory can be compared to a lens that supports the ability to see the world around us, and have some conception of the reality in which we live. To this end, theories help to put the world in focus. Theories can be a normal lens that we use every day or they can be telescopic to furnish an overview of the strategic environment. For a special operations theory, it would require a lens that allows the user to understand special operations and help determine what is important. As Professor Colin Gray argues, “theory should cast a steady light on all phenomena so that we can more easily recognize and eliminate the weeds that always spring from ignorance; it should show how one thing is related to another, and keep the important and the unimportant separate.”¹

Based on a set of core assumptions, theory provides a picture of the world, explaining how it is put together, what dangers exist, and what opportunities are present. Theory may explain international behavior and/or make predictions about the future. Various theories compete to most accurately explain world politics and guide states in their international behavior. Special operations theory, specifically the ones addressed in this volume, continue the dialogue within the community. While there is no one theory that fully explains special operations, there are numerous theories by Navy Admiral (retired) William McRaven, Harry (Rich) Yarger, Robert G. Spulak Jr., Richard Rubright, and Tom Searle, that attempt to address aspects of special operations.

This volume provides analysis of special operations theory from a broad range of perspectives. Chapters are penned by practitioners who are active in operations, policy, and research. Readers may want to compare the various points of view on special operations theory and decide for themselves if such a theory is necessary. If so, does a general theory of special operations exist or can numerous specific theories cover all the equities? The chapters have

been organized to build upon the symposium opening remarks provided by Lieutenant General Charles Cleveland (U.S. Army, Retired) in chapter 1. The following can be considered an executive summary of each chapter to highlight the arguments and propositions of the authors. No one chapter will persuade the reader that special operations theory is required or not required, whether a unified theory is possible, or whether a special operations paradigm must consist of a multitude of theories. However, after reviewing this volume, the reader should be able to locate themselves on the spectrum of the argument and be better informed. After all, the point is, as Yarger notes in his chapter, “Theory’s rightful role is education and its focus is to inform decision making, doctrine, and operations.”

Keynote Address: Lieutenant General Charles Cleveland (U.S. Army, Retired)

General Cleveland’s transcript remarks opens this look at special operations theory, because he recognizes the inherent challenges and opportunities. In doing so, he expounds on the importance of the symposium and having an overdue conversation about special operations theory. He believes it is important to lay claim to a piece of the operational spectrum and provide serious thought to that part of the operation. He notes there is no place inside the Department of Defense that addresses America’s ability to conduct irregular warfare or how/when to conduct a surgical strike. But any special operations theory should not be U.S. only. Rather, it should be universal—functionally and geographically. Any special operations theory should accommodate U.S. expeditionary SOF partners (global SOF network).

During his remarks, General Cleveland presents four specific challenges, three observations, two ideas, and one promise. The challenges include: a theory must be unit agnostic; creating a unified theory will be hard; conducting the theory over the long haul; and any theory needs to reconcile the tactical, operational, and strategic. The three observations include: there should be no separation between government agencies and SOF; outsiders see us best; and SOF are reluctant to lay claim to ideas such as the human domain. The two ideas serve as cautions on bringing the SOF community together and how special operations will no longer be the ‘go-to’ force. Finally, General Cleveland promises that even though pursuing a special operations theory is difficult, it is an incredibly important endeavor.

The general's remarks are an important read for everyone within the SOF enterprise. Today, SOF are the main effort in many conflicts; SOF have a responsibility to more fully develop its "operational art so it can be bur-nished, improved, taught widely, practiced, then critiqued, and changed." This opening chapter sets the stage for the theories and counterarguments in later chapters.

Special Operations Theory and Doctrine: A Symbiotic Relationship

Major General David Baratto (U.S. Army, Retired) argues the "relationship between theory and doctrine is interdependent and symbiotic in nature whereby both benefit from the relationship." He accomplishes this lofty goal by defining both doctrine and theory. Joint doctrine is defined in the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* as "Fundamental principles that guide the employment of United States military forces in coordinated action toward a common objective and may include terms, tactics, techniques, and procedures." The definition of theory is less precise. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "an explanation of a phenomenon arrived at through examination and contemplation of the relevant facts; a statement of one or more laws or principles which are generally held as describing an essential property of something." General Baratto compares and contrasts theory and doctrine and concludes they have complementary aspects. Especially, theory applies to doctrine to guide operational design, campaign planning, and planning and execution of military operations.

Epistemology, Paradigms, and the Future of Special Operations Theory

Robert Spulak's chapter "provides a rigorous foundation for the application of theory to understanding special operations." Epistemology explores how knowledge and theories are created. Paradigms are the characteristics of research as a community endeavor. These are lofty concepts and while they may be intimidating to wrestle with and consider, the special operations community would be wise to consider Spulak's argument: "theory becomes the knowledge that informs expectations." The numerous special operations theories are conflictual in nature and that is a good thing. These theories and future theories can coalesce into a future paradigm for special operations.

As Spulak notes, “there will be multiple theories about special operations with a future paradigm.”

Operationalizing SOF Theory: A Function of Understanding SOF Power

This fourth chapter provides the reader a historical view of the rise of special operations. Colonel Bernd Horn (Canadian Armed Forces, Retired) argues that special operations/SOF theory was operationalized throughout history, and through special operations employment the community “learned, promulgated, and exercised.” The evolution of SOF and its strategic utility are tied to the concept of SOF power. Horn contends that SOF power consists of three components: capability, effect, and cost. The key to operationalizing SOF theory is to understand SOF power, especially those key political and military decision makers who can influence the capability, effect, and cost of special operations.

A Blueprint of What is Possible: The Value in a Theory of Special Warfare

Lieutenant Colonel Travis Homiak (U.S. Marine Corps) argues there is value in a SOF-specific theory. More importantly, a SOF-specific theory can be the basis for action. Much like the previous chapter, Colonel Homiak advocates for operationalizing SOF theory. He first explains the five tasks that theory performs (based on historian Harold Winton). These five tasks are: define, categorize, explain, connect, and anticipate. Colonel Homiak also makes the distinction between ‘special operations’ and ‘special warfare.’ Special operations are distinguished from conventional operations whereas special warfare are those operations working by, with, and through indigenous forces. This chapter reinforces the three previous chapters’ view that theory provides a mechanism to educate policymakers on what special operations can achieve and ultimately move theory into action.

Civil Context for SOF Theory

The sixth chapter expands upon the notion that special operations has strategic utility. Kurt Müller focuses this chapter on the need for SOF theory to link with and achieve policy goals. Müller notes the “small footprint of special operations offers advantages across the spectrum that facilitate

interagency integration to achieve a national objective.” This chapter explores that path to interagency integration and the role of unconventional warfare. Müller concludes that without multiagency perspectives and an agency to integrate analyses, it is doubtful an operational response will meet a national policy goal. It all starts with special operations theories that illustrate the strategic utility.

Outside the Box: A Theory of Special Operations

Tom Searle provides a summary of his much longer 2017 JSOU Press monograph of the same title. The main argument is that a theory of special operations needs to define its operating space. Searle does this through a series of figures to demonstrate that special operations are outside the conventional box. The final figure depicts the changing nature of conventional operations whereby conventional operations expand into traditionally special operations missions (foreign internal defense, civil affairs, unconventional warfare, military information support operations, and counterinsurgency). Therefore, a theory of special operations must take into account the changing nature of the conventional and special operations roles and missions.

The Future is Now: The Need for a Special Operations and SOF Theory

Emily Spencer asks an important question: Is theory required to maximize the utility of SOF and effectively conduct special operations into the future? She provides a resounding yes. However, one overarching theory is insufficient; rather, she argues for a SOF theory to examine the complex relationships (people) and a special operations theory to harness the potential of its missions. By examining both, Spencer provides the reader with a different way to view theory. Special operations theory can focus on three relationships: global environment, military/political decision makers, and conventional operations. SOF theory can explain SOF-specific characteristics not inherent in other military theories. These two theories, special operations and SOF, are distinct but interrelated; only by formulating and applying them will special operations improve.

Do We Even Need a Theory?

This important ninth chapter is the other side of the coin. James Kiras argues that while a special operations or SOF theory is possible, having one is unnecessary. In fact, Kiras suggests that related and existing theory is sufficient for understanding special operations. One such example is Civil War scholarship which discusses irregular warfare. Other examples include a myriad of scholarship on strategic utility and effect, civil-military relations, and other historical accounts. Kiras warns that any special operations/SOF theory could be too bureaucratic (prescriptive) for the special operations community. In addition, Kiras argues the special operations community will most likely reject theory that is not “credible.” In other words, non-special operations outsiders will find it hard to convince operators to accept a theory focused on their community. This chapter will challenge the reader to explore the adequacy of extant theory and efficacy of special operations/SOF theory as a pursuit.

President of the United States (POTUS) and Special Operations Theory

Francisco Wong-Diaz presents a critical look at two theories—Spulak and Yarger—and discusses the role of the U.S. President in special operations theory development. Wong-Diaz argues that the POTUS is the key driver on the development, structure, growth, and use of SOF. In addition, the relationship between POTUS and other military leaders, including USSOCOM commander, is critical in the use and future of SOF.

Two Special Operations/SOF Theory Challenges: Building Depth and Avoiding Prescription

As a previous writer of special operations theory, authoring the book *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*, Rich Yarger offers up sage advice on moving forward with special operations/SOF theory. A theory must present a framework on “what is necessary, appropriate, and acceptable for special operations/SOF and justifying it to the public, policy-makers, and conventional military.” Included in this framework is how special operations/SOF fit into the broader national security apparatus, identify its strategic value, and the need for constant change to keep up with the operating environment.

Special Operations Theory: Looking Ahead

It should come as no surprise that the final chapter is reserved for JSOU. It is, after all, the university that hosted the theory symposium in August 2016, and published this volume. Paul Lieber takes on the monumental task of pulling together everything we learned at the symposium, then mulled it over and provided a coherent conclusion. What he finds is a community in the embryonic stage of theory building. While there are many examples of published and unpublished special operations theory (Admiral McRaven,² Kiras,³ Spulak,⁴ Turnley,⁵ Yarger,⁶ Knarr, et al.,⁷ Gray,⁸ Shultz,⁹ Lieber,¹⁰ Rubright,¹¹ and Searle¹²), the community is still grappling with the basic issues. Is a theory necessary? According to Kiras, it is not. Existing military theory can account for special operations. According to most of the community, a special operations specific theory is necessary. Is there one overall general theory of special operations? Possibly, if the reader is convinced by the works provided by Rubright and Searle (vol. 1 and 2 of the JSOU Press theory series). Lieber challenges the SOF community to move beyond the basic questions and develop theory that is distinguishable from conventional forces.

Endnotes

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11. Richard W. Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations* (Tampa, FL: JSOU Press, 2017).
12. Tom Searle, *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations* (Tampa, FL: JSOU Press, 2017).

Chapter 1. Keynote Address—Special Operations Theory

Charles Cleveland, Special Operations Theory Symposium Remarks (transcribed) 30 August 2016

I have purposely tried to kind of stay away from all things Special Operations Forces (SOF) for certainly this first year. I don't know whether that is a good thing or a bad thing, but what it has allowed me to do with a little bit of over a year in retirement is put 400 steaming hours on my boat. And for those who don't know, about a year before I retired I bought a boat, and have been, when I can, living life at seven knots and at anchor or holed up at a marina some place, and frankly, that gives you time to think and reflect on, what for me was, 37 years in the Army, add to that four years at the Academy, and so that's over 40 years, and of that 36 years of them basically were in special forces.

The one firm conclusion that I have drawn upon reflection, is that I could not have picked a finer way to serve the country, and I enjoyed every minute of it; well, maybe not every minute of it, a good portion of it, and certainly there was nothing, I think, that could have been more professionally satisfying. My goal is to put three times that amount on the boat this year. So you kind of know where my mind is on this stuff, and just to put it in perspective, there is life beyond the walls, the compound, and the uniform, but what you do is incredibly important.

Reflection has showed me that you really don't necessarily notice it when you are in the middle of it, but looking back on it and looking from outside in, I cannot tell you how much the country depends on you. And so

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it is incumbent on you to think about the business that you are in, and do some deep thinking about this profession. That's why I applaud Brian Maher [President] at the Joint Special Operations University, and the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). You won't hear me say that very much. I do not applaud USSOCOM for many things, but I do applaud them for beginning this, and having this symposium, because they need a presence where thinking is most vigorous, and where questioning of the precepts and the assumptions that form the basis of who we are takes place.

You have the correct brain power assembled here to make a significant dent in the question of whether or not you need a SOF theory or a theory of special operations; I think that's better put. You know, as [JSOU Senior Fellow] Jim Powers pointed out, I mean it was a descriptor really in the original concept and we think holistically about it. You have civilian special operations assets in the country as well, and you have conventional forces that do things that look very special operations-like or can be. So, the lines are blurry and we need to ensure that whatever we come up with explains and basically doesn't necessarily draw the hard lines but accommodates the flow between civilian and military, and conventional and special operations. Those are realities of the world we live in and whatever you come up with have to, I think, accommodate that reality.

You are going to get a chance to not only talk about the problem, but I hope actually lay out some markers about what solutions might SOF theory consist of and it's not uniquely special operations theory, which again you can come down on that side as well, and there are probably some School of Advanced Military Studies purists out there that would say: "Hey! The theory is already written. It came down from the mountain somewhere in Germany, and now someone has codified it." But I hope it's not just SOF theory. I hope we can at least agree on the idea that what constitutes today's current operating theory is proving inadequate because it appears to me that it's failing the nation.

At the end of the day, success is what this is all about and not losing, winning, although sometimes you campaign to not lose, which is different than a campaign to win. You have to understand the nuances. At the end of the day, you know, [former deputy commander of U.S. Army Special Operations Command] Dick Potter once said, "Hey, Charlie!" This was when he retired. Jim Powers and I were just talking about Potter. He lives within proximity of Potter, which means he is his de facto aide de camp, I guess. If you worked

for Dick Potter once, you worked for him always, right? But, he used to tell me: “Hey, make sure you are successful because a successful Army pays pensions.” So I now have a stake in your success. I realize that. Okay. So I look forward to helping and providing a little bit of a perspective.

Now I have to admit, I struggle with the word ‘theory’ in what we are trying to do. I am not sure, and this is probably more a failing on my part, which I probably shouldn’t admit so freely, but I am not sure what the theory for conventional operations is; I mean whether we can pin it down. So, is theory the right word? I don’t know. Maybe it is. Maybe Clausewitz more. Maybe we’re Sun Tzu updated. You know, I don’t know. I will let you figure that out. Again, we have got the brain power here to do that.

The two Joint Special Operations University theory monographs were very helpful, and I encourage you to read those, but I think both encounter the problem that confounds most attempts at trying to generalize or provide overarching tenets and principles to special operations, namely to encompass, in my view, both the indigenous centric war fighting capability in foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare (UW), and the other part of the community using [Naval Postgraduate School, Dr.] Rothstein’s term, “a hyper-conventional raiding capability.” Well, they are in many, many, many ways different.

They are different by design, by structure, by selection, and so part of the question is how fungible are SOF? And your theory needs to answer that question or help answer that question, or provide the framework to answer that question. Because right now, it really is up to the individual commander or those planning staff officers. A Navy SEAL team looks like an Operational Detachment Alpha, looks like a United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command team, looks like a Ranger squad, or a Ranger platoon. At some point, we have to recognize that there is a limit to fungibility.

And one thing about Rothstein who coined the term, I think, appropriately, you know. He is a retired special forces guy who I first met I think in El Salvador, San Miguel, when he was an advisor there. I see Rothstein on the docket here, but you really need to know that this is a very experienced SOF operator, as well as being a very, in my view, one of the premier thinkers in the business.

So it is either that, you know, the squaring of those two problems, and it becomes so general if you try to provide one of these tenets, one of these principles of theory to encompass both things, that it either becomes so

general as to be SOF truth-like, right? So, humans are more important than hardware, which is a great bumper sticker. It is true, but it doesn't necessarily help you plan the campaign. Right? And it hasn't, frankly, proven to be all that beneficial here locally when you try to fight for resources. Right? Or it's wrong. All SOF are culturally savvy warrior diplomats, and we know that's not true.

And everyone knows in the business, as Jim pointed out, that the special forces missions aren't much help either, direct action, special or strategic reconnaissance, essentially tactical missions, and not necessarily SOF alone. They often receive equal or better billing than UW—which is as much as the name implies; a form of warfare, distinct formal war, and frankly one that has been much derided over the course of my career often within the special forces community itself, as well as the special operations community at large, but being effectively put into practice today by the Russians, the Iranians, and Maxwell will tell you, even the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. If we miss the kind of war we are fighting, we risk failure.

And of course, we still haven't decided if civil affairs are truly special operations. Right? And the mission or discipline, which shall not be named, operating under the cover of Japanese soup, suffers from not being lethal, therefore not sexy, and almost always is some other agency to do, but they don't seem to be doing it well, as we are repeatedly being told that in the case of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. We are losing the influence, information—dare I say—psychological war. So, the missions aren't helpful either; and that they may be in law just means its bad law. What might be a more appropriate question is whether or not there isn't, perhaps, an American way of war using Russell Wiley's term from his book, the SOF edition, or an American way of irregular warfare.

When I was at the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), the approach we took was to lay claim to a part of the operational spectrum, but then we also went after the very fundamental thing of Army operational design, and again, that caused a little bit of a tremor in the foundations out at Leavenworth, but I think we were largely successful because what I learned was and what I would tell you is that when you are right, you are right, and they can't refute the logic. We oftentimes don't engage in the conversation because we are afraid of the reaction, perhaps, from an organization or an institution that we might have to be beholden to in some way, in this case, the U.S. Army. Sometimes you have to take on the orthodoxy.

And I think we came up with some SOF operational design tenets. I think 13 went to 11 that I think might have been helpful. Maybe that's part of the solution. Again, I will leave it to you here to really start working your way through, but regardless, either theory, way of war, or operational design, whatever you want to call it, some fundamentals about what constitutes special operations as Jim mentioned and articulated earlier. What bounds it is necessary today, and it is necessary today more than ever.

The rise of SOF from being a footnote to the main effort means that we have responsibilities to more fully develop our operational art so it can be burnished, improved, taught widely, practiced, then critiqued, and changed. In fact, you kind of have to ask yourself: We have a joint special operations university here, but what the heck are we teaching? All things should stem from the fundamental contribution that SOF makes to the nation, so we have to start writing sheet music and quit playing by ear, right? As much as we love playing by ear, right? It is all jazz. I can remember when I was down on the team: "We don't need no stinking operations plan." Now things have changed a lot.

It still needs to be our jazz, but we have to recognize that we have lot more players in the orchestra now, and we have to lead that orchestra. That means that we have to educate men and women in the business on the broadest tenets of what constitutes special operations. You know, our network to defeat a network mantra, or if you look at the collection of agencies that it takes in order to conduct our form of UW that former deputy commander of USSOCOM, Lieutenant General John Mulholland (U.S. Army, Retired) practiced with the Northern Alliance; a huge number of agencies come to that dance.

All of those players need to be able to read their part of the sheet music. Well, somebody has got to write it. So such a theory can help lay out special operations options also and better calibrate expectations on the part of policymakers. We can't lose the character of who we are in the process of supersizing up, but we can't avoid doing so. We owe it to the nation, and we owe it to those coming up through the ranks behind us.

I fear that we lose our character. I mean I don't want to become too conventional. We have to hold on to what makes us who we are, and I am afraid we already attempt, in somewhat of an attempt because of these wars, to put so many forces on the battlefield doing very similar sorts of things that we, perhaps, unintentionally homogenize SOF almost too much. Now, I am

going to fight the urge to say that it's about time that we got around to this task or to ask, "Hey! Where have you been for 30 years?" I mean because really looking back on it that is half the time that it took the Army, which waited 60 years (from 1952-2012) to require our SOF to put in the cannon and Army doctrine SOF document. So, I mean you are twice as good as the Army. Right?

The opportunity was afforded because men like Lieutenant General Bennet Sacolick (U.S. Army, Retired), then commander of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School and then Chief of Staff of the Army, and General Ray Odierno (U.S. Army, Retired)—a very experienced field commander—gave us that opportunity. While doctrine is not theory, in order to develop what became U.S. special forces doctrine or our Army version of it, we made some assumptions on what might constitute a start toward special operations theory. We started with the battlefield effects and the objectives of special operation units, our task to achieve, and principle methods used to achieve these effects.

We took the step further and said, "What is missing from the inventory of things that we have in our kit bag that we need to create to do better those things which is too often what we fail to do." Too often the starting point is what is extant versus what is needed. It is applying what you have today versus figuring out what is needed for today and tomorrow, and whatever that discussion should hinge on, it should be beyond the foundational theory that supports what special operations provide the nation.

But simply, we have two main efforts, and two main effects rather, that we had to achieve. And one was to achieve U.S. and partner nation objectives primarily through the use of indigenous forces, or indigenous mass if you will, or to conduct unilateral raids to achieve specific U.S. objectives. We gave them names. They weren't very popular, but that was a great thing about being a three-star in charge of the Army segment of the business with a chief of staff that was supportive.

We wrote them into doctrine as special warfare to describe that collection of activities from foreign internal defense to UW and surgical strikes to talk about this very, very hyper-conventional, high-end capability to conduct raids, not to say that they are always just unilateral. There are variants of everything between those two, if you will, goal posts. So while they are controversial in my view, they better delineated the results we needed.

Now, for the surgical strike piece, the latter of the two, Admiral McRaven's work (*Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*) at Naval Postgraduate School, I think, is some of the best thinking out there in terms of the tactical level outlining how speed and surprise can locally offset mass and fires. Admiral McRaven's operative theory constitutes today's special operations, but its principles apply not only to SOF. If you think about it, those principles apply to any raiding force.

Those operations also are well understood by conventional commanders. Because in fact, it is very much related to what they do for a living, which is a challenge for SOF theory investigators. Now, how blurry is the line between SOF and the conventional raiding capabilities? For the former, of the indigenous centric war fighting capability though, there is no clear U.S.-authored theory on supporting the indigenous war fighting.

There are, of course, great works, some of them written by panelists that you are going to have on insurgency, counterinsurgency, resistance, and revolution. The concepts and doctrines on the development, manipulation, and employment of indigenous mass, fires, etc. or indigenous special operations with the use of resistance groups is, in my view, pretty thin, and certainly very thin inside of the Department of Defense (DOD).

As a result, views on how the U.S. and third parties can approach the use of indigenous groups to achieve our objectives, their objectives—it is hard for us to recognize and reconcile the idea that it may not be our campaign, but one we are advising or helping. It's difficult. That's foreign. How you do that is different than being the guy in charge. It takes a different set of skills. We need to recognize those differences.

So, I commend everybody on the USASOC Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies project because I know [Retired Colonel] Dave Maxwell will. I think it is really a great ongoing effort to look at resistance, rebellion, and insurgency. The question is what you do about it and how you do it and that's up to the practitioners and the leaders in the business. They need to help you, the academics, but it's your responsibility. The lack of a well-articulated theory for this side of SOF hasn't prevented us though from trying. I mean, witness the number of missions we have been under building partner nation capacity. Conventional and SOF units doing that, or training and equip programs—the latter being especially concerning in that some leaders are promoting training and education as a viable option—for instance

in Syria, resulting in what, in my view, was a tremendous embarrassment to the country, and frankly to the community.

What was the best military advice given? How informed was that military advice? Who gave it? One should hope that such a theory on how to support these things, some part of a holistic approach in how you explain special operations, the foundations of it would have resulted in a better educated senior leader, perhaps, and planners. You might have seen the challenge in removing fighters from the front lines with their families to become better at basic marksmanship for three-to-five second rushes.

Indeed, it may have resulted in better advice to policymakers on how to execute more effective UW campaigns, which when matched with effective calls for fire from forward locations, from lethal U.S. raids and strikes might constitute what could pass for SOF operational art being applied in the battlefield. We may be there. We may be working our way to that. The battlefield is a great teacher. I am hoping that is where we are headed. The idea of using our technological advantage with indigenous mass, I think, is powerful.

A theory of special operations should also get us beyond very debilitating obstacles to our thinking that has left the nation vulnerable, thus purposely diminishing and nearly terminating the whole idea of UW as a military mission. Theory has to protect the capabilities. It has to provide the rationale for their existence. It has to be the first line of defense when somebody comes out saying, “Hey, so what country in South America are you going to take over?” And that question was posed to me by USSOCOM staff. I listed off a few that I would have liked to have taken over at the time. The input wasn’t appreciated all that much since he outranked me, but that sort of thinking is temporary. The theory has to outlive that temporary condition. I think there are so many decisions ... talk about near misses. When I graduated from the special forces officer’s course back in 1979, the rumor was going about everybody with a red flash; you might as well buy a different colored one because 7th Group was going away. It wasn’t but in a blink of an eye when I am visiting Rothstein in El Salvador, and you look back a few short years, five, six years, and you realize just how myopic that decision would have been because 7th Group was knee deep into what was going on in Central and South America.

But the demands of the time were, “Hey, we don’t need them.” And you can go on ... I mean I can remember giving the brief, and I have told this

story a couple of times ... forgive me for repeating, but my first Quarterly Training Brief to my group commanders, my battalion commander, I mentioned, "Hey, I want to be the world's finest UW battalion in the DOD." And he goes through the entire Quarterly Training Brief and says, "Everything is good on this, everything you are proposing for your battalion, but you have got to take all that UW stuff out of there. We don't do that anymore." I was like, "What? Really?"

So, again, the good thing about being the guy in charge of USASOC is when I go to the senior leader courses, and [USASOC Command] Sergeant Major George Bequer is here in attest to this, I would ask those great young Green Berets: "What is your mission?" And I get this laundry list of things, and I felt compelled to remind every one of them that your job is to be America's UW capability. Be prepared to go into a denied area, operate for an extended period of time working with indigenous groups to overthrow a belligerent or occupied power. Now, we can do foreign internal defense. We can do all those other things, but your reason is to be expert enough to do that. That's what the nation needs. We need a theory that actually allows it to be something more than just 'it might pass through,' and I try to keep it focused that way. So, again, I am going to give you four challenges, three observations, two ideas, and one promise. Four challenges: OK, the country needs this theory,

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or something like I said, you can debate what you call it, for special operations because the current theories on the application of military force don't adequately account for the role special operations now fulfill.

The ambiguity of the narrative—direct/indirect, national theater—which is beneficial to some segments in the community I'll grant you but, overall, the lack of a theory encourages misunderstanding, and those descriptors, that narrative, has not been helpful. It gives unrealistic expectations and allows others less qualified, in my view, to lead campaigns, which today are SOF campaigns or as I think, Clausewitz would correct me, right, or campaigns where the defeat mechanism is basically the SOF component. Why would we job that out?

The first challenge is the theory needs to be unit agnostic. It needs to be taught at service schools and USSOCOM. Well, then what are you going to

base that education on? And that's what I think this theory or this foundational underpinning of a holistic SOF, this idea between the indigenous centric war fighting and the hyper-conventional raid, bringing those two halves together at the campaign level to say this is what a SOF campaign looks like, and then educating leaders as they move up the chain to be able to command those campaigns, which are very complex.

Now, if you think about UW, it's the orchestration of subversive efforts, of sabotage, of confidence targets, knowing when to increase the tempo of certain operations, knowing when to pull back, having the discipline to wait when forces in the field aren't ready. It takes somebody that frankly understands all that to orchestrate it properly. The second challenge will be not to confuse, as I said before, current structures or units as capabilities that are required.

The second challenge, a unified theory of special operations, will be difficult. It is not unlike finding Einstein's unified field theory in physics, right? Anybody know what that is? There's got to be a few closet physicists out there. This idea of squaring gravity and electromagnetism, but they haven't done it yet. So this idea of actually building something that encompasses both parts of what SOF consists of, it's going to be hard. I hope easier than the unified field theory is, but it will be a challenge.

The third challenge will be to organize yourself to conduct the inquiry over the long haul, to be able to resist the challenge, overcome the challenge. Now, witness the resistance to the gray zone, or earlier, the SOF International Security Assistance Force Joint Command (IJC) business. Right? Now, I am not saying that they don't all deserve to be resistant. There needs to be a robust debate about it, but when you promulgate this theory, or whatever you are going to come up with, it is going to be controversial. It will draw fire because in the Washington, D.C., area, it will be seen as another SOF end run. And you have to have leaders that are prepared to defend it. They'll have to know what it is, and you'll have to be able to explain it to them. It will have to stand on its own, you know, the global SOF network. The SOF IJC made all the sense in the world, but why was it immediately attacked?

The fourth challenge will be reconciling the tactical, operational, and strategic; the theory needs to account for all three. It is obvious that certain tactical events, Bin Laden's raid for example, had a strategic effect, but what is most absent in my mind in special operations' approach, are special

operations' approaches and campaigns in the operational mode and we are not organized, frankly, to either write those campaigns or to command them.

The Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOCs), while they are much better than they were when [Retired Colonel] Chuck Fry took over from ... who was the first TSOC commander? I can't remember. It went from 23 guys in the first TSOC when they peeled off part of the J-3 Special Operations Detachment down in USSOCOM, and when Fry took over eight months later, he tells the story, he was down to four because guys had purloined and pulled them back in the J-3. They wanted nothing to do with this TSOC business.

Well, TSOC has gotten better since then, but what's their role? Are they mini special mission units or should they be? What kind of campaigns are they supposed to promulgate? Or are they just whatever the Geographic Combatant Command wants them to be? And so, then you are leaving it to somebody who doesn't necessarily have any inkling about what necessarily SOF are supposed to provide. Where he is supposed to get it? Inside his war college? Right? So we need this.

So you have got to reconcile this, and frankly in my view, we have got to figure out a way to quit outsourcing our war-fighting at the campaign level to the Army and the Marine Corps. And I love my Army, right, but the Army corps really is poorly placed in charge of a very indigenous centric special operations heavy war front. And it's a great guy that is there, and the staff that is under him, they come from every other background and we are doing it too often for it to just be acceptable as a one off.

I observe three things. First, there should be no bright line between the capabilities of selected government agencies and SOF with respect to support the indigenous war fighting, or the lethal use of drones and force in the region. Nor is there necessarily a bright line between where a raid is a special operations activity versus a conventional. Units straddle both ends. The Rangers straddle the conventional special operations world. Special forces straddle the other government agencies and special operations world. Let's recognize that. Organize yourselves so you can do it well. Don't fight it. Figure out how to use it.

Likewise, the solution to the SOF IJC piece, in my view, was a great opportunity for USSOCOM and the U.S. Army to collaborate deeply on forming what should have been a hybrid core to let the nation have the right capabilities in that headquarters' residence there to fight that fight. But we resisted,

and we were arrogant enough to say, “Hey, we are going to give you the 100 best of our guys and just put them on top of the corps.” And, of course, with the Army, it was like, “Oh!” So our approach was, I think, poor, and frankly, I think we missed an opportunity.

Second observation is that outsiders sometimes see us best. You have assembled a great group of people here to take on these questions. Use them. Start at the fundamentals and fight through the temptation to retrofit the theory to today’s reality. We can do better for the nation. Keep an active and ongoing dialogue with academics, thinkers, technologists, your components; task the components to be part of the discussion, to be active in it.

It should be vigorous. It should be ongoing and continuous. Each symposium should punctuate the ongoing discussions, not be the place in which you come to actually grapple with and capture the best you can and then head off to the next course. I am not saying that just about special mission units. I am saying that about the business that is SOF. So, use these academics, thinkers, technologists, your components, and joint force commanders who see us in the field. And remember that they are doing so using us in the field absent of a whole lot of formal education or training on what special operations really does in the broadest sense.

My third observation is that we in SOF are reluctant to lay claim to primacy in any portion of the confidence spectrum ... I saw this with the push-back on the human domain. No one could argue the points on the concept, but resistance became overwhelming when realization set in that it would require a change in the status quo. Somebody was going to be perceived as a loser. The Marine Corps caught on very early and basically gave it the Heisman, but it gave SOF its domain, and while nobody owns the domain, the one in which SOF operates principally is, in my view, the human domain.

And, again, the community has to grapple with the idea, either take it on or not take it on, but again, your place, its place, SOF place, it’s rise to promise has a reason, and that reason is tied to the changes on the battlefield. And the changes on the battlefield appear to me, again, this DOD school educated guy, is basically the reemergence of this new space that we are having to fight in. And our tools that we used to fight in that space before had become less relevant. You can’t pick up everybody from a certain population, move them into a containment area, and declare everything outside of that containment area a free-fire zone. That is not acceptable to this nation anymore. So, this nation needs different tools.

You represent those tools. That's the rationale behind your rise to prominence, selective targeting and using indigenous forces to solve their own problems. So it is SOF' domain in my view, again, maybe that's not the right view, but take on and figure out where your place is. Again, in my view, we had primacy there because we were the maneuver force of choice in that space.

My two cautions relate to the fact that SOF have to do a better job bringing this community together. Firstly, we are still living, in my view, with the sins of our fathers, you know, as early as Delta versus Blue Light, that kind of stuff. At some point, special operation officers and noncommissioned officers must undergo, again, this indoctrination educational process that teaches them to be practitioners and leaders in the entirety of special operations.

The problem being evident, as I indicated, is at the TSOC level where commanders have no experience with supporting indigenous war fighting or special warfare, to use the Army term basically, are for the first time given those commands. That's not fair to them. It's not fair to the staff, and frankly it could be, in my view, very damaging not for any purposeful reason. We just need to have an education process that at some point, I mean that's with the conventional unit, that's what the Army, the Navy, and the other Services do. That's with special mission units.

My second caution is the pendulum will inevitably swing away from SOF. We have been hearing whispers now for quite a while about the chatter of SOF or USSOCOM fatigue. That SOF has not suffered the same fate that it did after Vietnam or even post-Desert Storm when I had a reduction in force in my own group when I was at United States Army Forces Command. I called my buddies saying, "Hey! Man, I am looking at your file, you need to consider getting out." We took a one-third cut just like everybody else.

The fact that we are not going through that is based on basically the battlefield out there and a mature USSOCOM helping them defend the equities and the interest, but this never-ending war is going to come to some kind of conclusion at some point, and you can bet that the pendulum is going to swing back the other way. This foundational theory, this understanding of what the nation needs from the operations community articulated in theory is to help you get through those kinds of times of change when the pendulum swings back.

And you have got a tremendous number of laboratories ongoing right now around the world. You can test your ideas on theory against those

laboratories or whatever you want to call it. Use that experience that is going on daily out there.

Lastly, the promise. Even though this is hard, it is an incredibly important endeavor. The promise is that if you do this right, if you set the conditions, you have basically the promise of solving a whole host of chronic problems

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that I have lived with my entire time in this business. The problem of SOF and conventional. You know, it's going on again.

FORSCOM wants to take command of all the SOF that come into theater. It has no staff officers or understanding of how to use that capacity when it's given to them, and in fact, may not have the dominance of force on the field, but still wants a stake in it. So, a good foundation, again, deep thinking, an articulation

put down in writing of a theory, of an American way of irregular warfare has a promise of solving a lot of these problems. The nation needs world class capabilities in both. I applaud the effort and I hope that you are successful.

So, what are special operations? How blurry should the lines between special operations and conventional operations, or military and civilian special operations be? What constitutes a SOF campaign? Is there such a thing? How does special operations differ? What are the characteristics of these differences? National theater, direct/indirect, what is the proper way to capture and bin special operations?

Is the assumption that special operations missions are so closely related that specialization isn't required as much as it used to be, stratifying then instead vertically based on proficiency as opposed to by function? I obviously have a decided opinion on that, and certainly you could come down on a different side of that question. A sound and agreed upon SOF theory should set the predicate to help answer this host of questions. It's hard, but it needs to be done. I wish you the best of luck, and remember, you damn well need to be successful because successful SOF pay pensions too.

Chapter 2. Special Operations Theory and Doctrine: A Symbiotic Relationship

David Baratto

For some time now, there has been ongoing controversy about the value and purpose of a special operations theory. It has been argued to be of questionable value, at best, since there are sufficient theories that address warfare as a strategic phenomenon with special operations and Special Operations Forces (SOF) as lesser-included cases that do not warrant their own “special theory.” Dr. James Kiras [Air University], in an article presented at a Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) 2016 special operations theory symposium, offered a number of reasons why a unified, or synoptic special operations theory is not needed and goes even further to opine that doing so might even be dangerous.¹ He proposed that special operations theory might be confused with, or mistaken for special operations doctrine.² This chapter contributes to the dialectic by presenting an opposing view that failure to continue pursuit of special operations theory would be negligent on the part of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), the special operations community, and JSOU in particular. The chapter attempts to demonstrate that the relationship between theory and doctrine is interdependent

The chapter attempts to demonstrate that the relationship between theory and doctrine is interdependent and symbiotic in nature whereby both benefit from the relationship.

Major General David J. Baratto (U.S. Army, Retired) graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1964 and was commissioned in the infantry. He served as Commanding General of Southern European Task Force, finished his military career in the Central Intelligence Agency as director of military affairs with 32 years of service (predominantly in special operations), and retired in December 1995. He completed his public service with 10-plus years as a research analyst for the Institute of Defense Analyses specializing in interagency operations, personnel recovery, and special operations.

and symbiotic in nature whereby both benefit from the relationship. Theory can be used to enhance inquiry, investigation, and understanding of special operations. Tested and refined through continued observation and experimentation, it can assist in the development and enhancement of special operations doctrine.

About Doctrine

Ambiguity and Paradox

Joint doctrine is defined in the *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*: “Fundamental principles that guide the employment of United States military forces in coordinated action toward a common objective and may include terms, tactics, techniques, and procedures.”³ Heeding caution in practical application creates a certain ambiguity in the interpretation. To vary from doctrine suggests that one may be leaving *terra firma*, or solid earth, and treading on the shaky ground of faulty judgment. This places a serious damper on innovative approaches at a time when contemporary experience mandates emphasis on adaptive and learning organizations. The practitioner too is faced with the reality that written doctrine is sure to lag best practices by at least three to five years.⁴ Confounding the issue even further, the dividing line where doctrine ends (in the sense of fundamental principles guiding actions in support of national objectives) and tactical (and ancillary) publications begin, is indistinct. Approved and published doctrine provides the military with an authoritative body of statements of best practices on how military forces conduct operations and common lexicon for use by military planners and leaders. Ideally, modern military doctrine should link theory, history, experimentation, teaching, and practice, as closely as possible.

Cultural Differences

Perhaps the ambiguity and paradox of the definition itself is a partial explanation why different services place different values on doctrine. Once, in an orientation briefing to the author, given by a spokesperson of a prominent three-letter agency, the briefer referred to doctrine as the “D” word. It was followed with an admonition that it should not be used internal to the organization for fear that it might conjure up a need to codify practices. Recent senior level retirees at the JSOU theory symposium in 2016 also expressed

variations of the same view. Some services take doctrine seriously, others merely entertain doctrine as a necessary bureaucratic evil. At the joint level, it is embedded into the force structure analysis process through the doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy⁵ model. The reality is that the joint force in 2020 is about 80 percent established today or already programmed. Hence, the only way to make significant and adaptive changes to our force structure is one of two ways: 1) by making changes in the other 20 percent, or 2) by making changes in the nonmaterial domains of doctrine, organization, training, material, leadership and education, personnel, facilities, and policy—namely doctrine, training, leadership, and policy. It is no coincidence that doctrine writ large is considered the engine of change, since doctrine is the driving requirement for what is to be done.

Doctrine and Theory Often Overlap

Given the time-lag mentioned above in the development of written doctrine, *The Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*, published in 2012 attempts to describe a “doctrine” that may be applicable to the future thereby “theorizing” future operational environments and attendant operational concepts.⁶ Its purpose is to guide force development toward Joint Force 2020. While it does not provide detailed guidance, it advances new concepts for joint operations and suggests attributes that define the future force.

Similarly—neither theory nor doctrine—*Joint Operating Environment 2035* “illustrates several ideas about how changes to conflict and war might impact the capabilities and operational approaches required by the future Joint Force.”⁷ It is designed to encourage thinking about future conflict through the lens of various trends, conditions, and contexts. For all practical purposes, it provides a theory of the alternative scenarios, which expands our understanding of the challenges we face in the future security environment circa 2035.

Theory can rather quickly evolve into doctrine. We can see the process evident in a *Best Practice Paper* written by the Deployable Training Division of the Joint Staff J7 in July 2013.⁸ The paper emphasizes the need for developing a creative operational approach and suggests certain design activities that are at variance with traditional planning activities such as co-creation of context in understanding the operational environment and “adaptive

planning” when responding to changes in the operational environment. Although lagging somewhat in influence and treatment, design theory had its debut in doctrine via chapter III of Joint Publication 5-0, August 2011.⁹

The design writings and initiative begin with a more critical inquiry into understanding the operational environment and the various forms of complexity, ambiguity, and non-linearity that are inherent. “Operational design combines aspects of military theory, systems theory, writings on the nature of problems and problem solving, and the challenge of critical and creative thinking in order to help the Joint Force Commander and staff understand and develop effective solutions for complex military problems.”¹⁰ To that end, the *Planner’s Handbook for Operational Design* is intended to provide useful details to commanders and planners on joint operational design and stimulate critical thinking, discussion, and debate on assimilating value-added ideas into the Joint Operational Planning Process. It reviews relevant constructs from military theory such as Clausewitz’s center of gravity, culmination, and the value of dialectic discussion; Jomini’s interior and exterior lines of operation and the contemporary variant of lines of effort; and Liddel Hart’s indirect approach. In addition, several system theory and problem theories are introduced pursuing new approaches to analyze the problem. Recent efforts in dealing with ill-structured problems have also introduced a design initiative to the Joint Operational Planning Process.

About Theory

Definitions of Theory

Numerous definitions of theory exist depending on the context and the nature of the discipline under discussion. Without diving too far into the technical or esoteric, and more than adequate for the purposes of this chapter, the Oxford definition will suffice: “A supposition or a system of ideas intended to explain something, especially one based on general principles independent of the thing to be explained.”¹¹ One can trace the etymology of the term and take delight in contemplating and debating an interesting variety of peculiar and arcane definitions, but such a venture would only serve to entertain the reader, not necessarily illuminate a better understanding of theory as it applies herein. What follows are rather generic descriptions and examples of theory and how theory may be used by the layman to enhance inquiry, investigation, and understanding of a particular phenomenon.

Various Categories of Theory¹²

Depending on our experiences, education, and aptitudes, we are naturally inclined to choose a particular category of theory with which we are most comfortable. Yet, the fact of the matter is that it is virtually impossible, if not impractical to categorize theories into discrete little boxes to contemplate without regard for their interrelationships.

Scientific Theory

The University of California, Berkley, defines a theory as “a broad, natural explanation for a wide range of phenomena. Theories are concise, coherent, systematic, predictive, and broadly applicable, often integrating and generalizing many hypotheses.”¹³

Any scientific theory must be based on a careful and rational examination of the facts. Facts and theories are two different things. In the scientific method, there is a clear distinction between facts that can be observed and/or measured, and theories—scientists’ explanations and interpretations of the facts. Theories are the result of a tested hypothesis. While hypotheses are ideas, theories explain the findings of the testing of those ideas. Theories can be improved or modified as more information is gathered so that the accuracy of the prediction becomes greater over time.¹⁴

Social Theory

Broadly speaking, social theories are analytical frameworks or paradigms used to examine social phenomena. Social theory encompasses ideas about how societies change and develop, about methods of explaining social behavior, about power and social structure, gender and ethnicity, modernity and civilization, religion, morality, and numerous other concepts. According to Harrington, a noted modern sociologist, social theorists do not view sociology, or the ‘human sciences,’ as a science per se in that they see definite limits to the extent that scientific method can be applied. Social theories cannot be subsumed under general principles of regular cause and effect relationships the way physical elements are classified by natural scientists, through repeatable experiments.¹⁵

Social theory transcends the observable and repeatable, but remains essential to greater understanding. Human sciences “study meanings, values,

intentions, beliefs, and ideas realized in human social behaviour and in socially created institutions, events, and symbolic objects such as texts and images.”¹⁶ Harrington argues that social theory and critical social analysis can be used to give us reasoned accounts of the dynamics, motives, and forces extant in the real world, not only as an aid in seeking to better comprehend the complexities of modern society, but in an attempt to change the world for the better. He opines that the idea of ‘science of society’ is sociologically related to other disciplines and humanities such as political theory, anthropology, history, and philosophy. The implication is one of nonlinear and complex relationships between cause and effect—input and output.

In a similar sense, Clausewitz’s extensive study of and writing on disciplines related to war enabled him to expound prolifically on the theory of war, the art of war, and the science of war in book two of his opus, *On War*. Therein he declares the primary role of theory as merely to help us comprehend history. He believed that the mark of true theory was in its capacity for continued learning and growth of ideas. He saw war not only as a phenomenon of controlled violence and destruction, but also as a phenomenon imbedded in society and politics. He portrayed war as a ‘true chameleon’ whose properties and internal laws seemed to vary from nation to nation and age to age. War as an extension of politics accounted for the ‘dual nature of war’ for the variability. He also wisely advised that “theory becomes infinitely more difficult as soon as it touches the realm of moral values,”¹⁷ again suggesting a complexity, or perhaps even a nonlinearity between cause and effect. Of note here is the caution not to automatically assume that morality and religion are synonymous. As philosopher David Hume stated, “the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, to be compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion. Hence, it is justly regarded as unsafe to draw any inference in favor of a man’s morals, from the fervor or strictness of his religious exercises, even though he himself believe them sincere.”¹⁸ There should be little doubt concerning our need to learn and understand more about the nature, relationships, and dynamics of ideology, religion, morality, and culture.

Military Theory

Military theories, especially since the influence of Clausewitz in the nineteenth century, attempt to encapsulate the complex cultural, political and economic relationships between societies and the conflicts they create.¹⁹

Clausewitz further claimed that the “primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled. Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply and expect the reader to share one’s views.”²⁰ Another common definition applicable to military theory is: “A theory is a set of accepted beliefs or organized principles that explain and guide analysis.”²¹

Popular generalized theories such as Sun Tzu’s *On the Art of War*, Clausewitz’s *On War*, Jomini’s *The Art of War*, are some of the first ‘military theories’ that come to mind when a serious student approaches the subject. One could argue one of the reasons they are still viable today is their generality. However, one could also argue the more general nature of the theory, the less utilitarian value it might have to the current day; thereby demonstrating a need for narrower theories that have relevance to today’s combat employment across the spectrum of warfare. This may explain a series of more recent theories that describe various types of warfare based on the type of combat forces employed (air, sea, land power), the character of warfare (high or low intensity conflict, irregular, conventional, unconventional, etc.), and numerous other categories.

Much like social theory, “military theory cannot have the same precision or consistency as theory in the physical sciences, because the means of measurement are highly uncertain.”²² In addition, since events are not repeatable, they do not lend themselves to experimentation and rigorous proofing. “Clausewitz rejected quantitative analysis and scientific formulas in favor of philosophical insights.”²³ Likewise, one can expect that emerging theories in any given era will draw on ideas and influences advanced in other fields, e.g., scientific, social, systems, complex, chaos, et al.

Special Operations Theory

A number of scholarly papers and monographs have been written on special operations theory;²⁴ a quick perusal of the referenced list will give the reader some appreciation of the effort that has already been made to encapsulate special operations theory into relatively concise descriptions—concise at least when compared to *On War*, or the *Art of War*. The authors have expressed the need for and the value of special operations theory; some have attempted to propose synoptic theories that better explain the value, appropriate use

and preconditions for success of special operations. However, in this author’s opinion, most of them fall short of the mark in one important aspect—they emphasize the warrior, direct action side of special operations, at the cost of properly addressing the indirect action side of special operations capabilities. Additionally, and more importantly, the narrow focus on direct action limits SOF thinking in two important dimensions. The first limitation emanates from the fact that the predominant context of those theories is nested in the specific condition of “war” as the strategic environment, as opposed to the generic strategic environment itself. This failure takes the focus off what special operations can do to shape the environment prior to the initiation of the actual beginning of warfighting, and likewise how

The first limitation emanates from the fact that the predominant context of those theories is nested in the specific condition of “war” as the strategic environment, as opposed to the generic strategic environment itself.

special operations can assist in the resolution of conflict after termination of conflict. This error is particularly grave when considered in light of complexity and chaos theory and their extreme sensitivity to initial conditions. The second limitation comes from the false assumption that systems and organizational designs appropriate for force-on-force application are timeless and universally adaptable. Management and organizational theory has changed considerably from the time of the

Industrial Revolution and Frederick Taylor’s theory—later known as scientific management theory which evolved with recent developments and applications of network theory, as espoused by General Stanley McChrystal (U.S. Army, Retired). A discussion of these special operations related theories is beyond the scope of this paper, but hopefully, the reader is stimulated to do further research on the evolution, interdisciplinary relationship, and potential application to SOF in today’s complex strategic environment. A partial list of references is provided.²⁵

Theory and Doctrine—Similarities and Differences

Similarities

Both attempt to describe the “how” of a particular event or activity, and both identify underlying principles governing the activity. Although both mandate empirical testing for accuracy and truth, doctrine assumes a higher

standard of rigorous testing. In that sense, theory benefits from its symbiotic relationship to doctrine. Both can be descriptive, anticipatory, and prescriptive.

Differences

The doctrinal process is lengthy and bureaucratic.²⁶ Typically it takes about two to five years to get a substantial change published. In addition, the coordination process is often convoluted resulting in a “watering down” of the originally intended message. Controversial thoughts are sure to bog the process down even further, resulting in delays and the probability that the thought will be stricken entirely. Doctrine requires a fair amount of institutional capital not only as a result of its several year developmental process, but also as a result of its interface with and required attachment to other main line processes.²⁷ Military doctrine evolves primarily from practice; it codifies best practices and goes beyond being prescriptive by purporting to be authoritative.

Theory, on the other hand, can be easily created and just as easily discarded, or simply ignored. Contributors to theory can come from all walks of life and disciplines adding depth and breadth to discussions and important dialectic processes that are considered to be essential to the development of sound theory. Several theories might exist for any given activity or organization, but doctrine is expected to codify ‘best practices’ in more restrictive pragmatic fields. Accordingly, not all practices and certainly not all innovative ideas are presented. Controversial ideas are not likely to make it to final doctrinal publication. Doctrine is rooted in military knowledge and developed primarily by military doctrine writers in a collegial setting of shared views thus bounding out, at least to a certain extent, widely divergent views and free thought. In this setting, collaboration and compromise reign supreme—not dialectics that might illuminate ambiguities extant in the real world.

Complementary Aspects

Perhaps the best example of how theory and doctrine can complement each other is to peruse chapter I of Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, 25 March 2013. In a recent revision, an entire Section A on theory was added to the beginning of chapter I. The chapter

provides a broad overview of fundamental beliefs and categorizations of war, war fighting and planning, and defines terms (task, function, and mission) relevant to the conduct of war. Clearly, the joint doctrine writers saw that section A was not doctrine per se, but without it, what follows would have been out of context and sans an intellectual framework. It elaborates further: “Extensive theory—developed by both classical and contemporary writers and practitioners—underpins the planning and execution of military operations. Some theoretical constructs such as center of gravity relate specifically to military operations, while constructs such as systems theory can apply across a wide range of disciplines.”²⁸ If that is the case, then simple logic suggests that a case can be made for theory applying to doctrine that ostensibly guides operational design, campaign planning, and planning and execution of military operations.

How Special Operations Theory Could Enhance the Development of Special Operations Doctrine

Risks and Concerns

There are those, both within and outside the community who caution against too much energy and thought being given to the creation of theory, or for that matter, doctrine. Special operations is noted for the ability to adapt on the ground and implement *sui generis* solutions to “wicked problems” that defy both definition and remedy in doctrine. Certainly some concern is warranted in the possibility that doctrine might be relied on too much or too often as ‘the solution’ to a problem. Likewise, there is a risk in formally developed doctrine being faulty, misleading, and potentially costly in seeking a solution. Theorists tend to describe their theories by using esoteric terms that are not well defined or understood. Sometimes they devote verbose discussions in the attempt to coin new words that are nebulous and even unintelligible. Doctrine needs to be succinct, clearly written, and easily understood if it is to provide a common lexicon and modus operandi for the art of warfighting.

Possibilities for Enhancements

Counterbalancing those risks and concerns is the potential for breakthrough ideas allowing special operations to uniquely contribute in the effort to make

the world a safer and better place to live. We are reminded that theory is never absolute and final, but always in the state of development. Theory allows flexibility to consider the diverse and changing environment and most importantly, innovative

ideas. It seeks to guide scientific inquiry, but does not necessarily provide definitive results. The following are a few possibilities that might be examined by theory.

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Exploring the Doctrinal Fringe Areas of Special Operations

The range and variety of military operations is vast and complex, as is the range of variety of special operations itself. From a strategic and whole of government point of view, gray areas and gaps exist in both policy and capability. SOF, on occasion, have filled some of those gaps on a short-term basis but have not taken the lead for a variety of reasons. Geographic combatant commanders and the Department of State are the default lead agencies and often fail to see how special operations can better contribute to the effort—especially lacking appreciation for how SOF can contribute early on in shaping the environment and later in the conflict termination and resolution stage. The ongoing tug between direct and indirect SOF applications need not result in a binary choice on the part of the geographic combatant commander. Any special operations theory that improves articulation and understanding of special operations capabilities might result in requests for forces based on effects rather than specific force packages that are not best suited to the requirement.

Encouraging Scholarly Research

One might ask: what is the practical value of scholarly research? Basically, the answer is that it can be of little or no value unless it evolves to another level of authenticity such as theory or doctrine. As such, the development of theory should attract the best, brightest, and most innovative ideas from within and outside the special operations community. Given the numerous related disciplines intertwined within and supporting special operations, academia and subject matter expertise can be drawn from a wide variety

of fields to co-create a context for theory and test it. JSOU provides an ideal crucible for the distillation of ideas into theory. From there, given the appropriate scrutiny, a handoff to the doctrine writers could be relatively seamless and efficient.

Enhancing Civil-Military Discourse

One of the most crucial functionalities of doctrine and theory is to communicate ideas on beliefs and principles. The entire concept of special operations is strange and ambiguous to most, especially to those outside the community. Ironically those outside the community are the ones that decide how and what special operations will make its contribution. So-called “theoretical” discussions are likely to be perceived as nonthreatening regardless of the environment and the audiences involved, but provide an excellent opportunity for participants to learn and express their views. A serious review of the military-civil communications failures that have occurred over the past half-century compels us to improve on educating and communicating with those who control our destiny and the destiny of our nation.²⁹

Illuminating and Refining Enduring Principles

The Special Operations imperatives below were developed in the late 1980s while the author was the commanding general of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School. Although, they seem to be just as valid today as they were then, they deserve contemporary scrutiny, parsing, and updating. Given the past several decades of conflict and resultant empirical data, considerable evidence exists to provide reinforcement of validity or indicators for a need of refinement.

- Understand the operational environment
- Recognize political implications
- Facilitate interagency activities
- Engage the threat discriminately
- Consider long-term effects
- Ensure legitimacy and credibility of special operations
- Anticipate and control psychological effects
- Apply capabilities indirectly
- Develop multiple options
- Ensure long-term sustainment

- Provide sufficient intelligence
- Balance security and synchronization

Special Operations Theory in Context: The Strategic Environment

Strategic lessons (long-term or enduring ones) are learned from the comprehensive study and analysis of war as a whole within its strategic environment—political, diplomatic, military, economic, informational, and other domains.³⁰ As stated earlier, the strategic environment provides the universe context, and operational content for military theory. However, military theory—and for that matter, military doctrine—have no exclusive claim on special operations. The strategic missions and environments of special operations (political warfare and irregular warfare, in particular) are considerably different from those of conventional warfare and require an understanding of natural phenomenon outside the operational environment of force-on-force conflict.³¹ Nonmilitary elements of national power in preparation of war, as well as in the conduct of war, are essential ingredients of sound military theory.³² Simply put, the overall aim of special operations theory (or theories), should be to learn more about the nature and use of special operations in the strategic environment of today and in the future ... nothing more, nothing less.

Special operations managers and leaders need to expand their horizons to incorporate the inquiry and learning that takes place in fields other than conflict and war. Antebellum applications of SOF are unique value added capabilities that need serious attention. An understanding of the humanities, political science, social, and behavioral science will be essential to acquiring the necessary wisdom to design, negotiate, and implement special operations contributions in the future complex and chaotic strategic environment. If chaos theory teaches us nothing else, it should instruct us on the importance of correctly assessing the initial conditions of the environment. It seems we, as a nation, have not been very successful doing so over the past half-century.

Hopefully, at this point, the reader has been persuaded that revolutionary thought is possible through diligent, expanded study and scientific inquiry. While a unified or single comprehensive theory of special operations might not be possible or necessary, there should be no moratorium on seeking good ideas in any of the many related special operations fields. As shown earlier, current and evolving ‘theories’ abound in special operations related domains

and attendant sciences. Enlightenment in one field may contribute to a better understanding of another field, and so on. Special operations theory can and should be a catalyst for new ideas and rich fodder for doctrine, in a symbiotic relationship.

USSOCOM is fortunate enough to have an institution in JSOU, specifically chartered to guide research projects across a broad range of subjects and in collaboration with other universities, academia—notwithstanding experienced retirees and respected experts in virtually any field; it would be tantamount to heresy if pursuit of special operations theory were relegated to mere chance findings. The challenge is to understand more, not necessarily all, nor completely.

Endnotes

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5. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CJCSI 3170.01I, *Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System (JCIDS)* (Washington, D.C., Joint Staff, 23 January 2015). In the Joint Capabilities Integration Development System (JCIDS), recent issuances expand this by adding a second P, which refers to “policy.”
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10. Joint Staff J-7, Joint and Coalition Warfighting, *Planner’s Handbook for Operational Design* (Suffolk, VA: Joint Staff J7), 7 October 2011, I-3.

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19. “Military theory,” Wikipedia, last modified 23 November 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_theory.
20. Von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege (On War)*, 142.
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26. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *CJCSM 5120.01A*, B-12. As previously mentioned, Figure 1 portrays 11 milestones over a period of 17.5 months as the Notional Joint Doctrine Development and Revision Timeline. Keep in mind that notional and actual typically will vary significantly.
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Chapter 3. Epistemology, Paradigms, and the Future of Special Operations Theory

Robert G. Spulak Jr.

There is an emerging community of researchers using theory to discuss special operations. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a rigorous foundation for the application of theory to understanding special operations. In addition, it will provide perspective on how research communities historically evolved in their pursuit of understanding and where we are in the discovery process.

Theory is an abstraction or explanation of what has been examined that allows us to apply what we know to new situations. That is, theory is knowledge that we use to inform our expectations. The first section of this chapter, “Epistemology,” explores how knowledge and theories are created. This section relies on the age-old philosophical quest to logically frame how we actually know something. This may seem obtuse, but special operations theory as a serious and credible subject deserves to be placed in the appropriate context in the pursuit of human knowledge.

Keeping in mind the rigor of the subject matter, it is encouraging that the first section comes to some predictable conclusions. Special operations theory, dealing mostly with the meanings behind human behavior, will not be natural scientific theory; it will not produce predictions testable by experimentation. A different approach is necessary, more common in the social sciences, where meanings are discussed and

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theories are offered that can be explored to see if they have the power to explain.

The second section of this chapter, “Paradigms,” discusses the characteristics of research as a community endeavor. In a scientific community, a wide variety of theories get sorted by those that work the best. This collection of theories (and other accepted methods of practice) has been labeled a ‘paradigm.’ All observations are interpreted by some kind of theory, even if it is our own personal theory of how the world functions. Paradigms arise for a community to reconcile varying points of view and develop a common understanding.

The final section of this chapter, “The Future of Special Operations Theory,” discusses the emerging community of practitioners of special operations theory. We are in the pre-paradigm stage of this discussion, where no personal theory is allowed to dominate observations or how they are interpreted. As the community develops, we will likely see the emergence of a paradigm that guides what questions are important, how we approach answering those questions, and whether the answers make sense. Some tentative observations about the future are presented in this section, including the need for scholarship (e.g., explicitness in presenting a theory) and the likely primacy of the interpretive approach. Possible progress toward a paradigm is illustrated by examples of how published special operations theories indeed used explicitness and the explanatory-interpretive approach. There is an emerging discipline of special operations theory and it is unlikely there will be one theory of special operations, rather multiple theories about special operations within a future paradigm.

With this introduction as your guide we will begin with epistemology, the study of how we actually know something, so we can understand the creation of special operations theories.

Epistemology

We want to know about special operations. How do we know something? Philosophers and scientists have been debating this topic for thousands of years starting with the Greeks (or before).¹ Epistemology is the study of how to know things, and in epistemology the Traditional Analysis of Knowledge says that knowledge is justified true belief.² Justification means that you have enough information to be highly reasonable in believing something,

whether it is true or not. True means that it corresponds to the facts. Finally, the justification itself must not depend upon one or more falsehoods. The fun and philosophy begin when we debate whether a justification is highly reasonable or whether a belief corresponds to the facts.

The Standard View of knowledge states that “People have a great deal of knowledge of the world around them, including some knowledge of the past, their current surroundings, the future, morality, mathematics, and so on,” and “some of our main sources of knowledge are perception, memory, introspection, testimony, and rational insight.”³ So, epistemology is about how people ‘know’ things, not about the things themselves.⁴ (And we know a lot about special operations based on observation, direct experience of operations, testimony including, e.g., after-action reports, etc.)

But knowing a collection of specific things is not enough. For example, we want to inform decisions that leaders might make in providing the right resources for the future and in planning and executing operations. We want to know how the specific things we know about special operations can be extended or organized to be used for those purposes. We want to have a ‘justified true belief’ about special operations in situations where we have not yet had experience, or observations, or reports. Put another way, we want to inform our expectations.

We call this knowledge that informs our expectations ‘theory.’ Many people are most familiar with theory in a physical or natural scientific context. Scientific theory has been very successful in producing practical results extrapolated to new situations. For example, quantum mechanics led to solid state physics that led to semiconductors that led to high definition television. Yet, how do we develop a justified true belief in a scientific theory? Can that process help us understand how to inform expectations about special operations?

Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman succinctly explained testing a scientific theory: “If it disagrees with experiment it’s wrong. In that simple sentence is the key to science. It doesn’t make any difference how beautiful your guess is, it doesn’t make any difference how smart you are, who made the guess, or what his name is, if it disagrees with experiment it is wrong. That’s all there is to it.”⁵

Karl Popper makes the point in more detail (but not necessarily better) using the language of philosophy:

From a new idea, put up tentatively, and not yet justified in any way—an anticipation, a hypothesis, a theoretical system, or what you will – conclusions are drawn by logical deduction. We may if we like distinguish four different lines along which the testing of a theory could be carried out. First there is the logical comparison of the conclusions among themselves, by which the internal consistency of the system is tested. Second, there is the investigation of the logical form of the theory, with the object of determining whether it has the character of empirical or scientific theory, or whether it is, for example, tautological. Thirdly there is the comparison with other theories, chiefly with the aim of determining whether the theory would constitute a scientific advance should it survive our tests. And finally, there is the testing of the theory by way of empirical application of the conclusions that can be derived from it.⁶

This seems easy enough. The goal is to simplify the situation to the point where we can solve it mathematically and make an accurate measurement while eliminating or minimizing all the complications (errors) of the real world. The power of this approach is illustrated by quantum electrodynamics, which predicts the magnetic moment of the electron to 11 decimal places. Experiments agree with the theory until the last decimal place.⁷ That's the same accuracy as knowing the distance from Los Angeles to New York to within the thickness of a human hair. But if a valid measurement disagreed with quantum electrodynamics we would have to reexamine the theory.

In addition, physics is reductionist. We assume that we can take the problem apart into simple pieces that we can actually solve, solve those pieces exactly, and then put the answers together to get the bigger solution. So, for example, when calculating the trajectory of a sniper's bullet, we have to account for range, muzzle velocity, ballistic performance of the bullet, spin drift, shooting angle, the rotation of the Earth, altitude, humidity, temperature, atmospheric pressure, and wind. In practice, the ballistic calculator you may have as an app on your iPhone can calculate each of these effects (predictions of theories) separately, then add up the answers. We can then measure the impact point to make sure we did it right.

But Special Operations Forces (SOF) are not electrons or bullets. We don't have a predictive theory of human behavior that we can test. For example, suppose you want to know how dedicated a terrorist is to their cause so

you can predict whether they would actually pull the trigger. You can't see dedication inside the terrorist. The only thing you can observe is how they behave. A given level of dedication may result in different behaviors in different people. Some dedicated terrorists may be very vocal in supporting the cause while others silently await their opportunity to strike. And a given behavior may have more than one explanation. The vocal terrorist may be overcompensating for their lack of dedication while the silent one may be internalizing their doubts. What is seen and is interpreted depends, to a very large degree, on what you are looking for and what you are willing to accept as evidence.

The philosophical basis for experimentally-based testing of theories that works so well for physics is known as positivism. Positivism asserts that knowledge is derived from what we perceive. "The central position of positivism as a philosophy of knowledge is that experience is the foundation of knowledge."⁸ That is, reasonable justification is based on what we take in with our senses. But philosophers dispute whether all knowledge is derived this way. In general, they claim there are four basic sources of knowledge: "perception, memory, consciousness (sometimes called introspection), and reason (sometimes called intuition)."⁹ And, interestingly, it is difficult to describe how, even in the positivistic (scientific) model, one comes up with the initial guess at a theory to be tested.¹⁰

Special operations theory will be more about people, and what they do belongs more in the realm of social science than physics. This is true for theories of special operations describing the activities of people (both kinetic and non-kinetic) in the larger context of the social activity of conflict, as well as theories of SOF as groups of people. As described in the terrorist example above, it is difficult to see, or observe, the things you might want to measure with people. Some social scientists are positivists because they look at questions that can be examined this way. Psychologists often research using prediction, experiments, and falsifiability. Even so, I would claim that the results are often fuzzier than in physics because you can't make truly reproducible experiments. An electron is an electron is an electron that you can put in an identical apparatus, but even with perfect sampling technique you can't replicate the exact same set of people with the exact same histories and put them in the exact same circumstances.

Other social scientists, especially those such as anthropologists who study groups of people, are generally not positivists.¹¹ These social scientists

have pretty much made peace with the idea that theory, to them, doesn't mean the same as theory to a physical scientist. They are still interested in understanding human behavior, but use other approaches. One approach is the humanist-interpretive approach.¹² Human interactions are not just based on behaviors that can be observed, but on meanings that cannot be observed, such as in the terrorist example. One has to explore these meanings by examining them in different ways and offering different interpretations that make sense. Since SOF are a special case of military forces where the human dimension reigns supreme, it is this approach that can lead to understanding.

An example of the humanist-interpretive approach is “whether King Lear is to be pitied or admired as a pathetic leader or as a successful one.”¹³ This may not seem to have much relevance to special operations (like assessing the motivation of a terrorist would, for example) but Paul Lieber published a 2016 Joint Special Operations University occasional paper entitled *Rethinking Special Operations Leadership: Process, Persuasion, Pre-existing, and Personality*.¹⁴ Leadership is an issue of great interest to special operations. And since leadership has a meaning that cannot be directly observed, and each specific

Carefully examining special operations leadership and producing many possible answers leads to insights about what we mean by leadership for special operations.

behavior that is observed can be interpreted either positively or negatively for ‘leadership,’ a strictly positivist approach cannot illuminate what we mean by leadership. “Carefully examining the question of Lear, however, and producing many possible answers, leads to insight about the human condition.”¹⁵ Carefully examining special operations leadership and producing many possible answers leads to

insights about what we mean by leadership for special operations.

According to epistemology, developing knowledge implies a theoretical component to determine whether a belief is highly reasonable and whether it corresponds to the facts. As we will soon see below, even descriptive observations are theory-laden. Everyone has a personal theory or theories of special operations. What we are looking for—having noted the limitations of using a natural science approach—is a social science of special operations. In addition, science itself (whether natural science or social science) is a community endeavor. Organizing understanding into a coherent whole instead

of a random collection of personal theories requires something more. Historically this whole has been called a paradigm.

Paradigms

The English word ‘paradigm,’ from the Greek word *paradeigma*, originally meant an exemplar or a standard model to use as an example—the very best example of something.¹⁶ Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*,¹⁷ used the word paradigm to describe the structure of science itself and thus changed the meaning of the word forever.

Kuhn claimed to be looking at science from a historical point of view and discussed paradigms as historical facts. He discovered that what he called paradigms emerge as people organize themselves into scientific communities. “By choosing it (the term paradigm), I mean to suggest that some accepted examples of actual scientific practice – examples of which include law, theory, application, and instrumentation together – provide examples from which spring particular coherent traditions of scientific research.”¹⁸

According to George Ritzer, this new meaning of paradigm “is a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what questions should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers obtained. The paradigm is the broadest unit of consensus within a science and serves to differentiate one scientific community (or sub-community) from another.”¹⁹

Are these kinds of paradigms necessary, or are they merely traditions or historical artifacts? What if we had no tradition or consensus of what data to collect? What questions should be asked, or what rules should be followed in interpreting the answers? One example of such an exercise may be what is called ‘big data.’ Big data collects vast amounts of information and tests for correlations or patterns.²⁰ Once a number of correlations are identified, researchers can try to explain them and perform experiments to see whether the explanations make sense. Unfortunately, there are usually a great many correlations, many of them spurious, and far too numerous to have the time to investigate thoroughly. Unlike looking for your car keys under the streetlight instead of where you lost them, David Sarewitz in *The New Atlantis* said, “big data is like looking all over the world for your keys because you can—even if you don’t know what they look like or where you might have dropped them or whether they actually fit your lock.”²¹

But in fact, the data that is chosen to be collected for big data is actually the result of someone's theory of what is important, that is, what plausible explanation they think already exists. For example, scooping up all the tweets on Twitter for a day means that someone believes that tweets contain useful information and that a particular day's worth of tweets is important. All observations, including the ones in some big database, are what is called "theory-laden." The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains it this way:

All observation involves both perception and cognition. That is, one does not make an observation passively, but rather is actively engaged in distinguishing the phenomenon being observed from surrounding sensory data. Therefore, observations are affected by one's underlying understanding of the way in which the world functions, and that understanding may influence what is perceived, noticed, or deemed worthy of consideration. In this sense, it can be argued that all observation is theory-laden.²²

This is one reason why theory is important to understanding. Since, as we saw above, knowledge is "justified true belief," what information we choose as highly reasonable in believing something, and also whether our belief corresponds to the facts, is "theory-laden" and depends on our underlying understanding of the way in which the world functions. This is why it is stated above that theory is knowledge that informs our expectations.

In addition, we have seen that the positivist philosophy, where all knowledge is derived from what we perceive, is an arguably inadequate approach to understanding special operations. In examining the meanings (which cannot be directly observed) behind behaviors (which can be observed) it is necessary that there are stated expectations about how to interpret behaviors.

Paradigms are necessary for a community to develop understanding, and theories are key parts of a paradigm. In the big data example, the lack of a paradigm means that decisions for what data to collect are usually made by many different people at different times, and the reasons for including or excluding any given data are not explicit. And which correlations to pursue are also the result of someone's theory of what is likely to be important. In the earlier terrorist example, observations of a terrorist's behavior to understand their dedication and thus their likelihood to act (the meaning behind behavior) is also theory-laden, and the interpretation of behavior depends

on the observer. Without agreement in a community, there can be many different unknown personal theories operating at the same time.

Kuhn describes three stages of paradigm development. First there is “pre-science” where there is no commonly accepted point of view.²³ So, no personal theory dominates what observations are made or how they are interpreted. “The pre-paradigm period, in particular, is regularly marked by frequent and deep debates over legitimate methods, problems, and solutions, though these serve rather to define schools than to produce agreement.”²⁴

Eventually one theoretical framework (whether described as positivist, humanist, otherwise, or a combination) becomes commonly accepted as the paradigm. This is the second stage where the paradigm guides observations and interpretations. This stage is called “normal science” by Kuhn. In this stage a paradigm has developed that “was sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity. Simultaneously, it was sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve.”²⁵ There is plenty of work to do in normal science. “Normal science consists of the actualization of that promise (‘of success discoverable in selected and still incomplete examples’), an actualization achieved by extending the knowledge of those facts that the paradigm displays as particularly revealing, by increasing the extent of the match between those facts and the paradigm’s predictions, and the further articulation of the paradigm itself.”²⁶

As a paradigm by definition explains things well, new problems are solved and understanding progresses. Often, however, there are credible results that don’t fit. These anomalies are not immediately seen as falsifying a theory, as Popper and Feynman would require. Often the researchers who produce them are accused of errors.²⁷ But as more and more evidence shows up that can’t be explained by existing theory, a “crisis” occurs. At that point, new achievements that redirect research serves as a new paradigm.²⁸ The concluding section will discuss the emerging community and discipline of special operations theory, and discuss how the nature of knowledge and the existence of paradigms affect the future of the discipline.

The Future of Special Operations Theory

There is an emerging community of practitioners and interest in special operations theory, as demonstrated by the 2016 JSOU symposium on special

Theory becomes the knowledge that informs expectations.

operations theory. As we have seen, understanding for its own sake necessarily has a theoretical component; even descriptive observations are theory-laden. Further, one purpose of special operations studies and research is to develop understanding to inform leadership decisions toward selecting the right resources for future planning and operations. Theory becomes the knowledge that informs expectations.

This community includes a number of practitioners who publish theoretical treatments of special operations or apply various theoretical perspectives to specific special operations issues e.g., strategy and SOF organizations. A very incomplete list includes Navy Admiral (retired) William McRaven,²⁹ James Kiras,³⁰ Robert Spulak Jr.,³¹ Jessica Turnley,³² Harry Yarger,³³ William Knarr, et al.,³⁴ Colin Gray,³⁵ Richard Shultz,³⁶ and Paul Lieber.³⁷ One might argue that not all of the works cited are specifically about a theory of special operations, but are applications of psychology, organizational theory, sociology, anthropology, conventional military theory, or theories from other disciplines, to special operations questions. This certainly does not mean there is no emerging discipline of special operations theory. For example, astrophysical theory includes electromagnetism, quantum mechanics, gravitation, spectroscopy, nuclear physics, and many other theories. But astronomy is a separate discipline where these theories intersect to answer unique and important questions.³⁸

Further evidence of an emerging community and discipline is the Special Operations Research Association—“a group of scholars, educators, and military personnel (including present and former special operators) who share an interest in the field of special operations, ranging from theory to practice”³⁹ that publishes the peer-reviewed *Special Operations Journal*.

We are still in Kuhn’s “pre-science” stage of paradigm development for special operations theory, “marked by frequent and deep debates over legitimate methods, problems, and solutions,” in which we enthusiastically engaged in the above-mentioned symposium this chapter serves to represent. If we are effective in developing understanding of special operations and creating useful knowledge that informs the community’s expectations, then we will get a paradigm, whether we want one or not.

Much of special operations theory will be about people, in keeping with the SOF Truths: “Humans are more important than hardware, quality is better than quantity, special operations forces cannot be mass produced,

competent special operations forces cannot be created after emergencies occur, and most special operations require non-SOF assistance.²⁴⁰ Turnley, in *Retaining a Precarious Value as Special Operations Go Mainstream*,⁴¹ argued that SOF's precarious core value is the quality of its people. It is often not politically correct within the larger military to assert that SOF personnel are indeed special—a statement that inaccurately implies to some that they somehow think they are better than conventional forces.⁴²

Thus, the humanist-interpretive perspective will be important to examine meaning. Theory, in this case, is explanatory, not predictive. But this does not imply a lack of scholarship; any theory must be carefully constructed and clearly communicated. For those unfamiliar with the humanist-interpretive approach, two examples can illustrate both explicitness and the power of explanation.

In *A Theory of Special Operations*, the theory for why special operations and SOF exist was explicitly stated at the beginning: “Special operations are missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Overcoming these risks requires special operations forces that directly address the ultimate sources of friction through qualities that are the result of the distribution of the attributes of SOF personnel.”⁴³ The rest of the monograph was an exploration of whether this made sense and had the power to explain.

Spec Ops addressed the question of the success and failure of special operations raids. This famous book proposed the theory that for raids a smaller attacking force could minimize friction and attain a theoretical temporary relative superiority by applying certain principles.⁴⁴ The rest of the book used historical case studies to explore whether the theory made sense. In both these examples, the idea of Clausewitzian friction was used to lead to a reasonable explanation of human behavior. Friction itself is an interpretive concept. Clausewitz was trying to explain why people behave differently in war: “Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”⁴⁵

Neither of the examples above explain everything about special operations. (And neither produce specific predictions that could be tested by experiment.) But they could be progress toward a paradigm. Different questions can lead to different theories. Even for a given question and within a given paradigm, two researchers may have different interpretive approaches and theories that both make sense. They lead to different understandings,

but combined add to the whole. There is unlikely to be one theory of special operations. There will be multiple theories about special operations within a future paradigm.

Endnotes

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3. *Ibid.*, 170.
4. *Ibid.* And, since it is philosophy, there are also alternative positions besides the traditional analysis of knowledge and the standard view.
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8. Bernard, *Social Research Methods*, 17.
9. Robert Audi, “The Sources of Knowledge,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, Paul K. Moser, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2002), 72.
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20. “The Big Data Conundrum: How to Define It?” Emerging Technology from the arXiv, MIT Technology Review, 3 October 2013, accessed 1 February 2017, <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/519851/the-big-data-conundrum-how-to-define-it/>. There is no consensus on the definition of ‘big data.’ One attempt at a definition

in this article is: “Big data is a term describing the storage and analysis of large and or complex data sets using a series of techniques including, but not limited to: NoSQL, MapReduce and machine learning.”

21. Daniel Sarewitz, “Saving Science,” *The New Atlantis*, Spring/Summer 2016, 32, http://www.thenewatlantis.com/docLib/20160816_TNA49Sarewitz.pdf.
22. James Bogen, “Theory and Observation in Science,” Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), accessed December 20, 2016, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/science-theory-observation/>.
23. Thomas S. Kuhn, “The Route to Normal Science,” chap. II in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).
24. *Ibid.*, 48.
25. *Ibid.*, 10–11.
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27. *Ibid.*, 59. Lord Kelvin famously pronounced Wilhelm Roentgen’s discovery of x-rays to be a hoax.
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36. Richard Shultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization, A Case Study of Task Force 714 in Iraq* (Tampa, FL: JSOU Press, July 2016).
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38. One part of the astrophysics paradigm is that what we observe in the laboratory we can apply to the stars.
39. Homepage, SORA: Special Operations Research Association, accessed 22 December 2016, <http://www.specopsjournal.org/home.html>.
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43. Spulak Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations*, 1.
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Chapter 4. Operationalizing SOF Theory: A Function of Understanding SOF Power

Bernd Horn

The Special Operations Forces (SOF) community remains engaged in a discussion on whether it requires a theory of SOF and/or special operations.¹ The reality, however, is that nations have possessed SOF and have conducted special operations throughout history. In so doing, tenets and principles of effective employment of SOF and the conduct of special operations were learned, promulgated, and exercised. As such, arguably SOF/special operations “theory” was operationalized by key political and military decision makers understanding and advocating for the strategic utility of exercising SOF power.

What is Theory?

Initially, it is important to articulate what is meant by theory. In its simplest form, theory refers to “a supposition or system of ideas explaining something,” or in other words, “the principles on which a subject of study is based.”² Military theory, then, provides the framework for understanding the foundation, nature, character, and conduct of warfare, as well as its relationship with society. More specifically, a theory of SOF and/or special operations would describe the nature, character, and characteristics of SOF

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and/or special operations to inform political and military decision makers on relationships, strategic drivers, actions, and specific conditions required for SOF and/or special operations to attain desired political outcomes (or national interest).³

Theory is viewed by many to be absolutely necessary to ensure proper understanding of SOF, their capabilities, as well as their limitations, particularly under varying circumstances and conditions, so that their employment is best positioned for success. Prussian theorist, Carl von Clausewitz explained:

Theory will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems confused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show their probable effects, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view, and to illuminate all phases of warfare in a thorough critical inquiry ... Theory exists to that one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield.⁴

Nonetheless, as mentioned earlier, no definitive, comprehensive SOF or special operations theory currently exists. Although most national SOF commands or organizations promulgated capstone or doctrinal-type publications covering the roles, tasks, capabilities, etc. of SOF and special operations, no true theoretical foundation was ever postulated on their role in the formulation and exercise of national power.⁵

As such, the question becomes: Is the existence of a formalized theory essential for the operationalization of the concept or capability? Or, is it possible to operationalize the concept or capability through a thorough understanding of its nature, use, and employment? An overview of the use of SOF and special operations through the years perhaps provides an answer.

The Employment of SOF and the Conduct of Special Operations—A Historical Overview

French Canadian Raiders

From a North American perspective, there is no better place to start than our own “Ranger Tradition.” Arguably, the daring raids, ambushes, and stealthy reconnaissance missions undertaken behind enemy lines during the colonial struggle for North America encapsulates the very essence of special operations. French-Canadian raiders, and later their Anglo-American counterparts, conducted daring forays in a harsh climate and unforgiving terrain in the face of intractable and often savage opponents. Importantly, for an extended period of time, these tactical actions produced strategic effect on the bitter struggle for North America. Through the use of selected men, hardened and trained in the realities of raiding, the French were able to maintain a balance of power in North America. This was despite an overwhelming disparity in numbers, economy, and military strength available to the Anglo-American colonies.

The key to success in these early days was the understanding of the use of special operations in the manner of the “Canadian Way of War.”⁶ Specifically, French and Canadian leaders, particularly those with extended exposure to the North American manner of war, believed that the optimum war fighting technique was achieved by a mixed force that included the military strengths of regulars (e.g. courage, discipline, tactical acumen) combined with those of volunteers and Indians (e.g. endurance, familiarity with wilderness navigation and travel, as well as marksmanship). The latter group relied more on initiative, independent action and small unit tactics than on rigid military practices and drills. As such, over generations, governors of New France, many born in Canada, came to understand that the use of specially picked partisan leaders with trained and experienced small raiding parties, which included indigenous allies, was an optimal strategy. These raiding parties placed emphasis on stealth, speed, violence of action, physical fitness, and courage, and when unleashed on the southern colonies wreaked havoc on their enemies.

The Governors of New France maintained this policy despite the protests of senior ranking French military commanders who decried, “the Canadians thought they were making war when they went on raids resembling hunting

parties.”⁷ For example, Major General Louis-Joseph de Montcalm, the senior French commanding general during the French and Indian War (1754–1761), often complained of the “petty means” and “petty ideas” of the Canadians.⁸ Nonetheless, the Governor of New France, who held ultimate command of all military forces in New France, and understood the strategic utility of his special raiders, maintained the policy. It remained in effect from 1688 until 1758, when circumstances put an end to the raiding approach. First, in 1758 the King of France promoted Montcalm to the rank of Lieutenant General and made him commander of all military forces in New France.⁹ As such, Montcalm ended the policy of *la petite guerre* because he disagreed with the concept and believed it was unable to achieve a strategic effect.¹⁰ Second, the British decided to concentrate on the New World, and deployed the largest contingent of regular forces to the continent up to that time. By the spring of 1761, they defeated the French forces and controlled North America.

Interestingly, the Anglo-Americans created a similar capability. It was the success of the French-Canadian raiders that prompted Major General William Shirley, commander-in-chief of the British Army in North America, to argue:

It is absolutely necessary for his Majesty’s Service, that one Company at least of Rangers should be constantly employ’d [sic] in different Parties upon Lake George and Lake Iroquois [Lake Champlain], and the Wood Creek and Lands adjacent . . . to make Discoveries of the proper Routes for our own Troops, procure Intelligence of the Enemy’s Strength and Motions, destroy their out Magazines and Settlements, pick up small Parties of their Battoes upon the Lakes, and keep them under continual Alarm.¹¹

By 1756, Major General Shirley ordered Major Robert Rogers, who had begun to make forays behind the French lines to great success, to raise a 60-man, independent ranger company separate from both the provincial and regular units. As such, it was titled “His Majesty’s Independent Company (later Companies) of American Rangers.”

Importantly, for the creation and maintenance of the special raiding and scouting capabilities, it required specific political and military decision makers who could see beyond their cultural and organizational biases, if not blinders. They would need to understand the strategic utility of a

specific capability that allowed the implementation and execution of special operations.

The Rise of SOF in WWII

The importance of “champions” to “operationalize” SOF and special operations was further underscored during WWII. In the dark days after the Dunkirk evacuation—when conventional minded military commanders wanted to focus on the defense (understandably as they had to rebuild, reequip, and retrain their army)—United Kingdom Prime Minister Winston Churchill, the former military man, adventurer, and war correspondent insisted on maintaining the initiative by offensive action. Through his experience with Boer commandos during the war in South Africa, he also understood the value of tying down German forces through raids, sabotage, and subversion. As such, he was responsible for the creation of commandos, paratroopers, the special operations executive, and what was to become the First Special Service Force.¹²

The Commando raids, despite a slow start and relative short history, were for the large part successful, and achieved their aim. They not only raised public morale, but also forged a record for perseverance and toughness, as well as tactical, and at times, arguably, strategic success.¹³ Importantly, Churchill’s prescience prepared the ground for the birth, if not near explosion, of other modern SOF. Although not popular with the general military, the idea of specially organized and specially trained units, made up of intrepid individuals who reveled in challenging and highly-dangerous small unit action that called for innovation, individualism, and independent action, found allies among a select number of senior military commanders. These

Importantly, Churchill’s prescience prepared the ground for the birth, if not near explosion, of other modern SOF.

paved the way for such SOF organizations as the Special Air Service, the Special Boat Service, the Long Range Desert Group, Phantom, Layforce, Popski’s Army, the U.S. Rangers, the Office of Strategic Services, Alamo Scouts, Underwater Demolition Teams, to name a few.

However, this limited, if not conditional, acceptance existed largely only at the beginning of the war. During this dark period when the Allies required time to rebuild, a few desperate men were able to fill a void—an ability to

strike out from a position of seeming impotence. And so, special units were raised to cover for weakness, as well as to meet specific needs that conventional forces were seen as too unwieldy or poorly trained to accomplish.

Throughout their short existence during WWII, SOF selection, training, and roles, as well as their tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) were evolved and refined. Although the mainstream military still railed against their existence, the few key champions who understood their value allowed SOF to make an impressive contribution to the war effort. SOF, through the execution of special operations:

- bought the Allies time to rebuild through offensive action;
- tied down Axis troops in defensive tasks and caused attrition of the enemy war effort (i.e., raids, sabotage, and subversion);
- psychologically dislocated the enemy;
- raised secret armies and resistance movements;
- shaped the battlefield for conventional force operations; and
- conducted strategic strikes.¹⁴

In fact, one Allied report noted, “the dividends paid by introducing small parties of well trained and thoroughly disciplined regular troops to operate effectively behind the enemy lines can be out of all proportion to the numbers involved.”¹⁵ Regardless of SOF’ proven track record of success and strategic utility throughout the war, virtually all special operations organizations were disbanded at its end. It was not a question of a lack of theory for SOF or special operations, but rather philosophical and organizational culture biases of the mainstream military. Even for the champions that remained, the cost of fighting to preserve capability (once the crisis was over) seemed not worth the fight.

Savage Wars of Peace in the Post-War Era

Significantly, the post-war era did not provide war-weary and debt-ridden governments or their publics with a prolonged period of peace. The onset of the Cold War in 1948, the Korean War a few years later, as well as a myriad of “brushfire” wars created another set of crises.¹⁶ Once again, SOF were tapped to conduct direct action raids, special reconnaissance, counterinsurgency, and unconventional warfare (i.e., raise secret armies and resistance movements behind enemy lines). Experience in theatres such as Korea, Malaya, Oman, and Borneo revealed to political and military decision makers that

SOF, when employed correctly, had a “comparatively low cost in lives set against results achieved.”¹⁷ Moreover, frugal bureaucrats realized that SOF provided an inexpensive means of waging war against insurgents in distant places, often largely on their own. Once again, understanding and belief in the strategic utility of SOF, particularly during periods of crisis, led to its creation, maintenance, and employment. Institutional enmity, however, ensured its marginalization within the larger military establishment.¹⁸

Still, key political and military decision makers’ understanding of SOF’ strategic utility has allowed SOF to break the artificial barriers and marginalization by the greater military institution. The absence of an established and endorsed theory or doctrine played no role. For example, against huge institutional resistance, in May 1961, President John F. Kennedy announced to a joint session of Congress: “I am directing the Secretary of Defense to expand rapidly and substantially ... the orientation of existing forces for the conduct of ... unconventional wars. In addition, our special forces and unconventional warfare units will be increased and reoriented.”¹⁹ Kennedy understood the strategic utility of SOF in the savage wars of peace in the post-war era.

Ironically, and despite their pushback, conventional military decision makers also comprehended the value of SOF/special operations. When the complexities of the Vietnam conflict (e.g., terrain, population, locating the enemy, interdicting supply lines) confounded conventional military commanders, they were quick to create new SOF units or expand existing ones to address the requirements. SOF could carry out such unique tasks as unconventional warfare, long-range reconnaissance, interdiction, and riverine operations in politically restrictive and environmentally hostile theatres of operation. For example, the U.S. Special Forces (SF), or “Green Berets,” were dramatically increased in size and undertook such programs as the Strategic Hamlet Program and later became responsible for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-funded Civil Irregular Defense Group program which largely involved raising local defense forces capable of defending their villages. However, SF also undertook activities such as improving agricultural practices, improving sanitation and water supply, as well as building and occupying fortified camps from which fighting patrols by SF and Civil Irregular Defense Group soldiers could be mounted.²⁰ In addition, Navy SEALs were created in 1962, as was the Studies and Observation Group in 1964, as well as 13 long range reconnaissance companies in 1965, which were four years later

collectively designated the 75th Infantry Regiment (Ranger).²¹ Furthermore, projects Delta, Omega, and Gamma, were sequential programs to create battalion-sized SOF units comprised of both U.S. and Vietnamese personnel—ones capable of long-range reconnaissance and raiding.²²

The Rise of Terrorism in the West

Not surprisingly, at the termination of the Vietnam War, SOF were once again relegated to the periphery.²³ Again, it was not a lack of theory or doctrine to derive longstanding purpose, rather once again it was institutional bias. Despite Kennedy's urging, as [former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff] General Maxwell Taylor revealed, "not much heart went into [the] work [of placing greater emphasis on SOF]." General Taylor, like many senior commanders, believed that SOF didn't provide anything unique that "any well-trained unit" could not do.²⁴

It was a fundamental shift to the perceived threat to Western nations, one that began to make itself known in the 1960s, but seemed to explode in the 1970s, that once again placed an emphasis on SOF. Terrorism hit the West with a vengeance. Bombings, kidnapping, murders, and the hijacking of commercial aircraft seemingly emerged out of nowhere, and not just in the Middle East. European countries were thrust into a state of violence as both homegrown and international terrorists waged a relentless war that recognized no borders or limits. The murder of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics in Munich, West Germany, became a defining image of the crisis, as did the 1975 terrorist assault on the headquarters of the Office of Petroleum Exporting Countries in Vienna, Austria.²⁵

Seemingly no country was immune to the onslaught of terror. As a result, every state required a capability to deal with the threat. Quite simply, fighting

Quite simply, fighting terrorism required specific skills not resident within the military institution at large.

terrorism required specific skills not resident within the military institution at large. As such, by the late 1970s, SOF were once again targeted to provide the solution. After all, who better than specially selected individuals who were capable of agile thought, are adaptable in operations, and possess superior martial skills? New units

were created, or existing ones assigned new tasks. Almost universally, most countries developed specialist counterterrorism organizations to deal with

the problem.²⁶ Despite this new evolution, for the mainstream military, SOF were simply seen as taking on another niche, designer task, one not yet fully recognized as a mainstream military function.

Importantly, the pattern continued. SOF and special operations—based on historical practice, evolution, and record of performance—were identified as capable of taking on the new task. The absence of theory or doctrine did not stop its employment. Key personalities who understood and supported SOF's strategic utility were able to push to attain the necessary levels of approval. The same transpired even after the tragic failure at Desert One in Iran (i.e., the failed rescue attempt of the American hostages held at the U.S. embassy in Tehran) in 1980 (which was laid at the feet of American SOF) and the lackluster performance of the United States Special Operations Forces during Operation Urgent Fury, the invasion of Grenada.²⁷

Creation of USSOCOM to Present Day

On 13 April 1987, due to their understanding and advocacy of the utility of SOF power, SOF champions in the Pentagon and Congress were able to push past Service resistance and establish the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM).²⁸ Subsequently, SOF employment began to increase in the 1990s. The performance of the United States Special Operations Forces, as well as some of its allies, in the 1990–1991 Gulf War, where it conducted strategic reconnaissance, direct action raids, economy of effort activities such as deception operations, and liaison/training missions with less advanced non-NATO coalition partners, demonstrated SOF's capability. However, what cemented SOF's utility in the eyes of decision makers and the public-at-large was its “Scud busting”—a strategically essential task critical to maintaining the integrity of the coalition by keeping Israel from retaliating against Saddam Hussein's continued Scud missile attacks on Israeli soil. SOF were given the difficult task of locating and destroying the mobile launchers.²⁹ They rose to the challenge and emerged from the war a stronger entity. SOF's next public exposure was hunting down persons indicted for war crimes in the former Yugoslavia and Africa during the mid-1990s.³⁰

SOF were now seemingly in ascendency. The invasion of Afghanistan in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center towers in 2001 culminated SOF's growing importance. The American public demanded retribution and political and military decision makers were looking for a

means of striking back swiftly and effectively. The rapid deployment of CIA operatives and 316 SF soldiers working with Northern Alliance, combined with Joint Terminal Air Controllers and precision air, resulted in the rout of al-Qaeda and their Taliban sponsors in only 49 days (from the insertion of the first American SF teams to the fall of Kandahar).³¹ This success prompted analysts, decision makers, and scholars to refer to SOF as the “force of choice.”³² Subsequent persistent wars against terrorists and their networks in Afghanistan, Iraq, the Philippines, the Sahel, the Horn of Africa, to list a few of the problem areas, cemented the strategic utility of SOF and the exercise of special operations.

Importantly, SOF organizations, their TTP, and employment continued to grow and expand. Again, employment and investment of SOF was not a function of elaborate theory or refined doctrine. Rather, it was a function of senior political and military decision makers understanding the strategic utility of SOF—specifically SOF power.

SOF’ Strategic Utility and the Rise of SOF Power

The evolution of SOF, from a concept born from weakness in the early days of WWII to a force of choice in the post 9/11 environment is intricately tied to SOF’ strategic utility in the contemporary operating environment. SOF’ indispensable relevance to decision makers in providing them with a wide scope of cost efficient, low risk, and effective options is precisely the driving force behind SOF power. Their ability to produce on short notice, courses of action and desirable outcomes, in a number of domains, regardless of location, with a high probability of success, give them great saliency to political and military decision makers. After all, arguably, the acid test of strategic utility is what an organization contributes to national power and the ability to project or defend national interests.

Strategy, in essence, is about ends (objectives), ways (courses of action), and means (resources). Military strategy specifically is commonly understood to mean the application of, or threat of the use of, military force to achieve political ends.³³ Therefore, for SOF to be a “force of choice,” or to demonstrate “SOF power,” means that SOF must have substantive value in the exercise of national interest. In short, they must deliver capability complementary to traditional conventional ones delivered by the Services, as

well as expand the option space for political and/or military decision makers to achieve desired outcomes.

Importantly, throughout their evolution, SOF have responded quickly, adaptively, and with agility to changing circumstances and threats. Their strategic utility to political and military decision makers, and their ability to assist with the protection and projection of the national interest has made SOF a “force of choice,” which in turn is a manifestation of “SOF power.” In essence, the concept of SOF power represents three fundamental components:

1. Capability—the ability to deploy specially selected, intelligent, innovative, risk accepting, adaptive, highly-trained individuals capable of performing a wide spectrum of tasks, from precision kinetic actions (e.g. direct action) to non-kinetic operations (e.g. military assistance) in any environment or circumstance;
2. Effect—the ability for SOF to act as a military instrument delivering a precision kinetic effect to achieve a military objective(s), or as a foreign policy tool by providing assistance to allied or friendly nations; and
3. Cost—the small footprint and low visibility of SOF allow for relatively low costs in both fiscal expenditure for operations and in terms of commitment. SOF team(s) or task force(s) represents a relatively small commitment and is generally not interpreted by national publics as “boots on the ground.” As such, it is easier to tailor host nation commitment expectations and it is easier to withdraw forces should the situation become tenuous or undesirable. Furthermore, the likelihood of high casualties is minimized, which often acts as a lightning rod for criticism, further action, or commitment.

It is therefore the ability of political and military decision makers to understand SOF power that has, in essence, operationalized the formally unstated “theory.” Specifically, decision makers who understand SOF power have come to realize that SOF furnish:

1. High readiness, low profile, task-tailored special operations task force and/or SOF teams that can be deployed rapidly, over long distances, and provide tailored proportional responses to a myriad of different situations;

2. Highly trained technologically enabled forces that can gain access to hostile, denied, or politically sensitive areas;
3. Discrete forces that can provide discriminate precise kinetic and non-kinetic effects;
4. A deployed capable and internationally recognized force, yet with a generally lower profile and less intrusive presence than larger conventional forces;
5. An economy of effort foreign policy implement that can be used to assist coalition and/or allied operations;
6. A rapidly deployable force that can assess and survey potential crisis areas or hot spots to provide “ground truth” and situational awareness for governmental decision makers;
7. A highly trained, specialized force capable of providing a response to ambiguous, asymmetric, unconventional situations that fall outside of the capabilities of law enforcement agencies, conventional military, or other government departments;
8. A force capable of operating globally in austere, harsh, and dangerous environments with limited support. SOF are largely self-contained and can communicate worldwide with organic equipment and provide limited medical support for themselves and those they support;
9. A culturally attuned special operations task force or SOF team that can act as a force multiplier with the ability to work closely with regional civilian and military authorities and organizations, as well as populations through defense, diplomacy, and Military Assistance/Security Force Assistance initiatives;
10. A force capable of preparing and shaping environments or battle spaces (i.e., setting conditions to mitigate risk and facilitate successful introduction of follow-on forces); and
11. A force able to foster interagency and interdepartmental cooperation.³⁴

It is within the exercise of SOF power that SOF demonstrates their strategic utility to political and military decision makers. This ability in turn has been one of, if not, the critical reason, why SOF have evolved from

historically existing in the margins of military institutions to currently where SOF are a mainstream, recognized capability.

How to Operationalize SOF Theory

In summary, accepting that there is no formalized/recognized SOF theory for SOF or special operations in place, how is it that SOF evolved to its current era described as the “Golden Age of SOF”?³⁵ How was SOF power, albeit in an informal, evolving, and highly comprehended state by political and military decision makers, operationalized? Based on the rudimentary historical analysis conducted in this chapter, it appears there are a number of key factors/benchmarks required to informally operationalize SOF power. These are:

1. **Create Capability.** Intuitively and practically it is necessary to create a capability that demonstrates strategic utility relevance to decision makers. It needs to provide viable options that allow them to attain national objectives, whether it is to buy time, maintain the strategic offensive, tie down enemy war efforts, attack networks, provide strategic intelligence, etc. To achieve this normally requires a well-placed champion(s). Most importantly, it demands highly trained and capable personnel able to deal with complex (i.e., unknown and constantly changing) and ambiguous environments.
2. **Educate political and military decision makers.** Most individuals, particularly those in senior positions of responsibility bring with them their own experiential baggage (i.e., what worked to get them where they are) and are normally risk averse as they will wear any failure. As such, it is exceedingly important to socialize and educate these decision makers with regard to the capability, its effectiveness, and its ability to translate military action into political reward.
3. **Prove capability.** Theory and demonstrations only go so far in building trust and capability. The proof is always found in successful execution of operational expertise. The greater the “political reward” of an action or the amount of successful operations undertaken, the greater the trust, credibility, and “capital” accrued.

4. **Have a proactive strategic communication plan.** Success shared within a closed group is of little utility to the organization. In addition, the inability of political and military decision makers to reap their political “reward” can also dampen the usefulness of a given operation. Operational security to protect identities, methodologies, TTP, etc., is paramount. However, a proactive, informative narrative that explains the importance and utility of the SOF capability is increasingly important in an information rich environment. Building a constituency for SOF is an important component of maintaining strategic relevance, as well as insurance, should a catastrophic failure occur. Unknown to the public, SOF would fall to the mythology of the narrative that SOF are uncontrolled, unaccountable secret warriors run amok. With a sustained narrative, the discourse becomes one of the challenges of operating in an extremely hostile, volatile, and complex security environment.
5. **Safeguard uniqueness.** Strategic relevance rests on what SOF can contribute to the attainment of national objectives/national interest. As such, SOF must remain innovative and agile, adjusting to the changing threats and security environment. To rest on hard-won laurels, competencies, roles, and tasks, risks being left behind as other conventional or other organizations begin to demonstrate those capabilities; or, worse yet, the opponents or security environment evolves/morphs to a degree that SOF are unable to meet the new challenges and threats that arise.
6. **Remain strategically relevant.** In keeping with the previous point, it is essential that SOF maintain its salience/strategic utility. SOF must always offer decision makers a wide range of precision kinetic and non-kinetic options to address challenges in the international security environment. It is this utility that empowers SOF to continue to be resourced and trusted to execute missions in the national interest.

In the end, the absence of a formal theory on SOF and special operations did not limit SOF’ ability to evolve into a force of choice. What was and is always vital to SOF’ existence and ascendancy is ensuring that key political and military decision makers fully understand SOF power and its ability, at relatively low cost and risk, to achieve national objectives and support the national interest.

Endnotes

1. *Canadian Special Operation Forces Command. An Overview* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2008), 7, <http://www.cansofcom.forces.gc.ca/pub/doc/ove-a-pe-eng.pdf>. For the purpose of this chapter the Canadian doctrinal definition of SOF will be utilized, specifically: “Special Operation Forces are organizations containing specially selected personnel that are organized, equipped and trained to conduct high-risk, high value special operations to achieve military, political, economic or informational objectives by using special and unique operational methodologies in hostile, denied or politically sensitive areas to achieve desired tactical, operational and/or strategic effects in times of peace, conflict or war.” *Special Operations Forces Reference Manual*, 4th ed. (Tampa, FL: JSOU Press, June 2015), A8. Similarly, special operations are defined as: “Operations requiring unique modes of employment, tactical techniques, equipment and training often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments and characterized by one or more of the following: time sensitive, clandestine, low visibility, conducted with and/or through indigenous forces, requiring regional expertise, and/or a high degree of risk.”
2. Katherine Barber, ed., *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1613.
3. See: Joe Osborne, “Advancing a Strategic Theory of Special Operations,” *Small Wars Journal*, 13 May 2016, accessed 14 May 2016, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/advancing-a-strategic-theory-of-special-operations>; and Milan Vego, “On Military Theory,” *Joint Force Quarterly (JFQ)* 62 (3rd quarter 2011): 60.
4. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege (On War)*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 163.
5. William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995); James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Robert G. Spulak Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Use of SOF* (Hurlburt Field, FL: JSOU Press, October 2007), https://jsou.libguides.com/ld.php?content_id=2876965. Some effort has been made to develop a theory. McRaven’s case studies focused solely on stronghold break-in and he laid out the concept of “relative superiority”—namely, the ability of SOF to gain a temporary decisive advantage even over a larger or well-defended enemy force. From his case studies, he derived the key principles of surprise; speed; purpose; security; repetition; and simplicity. Kiras postulated that the cumulative effect of numerous disparate special operations, in conjunction with conventional forces, was working toward a common goal of attrition of an adversary’s key moral and material resources. Finally, Spulak argued special operations were missions undertaken to accomplish strategic objectives when the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Although all are excellent works in their own right, none are considered adequate to provide the necessary comprehensive theory for SOF or special operations.

6. Bernd Horn, "La Petite Guerre: A Strategy of Survival," in *The Canadian Way of War: Serving the National Interest*, ed. Bernd Horn (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2006), 21–56; and Bernd Horn, "Only for the Strong of Heart: Ranging and the Practice of la Petite Guerre During the Struggle for North America," in *Show No Fear: Daring Actions in Canadian Military History*, ed. Bernd Horn (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2008), 17–64.
7. C.P. Stacey, *Quebec, 1759: The Siege and the Battle*, ed. Donald Graves (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, reprint 2002), 33.
8. H.R. Casgrain, ed., *Lettres et Pièces Militaires: Instructions, Ordres, Mémoires, Plans de Campagne et de Défense 1756–1760* (Québec: L.J. Demers & Frère, 1891), 45; Martin L. Nicolai, "A Different Kind of Courage: The French Military and the Canadian Irregular Soldier during the Seven Years' War," *Canadian Historical Review* 70, no. 1 (1989): 59–64.
9. The promotion and appointment was the result of Montcalm's victory at Ticonderoga in 1758. He then decided to pull back from the frontier and concentrate his defenses at Montreal and Quebec, believing that he could defeat the superior British forces from an entrenched defensive position as he had done at Ticonderoga.
10. M. Pouchot, *Memoirs on the Late War in North America between France and England* (1781; repr., Youngstown, NY: Old Fort Niagara Association, Inc., 1994), 242. La petite guerre is, in essence, small-scale irregular warfare. The literal translation is "small war." European understanding of "petite guerre" was warfare "carried on by a light party, commanded by an expert partisan ... separated from the army, to secure the camp or a march; to reconnoiter the enemy or the country; to seize their posts, convoys and escorts; to plant ambushes, and to put in practice every stratagem for surprising or disturbing the enemy."
11. John R. Cuneo, *Robert Rogers of the Rangers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 33.
12. Colonel Bernd Horn, "Strength Born From Weakness: The Establishment of the Raiding Concept and the British Commandos," *Canadian Military Journal*, 6, no. 3 (Autumn 2005): 59–68.
13. Hilary St. George Saunders, *The Green Beret: The Story of the Commandos, 1940–1945* (London: Michael Joseph, 1949); Louis Mountbatten, *Combined Operations. The Official Story of the Commandos* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943); Brigadier T.B.L. Churchill, "The Value of Commandos," *Royal United Services Institute* (RUSI) 65, no. 577, February 1950, 85.
14. For a sampling of SOF achievements, see: Colonel Bernd Horn, "Reckoning: The Value of SOE in the Second World War," chap. 10 in *A Most Ungentlemanly Way of War: The SOE and the Canadian Connection* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2016); McRaven, *Spec Ops*; James Ladd, *Commandos and Rangers of World War II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); and Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 313–317.

15. “Precis of a Memorandum by Commander 1 Airborne Corps on the Value and Future Use of SAS Regiment” (WO 193/705, “Future of SAS Regiment,” National Archives [UK]) 1.
16. The term “brushfire” war is a term commonly used to refer to small-scale conflict or war that erupts, but is not part of an officially declared war. In the post-War era, this referred to a large number of “wars of national liberation,” and/or communist insurgencies (depending on perspectives). Borneo, Malaya, Oman, Yemen, Vietnam, and Algeria are but a few examples.
17. Ken Connor, *Ghost Force: The Secret History of the SAS* (London: Weidenfeld Military, 1998), 54–55 and 84–86; Anthony Kemp, *The SAS: Savage Wars of Peace, 1947 to the Present* (London: Penguin, 2001), 38; Tony Geraghty, *Inside the SAS* (Toronto: Methuen, 1980), 49.
18. Bernd Horn, “Love ‘Em or Hate ‘Em: Learning to Live with Elites,” *Canadian Military Journal* 8, no. 4 (Winter 2007–2008): 32–43.
19. Jon E. Lewis, *The Mammoth Book of Covert Ops* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2014), 360.
20. Colonel Scott Crerar, “The Special Force Experience with the Civilian Irregular Defence Group (CIDG) in Vietnam,” chap. 5 in *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations Forces*, eds. Bernd Horn, J. Paul de B. Taillon, and David Last (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004); Robin Moore, *The Green Berets* (New York: Ballantine, 1985), 99–119; Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 14–20; and Charles M. Simpson III, *Inside the Green Berets: The Story of the U.S. Army Special Forces* (New York: Berkley Books, 1985), 72–73. An example of the spike in growth was the Special Warfare Centre, which on average graduated less than 400 individuals in a given year. By 1962, the selection rate, which was historically 10 percent, shot up to 30 percent. By 1964, it had swelled to 70 percent. The following year, SF accepted, for the first time, 6,500 first-term enlistees and second lieutenants! Not surprisingly, the emphasis on quality—that is, ability, experience, maturity, and skill—was ignored in favor of quantity.
21. John D. Lock, *To Fight with Intrepidity: The Complete History of the U.S. Army Rangers, 1622 to Present* (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), 330–438.
22. Robert M. Gillespie, *Black Ops, Vietnam: The Operational History of MACVSOG* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011); Susan Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, 14–20; John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret War of America’s Commandos in Vietnam* (reprint, New York: Onyx, 1997); Richard H. Shultz, Jr., *The Secret War Against Hanoi: The Untold Story of Spies, Saboteurs, and Covert Warriors in North Vietnam* (New York: Perennial, 2000); Thomas K. Adams, *US Special Operations Forces in Action: The Challenge of Unconventional Warfare* (London: Routledge, 1998), 78–149.
23. SOF performance in Vietnam is contentious. The sudden spike in demand for SOF personnel was met, in many cases, by lowering selection standards, where

in fact they existed, which inevitably led to a diminution of the overall standard of individuals serving in those units. In theatre, the SOF culture of lax discipline and deportment, as well as 'unconventional' tactics, exacerbated by the type of inexperienced, and often immature, individuals who were now serving in SOF, created difficulties. Rightly or wrongly, the reputation of SOF suffered. They became viewed by the conventional military, as well as by much of the public, as largely a collection of ill-disciplined cowboys, and soldiers of questionable quality and planning ability, who were running amok without adequate control mechanisms.

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Chapter 5. A Blueprint for What is Possible: The Value in a Theory of Special Warfare

Travis Homiak

In August 2016, the Joint Special Operations University hosted a symposium on special operations theory. The purpose of the gathering was not, as one might have expected, to debate the finer points of theory among academics and long-time Special Operations Forces (SOF) practitioners. Rather, the symposium was held to determine whether there was a requirement for a theory of special operations in the first place. The conclusion of this writer is that such a need does exist if only to provide policymakers with a better understanding of what special operations can do as an element of the nation's military power. At a minimum, the result might help demystify special warfare and increase its viability as a policy option. Insofar as we are able to move toward realizing such goals, theory will prove its value to special operations.

At a minimum, the result might help demystify special warfare and increase its viability as a policy option.

It is surprising that this debate continues unabated: a substantial body of work addressing the theoretical aspects of special operations and SOF already exists. Most notably Admiral William McRaven's (U.S. Navy, Retired) work on relative superiority (1995); Robert Spulak's *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Use of SOF* (2007); and Harry (Rich) Yarger's *21st*

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Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations (2013), to name but a few. In addition, special operations research has recently emerged as a distinct field of study. Championed by [U.S. Army Command and General Staff College] Dr. Christopher Marsh, among others, the field is intent on applying rigor and scientific methods to the study of special operations for the benefit of a wider audience. Notwithstanding the creation of a new field or the significant thinking done by those previously mentioned, the debate surrounding the utility of a standalone theory of special operations continues. One reason is that no theory has yet surfaced that adequately canvases the spectrum of special operations or is so widely accepted by the community as to be considered universal. At least in part, the nature of special operations itself accounts for the lack of theory, accepted or otherwise.

Many attributes of special operations run counter to the creation of a unified theory or discourage the use of theory in general. Borrowing from another prospective theory, special operations have historically been about doing the “extraordinary” to achieve a specific effect (often aimed at the operational or strategic levels of war).¹ If one accepts that the defining characteristic of a special operation is its “extraordinary” nature in relation to more “ordinary” military activities, then it follows that special operations are in a constant state of flux.² They adapt and change just as military operations and capabilities adapt to fit what Clausewitz identifies as the “ever changing character of warfare.”³ Any theory needs to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate this fact. Second, the special operations community sees little utility in theory. As one might expect, the community is dominated by operationally-focused practitioners who are results-driven, and appear to have little use for theory in the day-to-day performance of their trade. This is not to say that these individuals are not deep thinkers or have no interest in moving their profession forward. Rather, they overwhelmingly focus on overcoming the day-to-day tactical problems related to current and future operations, and put forth much less effort on pushing the theoretical boundaries of their profession. As a final point, military professionals and academics have, for a multitude of reasons, been content to let special operations nest within general theories of warfare. The earlier reference to Clausewitz reinforces this point. Until recently, there was no requirement or movement afoot to create a theory specific to special operations.

This chapter will argue that there is value in a SOF-specific theory; one that is relevant to the SOF practitioner in two ways. First, an accepted theory

of special operations can provide both military and civilian leaders with a common departure point from which to understand how special operations may be used and what these operations might achieve. Second, having a theory will prove beneficial to SOF practitioners by enabling them to have a set of principles upon which they can anticipate specific actions and counteractions among both enemies and partners. Inspiration for this chapter came from the opening remarks made by Lieutenant General Charlie Cleveland (U.S. Army, Retired), former commander of United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC), at the Joint Special Operations University symposium. General Cleveland, an advocate for a SOF-specific theory put forth that “theory has use in that it provides policymakers with a blueprint demonstrating what may be within the realm of the possible.”⁴

Building off of General Cleveland’s comments, this chapter will begin by looking at the role played by theory, briefly review existing work on special operations theory to frame the state of the field of special operations research, and provide insight on what having a theory might mean for the field and the SOF enterprise. The second part of the chapter will provide an example of how theory might benefit special operations. To that end, it will draw heavily from the recent work of Marsh, Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Mike Kenny, and Major Nathanael Joslyn who, although stopping short of recommending a unified theory, advocate for multiple, connected theories of special operations.⁵ They see this method as the best way to move forward, while managing the diversity inherent in special operations.

The Five Tasks of Theory

Like any examination of ‘theory,’ irrespective of discipline or field, a definition of the term is compulsory and ensures a common understanding as we move forward. Previous work on special operations theory such as those by Dr. James Kiras [Air University] and Marsh provided detailed definitions along with an accompanying etymology of the word. Kiras, for example, defines theory as “a supposition intended to explain actions or behavior based on systematic explanation of its nature through a series of codified, related propositions backed by sufficient analysis and evidence.”⁶ For the purposes of this chapter a simpler definition is sufficient, although the choice is not intended to invalidate the earlier, and admittedly more scientific, work done by the aforementioned authors. Merriam-Webster’s definition holds

that theory is a “belief, policy, or procedure proposed or followed as the basis of action.” The utility of this definition over others is the directness with which it highlights theory as a “basis for action.”⁷ This point is worth emphasizing because it reinforces the central idea that theory can serve as a springboard for action.

Within the armed forces, theory performs multiple functions. In his effort to define the relationship between theory and the military, historian Harold Winton identifies no fewer than five “tasks” that theory performs. Winton’s five tasks are worth discussing because they broaden the understanding of theory and facilitate later linkages as the argument develops. According to Winton and depicted in figure 1, theory defines, categorizes, explains, connects, and anticipates.⁸ Not surprisingly, Winton accords primacy of place to theory’s role in explaining behaviors and relationships, which he identifies as its third function.⁹ Theory’s explanatory role is well understood. There is not much else that needs to be said on the theory’s role in explaining beyond acknowledging that it can be used to forge shared understanding across different groups—a point which directly supports General Cleveland’s proposition on the value of theory for special operations. That said, Winton calls attention to the fact that theory must, as its first task, define the “what” or the object against which it’s oriented before it can rightly explain anything. He also identifies the ability to categorize as the theory’s second task. A close second to the theory’s explanatory function, “categorizing” is also a key component in generating shared understanding because it denotes the use of a taxonomy or naming convention as a means to better understand the phenomena being explained.¹⁰

Theory’s Five Tasks in the Military Profession According to Winton	
Task	Example
Define	Identifies, scopes, and delimits the phenomena to be explained.
Categorize	Provides a taxonomy for evaluating the phenomena.
Explain	Articulates how the facts under consideration relate and interact with one another.
Connect	Links the theory to the wider world, making it relevant.
Anticipate	Looks forward to “predict” outcomes that have yet to occur.

Table 1. Theory’s Five Tasks in the Military Profession According to Harold Winton¹¹

The fourth task of theory is to connect or link with other fields of study or the wider world in general. “Connecting” places theory within much broader context and speaks to its accessibility for those outside of the field in question. Identifying where a specific theory fits within the broader scheme of knowledge and understanding the role it performs in relation to other theories enables one to evaluate its relevance as part of a larger whole. The relevance provided by the “connect” function contributes to shared understanding by using other theories to provide context and make the theory in question more accessible.

The fifth, and last, task of theory is its ability to help anticipate future concepts, trends, and capabilities. That said, Winton qualifies theory’s predictive ability, reserving it primarily for the realm of the natural sciences. Like many within the social sciences, Winton recognizes that human behavior is of such complexity as to make prediction a bridge too far in most cases.¹² Winton’s view is similar to that of noted international relations theorist Kenneth Waltz. Waltz too had little confidence in theory’s ability to predict real world outcomes, but nonetheless considered theory useful in predicting discrete behaviors.¹³ Similarly, Winton takes the position that theory can provide the conceptual foundation for future modes of warfare and capabilities that, although currently beyond our grasp, might one day be realized. The fact that theory invariably falls short in its ability to predict human behavior in no way compromises its overall utility. At the risk of borrowing too heavily from the field of international relations, theory, if it does nothing else, allows us to expand our understanding of special operations research and enhances our ability to act and think effectively on the topic.¹⁴

Finally, and before launching directly into the argument, a brief explanation of differences in terminology between words like ‘special operations’ and ‘special warfare’ is warranted, and will benefit the understanding of the lay reader. Although some of these terms may appear interchangeable, there is distinction and nuance in their use. This paper deals with special operations as a subset of military operations, the extraordinary nature of which distinguishes them from conventional operations.¹⁵ While having previously established that the quality of being extraordinary is static, the nature of special operations in practice change over time. It is therefore, plausible that future special operations will expand beyond these categories, but they are sufficient for the present argument. Next, we will introduce the terms ‘special warfare’ and ‘surgical strike’—both terms are admittedly

U.S. Army centric—as two broad categories that encompass the majority of contemporary special operations.

The first term is ‘special warfare’ which comprises the family of operations that involve working through, with, and by indigenous forces. Special warfare occurs on a continuum ranging from the peacetime training of foreign forces to active involvement in counterinsurgency, and, at the far end, unconventional warfare (UW). The advice and assistance provided to the French resistance in 1944 by American and British commandos falls squarely within this category.¹⁶ UW refers to U.S. support to a resistance movement in a foreign country, the aim of which is to overthrow the government. As it is doctrinally conceived, UW generally entails the lengthy process of building infrastructure to expand and develop local resistance into a force able to take the field and win against a conventional opponent.¹⁷ The second category, ‘surgical strike,’ covers the operations that come to mind when one thinks of “commando” operations like the 1942 raid by U.S. Marine Raiders on Japanese-held Makin Island and the 2003 rescue of Army Private Jessica Lynch. More precise, doctrinal definitions for special warfare, UW, and surgical strike will be provided as the argument unfolds, but a working understanding of the differences is necessary and suffices for the present.

SOF Theory: How Did We Get Here?

Having addressed theory’s potential uses, this next section will provide an overview of existing work within the field of SOF theory. Understanding what was already produced allows us to better determine which theories are most appropriate to our ends. Much of what was already done regarding special operations theory focuses more on SOF as an organization, and endeavors to get at those aspects that make it unique from conventional counterparts. This is certainly true for Spulak’s *A Theory of Special Operations* and Yarger’s *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations*. Spulak addresses SOF’s unique characteristics which allow them to overcome friction in a way that conventional forces are unable.¹⁸ Similarly, Yarger focuses on the attributes that makes SOF unique in his *21st Century SOF*. However, Yarger’s treatment of the topic differs from that of Spulak in its explicit focus on American special operations and his idea of SOF power as “a distinct form of military power.”¹⁹ Placing United States Special Operations Forces over traditional military instruments as the logical and

preferred tool with which to address challenges in the 21st century, Yarger advises that theory can play an influencing role in ensuring that SOF are both resourced for success and employed wisely.²⁰

When one considers that SOF struggled for their place within the conventional military establishment for much of their existence, it is understandable that a great deal of the earlier “theoretical” work focuses on defining the nature of SOF and special operations, especially in relation to the conventional force “other.”²¹ This early work was often intended by those within the SOF community to prevent what they saw as misuse of a poorly understood asset by the larger, conventional military. However, more relevant to the purposes of this essay are theories that explain why and how special operations achieves its effects or those that place special operations within larger theories of warfare. Kiras’ 2006 work entitled *Special Operations and Strategy* does exactly this; it nests special operations within Clausewitzian theory and argues that such operations, in conjunction with conventional operations, achieve their effects through the moral and material erosion of an opponent’s psychological resolve.²² Rich Rubright offers his own theory of special operations, “special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect.”²³ In Rubright’s words, the theory “is broad by intention so that it covers all of special operations and is applicable through time; in essence, unbound and serving solely as an explanatory tool for the phenomenon of special operations.”²⁴ Rubright’s theory appeals because of its simplicity and applicability. While it explains the phenomena of special operations better than other existing theories, its lack of mission specificity—arguably one of the theory’s main strengths—may disadvantage its use as a tool to demonstrate what special operations might achieve in a particular context.

To distill a theory with enough substance to connect both military and policy spheres, we must look at sub-theories under the broader heading of special operations. This is exactly the route proposed by Marsh, Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Mike Kenny, and Nathanael Joslyn in their 2015 article “SO What?: The Value of Scientific Inquiry and Theory Building in Special Operations Research.” After establishing the requirement for a scientifically rigorous theory within special operations, the authors point out that the nature of special operations is variable.²⁵ This variability occurs across the range of special operations missions amounts to “quite distinct (though interrelated) *phenomena*,” making it difficult for one single theory to cover them all. Therefore, Marsh, et al., advocate for several theories to cover the

range of special operations. The authors adopt USASOC's taxonomy, introduced earlier, for different types of special operations, which breaks special operations into two capability areas: surgical strike and special warfare.²⁶ The succeeding paragraphs will explain these two areas in greater depth and demonstrate the reasoning behind multiple theories.

The Army's current doctrinal publication on special operations describes surgical strike as a precision direct action capability that can be used "in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover, or damage designated targets, or influence threats," or what the layman would consider to be traditional "commando" or raid-type operations.²⁷ Although it garners significant attention and is undoubtedly a critical capability provided by SOF, surgical strike will not figure in the subsequent argument for several reasons.

First, surgical strike already has a widely accepted associated theory. Admiral William McRaven's book *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* examines surgical strike in depth and has been in publication since 1995. Second, a cursory search of *The New York Times* for "U.S. raid" yields a surprising number of results, one of which indicates that policymakers likely possess a solid understanding of that capability along with a demonstrated willingness to employ it. A similar statement cannot be made for special warfare, despite its closer proximity to the heart of USASOC's institutional culture and historical experience.

Special warfare, which includes UW as one of its main subsets, is also a "traditional" SOF activity and speaks to the U.S. military's significant involvement with resistance forces in both WWII and the Cold War. However, special warfare gets much less attention. For a multitude of reasons outside of the present argument, it does not capture the public's attention or figure into popular culture to the same degree as surgical strike. This point is emphasized by the lack of a joint definition for special warfare.²⁸ As a result, the U.S. Army definition for special warfare is provided here:

activities that involve a combination of lethal and nonlethal actions taken by a specially trained and educated force that has a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small-unit tactics, and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain, or hostile environment.²⁹

Special warfare comprises a range of activities such as foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency, stability operations, and security force assistance among others. That said, UW has primacy of place within the pantheon of special warfare-related tasks, largely because of its place within the institutional psyche of Army special forces.

Linking Theory to Policy

The challenge arises in that UW and the other special warfare tasks are not particularly attractive options with policy makers. First, special warfare, more so than unilateral military action, works primarily “through collaborative efforts with indigenous populations.”³⁰ This means that the U.S., although it may be driving actions, likely lacks the control and assurance it would have were it taking action with its own forces. Second, not only is there a reliance on partner actions, but also the matter of the target population’s receptiveness to those actions. These two qualities generally make special warfare a long-term endeavor, and, more importantly, one fraught with uncertainty and substantial political risk. This fact typically places special warfare solutions, especially those involving UW, outside the desired selection criteria of policy makers striving to satisfy more immediate political goals. In addition, the use of special warfare—specifically UW—by a liberal democracy such as the United States also raises difficult legal and moral questions for which there are no easy answers. Thus, political calculus almost always works against special warfare options, even when such a solution might ultimately prove more durable over the long-term.

The end result is that U.S. policymakers tend not to consider special warfare as a viable policy option. This is especially true in today’s political climate, one particularly unforgiving of military actions characterized by large troop deployments with open ended commitments. A prime example of this phenomena is the ongoing debate involving the commitment of increasing numbers of U.S. ‘boots on the ground’ against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in both Syria and Iraq. Other examples includes Russian annexation of the Crimea and support to separatists in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Both examples point to an environment, often imperfectly referred to as the ‘Grey Zone,’ that is certainly not peace, but falls short of state-on-state war. In precisely this sort of environment, SOF’ small footprint and low visibility make them a preferred policy option over larger, conventional units.³¹

Unfortunately, the doctrine-based language settled upon for communicating special operations options to policymakers is almost always grounded in traditional concepts of war, e.g., special warfare, unconventional warfare. Using such terminology subconsciously pushes one toward a conventional mindset that culminates with U.S. forces conducting the dominating activities reminiscent of a doctrinal joint campaign.³² Theory may prove beneficial in defusing precisely this type of thinking, and expanding the locus of decision making to entertain special warfare options more appropriate to the ambiguous space characterizing modern warfare.

Charting a path toward this outcome brings us back to Marsh, Kenny, and Joslyn's work on special operations theory. In seeking a scientifically rigorous theory of special operations, the authors, after opting to split special operations into the subsets of surgical strike and special warfare, looked at applying contemporary social movement theory as a means to better conceive of special warfare activities. Specifically, they recommend applying Charles Tilly's theory of contentious politics. In their minds, Tilly's theory could add depth to explaining how "SOF plan, construct, and utilize functional networks of human relationships to effect the mobilization and demobilization of collective actors operating within political opportunity structures and cultural contexts to achieve political objectives."³³ Incorporating Tilly's more scientific theory would help explain the 'how' and 'why' of special warfare where previous attempts stopped at explaining the 'what.' This is especially salient in an age where the proliferation of information technology and individual empowerment has made for an increasingly complex landscape; one with a plethora of nontraditional international actors able to compete, in certain areas, with sovereign states. Tilly's theory would not usurp existing theoretical thought entirely but serve as "a point of departure for systematic and scientific discourse aimed at constructing a theory of engagement [with indigenous populations] and special warfare."³⁴ The authors drew their conclusions using previous and related research done by Joslyn on the origin and future of U.S. special warfare doctrine.

In his monograph entitled *Past and Present Theory for Special Warfare Operational Art: People's War and Contentious Politics*, Joslyn traces the roots of U.S. Army thinking on special warfare back to two distinct theories: one oriented toward guerrilla operations and came out of the American experiences in the Philippines during WWII, and two, a theory of insurgency the intellectual foundation of which rests on Mao Zedong's model of people's

war.³⁵ While Joslyn praises the durability of U.S. thinking on guerrilla warfare, he critiques the simplified manner in which many of the ideas in Mao's theory of people's war were absorbed into U.S. special operations thinking and what he considers to be a lack of intellectual scrutiny of the model itself.³⁶ His critique includes the fact that U.S. institutional models of insurgency have historically taken a simplified approach when looking at indigenous populations, overlooking the religious, cultural, and even economic variations present in any large group of people that provide multiple avenues of engagement.³⁷ Russia's exploitation of ethnic fault lines in Georgia and South Ossetia in the run-up to the 2008 Russo-Georgian War and again in Eastern Ukraine in 2014 are examples of how a state or group can capitalize on a deeper cultural and societal awareness.³⁸ Notwithstanding the limitations of the U.S. military's interpretation of Mao's theory, there is inherent virtue in updating, or at least revalidating, a theory that has its origin in 1950s and 60s thought.

Despite the ability of Tilly's theory to describe the dynamics of modern contention better and more fully than current U.S. military thinking on special warfare, the question of how one puts theory into practice remains. Joslyn, for one, recognizes the challenges involved in operationalizing theory, especially one that originated in academia outside of the military. He recommends further study as to whether a theory of contentious politics can serve as the foundation for future approaches to special warfare.³⁹ Particularly as it applies to special warfare, theory acts as a mechanism for creating a shared vision between the military, other governmental departments and agencies, and those who craft policy. This is theory fulfilling its tasks to define and explain.

Particularly as it applies to special warfare, theory acts as a mechanism for creating a shared vision between the military, other governmental departments and agencies, and those who craft policy.

Conclusion

When weighing policy options, it is difficult to conceive of an instance in which one wouldn't desire complete understanding of the problem along with the promise of an optimal solution. It is in this precise space that we would look to capitalize on General Cleveland's view of theory and its

potential utility to special operations. Theory may very well open the aperture on courses of action that, for lack of a shared vision, would otherwise remain misunderstood and far from the light of day, never to receive serious consideration. As policymakers gain a better understanding of what special operations can achieve, the result might be to demystify and clarify special warfare; bringing it closer to the mainstream thinking, and increasing its viability as a realistic policy option. Insofar as we are able to move toward realizing such goals, theory will have proved its value to special operations.

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Chapter 6. Civil Context for SOF Theory

Kurt E. Müller

As a mid-grade officer, Admiral William McRaven (U.S. Navy, Retired) applied professional military education to derive from eight specific instances of the employment of Special Operations Forces (SOF) a set of principles to improve the likelihood of success for particularly risky missions. Undertaken as a study while at the Naval Postgraduate School, Admiral McRaven’s presentation draws examples from the experiences of five nations, both within major conflicts (WWII and Vietnam) and in an isolated operation during peacetime (the Entebbe hostage rescue).¹ In a later exploration of SOF theory, Robert Spulak correctly notes that then-Commander McRaven’s study is actually an exploration of direct-action missions—i.e., a specific subset of SOF missions—that provide a basis for more generalization. Although he notes non-wartime roles for SOF, in particular in foreign internal defense, counterterrorism, and civil affairs, Spulak nonetheless focuses on wartime because the “value of SOF in peacetime is derived from their unique roles in war.”²

The wartime–peacetime dichotomy complicates the development of a SOF theory to the point that some may see the distinction between direct-action missions and persistent-presence roles as sufficiently different to preclude a theory applicable to both. But many in the SOF community are strident advocates of definitions that account for the “spectrum of conflict,” from peacetime competition through low-intensity conflict to war. Although we

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may expect wartime experiences to lead policymakers to call for preserving, if not expanding, the SOF structure, there should be little doubt that the challenges short of war that the U.S. experienced between periods of major conflict prevented the usual demobilization pattern, which hits military specialties differentially. In an effort to preserve conventional combat power when “peace dividends” demand a reduction in the armed forces, those units with special skills developed for a specific environment or circumstance are most likely to case their colors or move to the reserve components. But without an element constantly attending to identifying emerging challenges, the options for responding to sudden crises short of war are too limited, as the U.S. discovered with Operation Eagle Claw, the attempted rescue of hostages in Iran. The SOF truth about being unable to mass produce special operators in a short time helps diminish pressure to reduce SOF force structure, but more important yet is recognition of the continuing utility of SOF in environments other than major conflict. If indeed the utility of SOF spans the spectrum of conflict, theories of SOF’ effectiveness should be applicable across that spectrum.

Admiral McRaven opens his exploration by proposing a need for a theory of special operations. Noting the existence of “theories of war escalation and war termination, theories of revolution and counterrevolution, ... theories of insurgency and counterinsurgency ... general airpower and sea power theories, and more specific theories on strategic bombing and amphibious warfare,” he then sets his inquiry into the necessary features of successful special operations as a response to the need to reduce “the frictions of war to a manageable level.”³

In essence, this approach contributes to a specific theory of armed force—a category that would include air and sea power theories. This category differs from general theories of armed force such as Clausewitz presents in his classic, *Vom Kriege*, in that the latter moves from the specifics of tactics through strategy to broader goals in interstate relations, often called the political, or grand-strategic, level. The gap in recent approaches to theories of special operations is at this broader level. It may be that exploration of the utility of special operations to achieving foreign policy goals leads us to conclude that a theory of effective special operations must be a subset of the general theory that Clausewitz offered. But if the utility of SOF extends across a spectrum of interstate relations, theories of SOF’ effectiveness ought to account for such varying circumstances.

The consistent emphasis on the small footprint of special operations offers advantages across the spectrum that facilitate interagency integration to achieve a national objective.

Such integration, which has been lacking in both conventional campaigns and special operations, is necessary from analysis through planning and execution to post-operation assessments.

In particular, special operations should not constitute an independent activity nor are they just an option to achieve a conventional military end state.

In particular, special operations should not constitute an independent activity nor are they just an option to achieve a conventional military end state. Rather, as with the tie between military power and policy goals, the policy goals must remain in focus.

Strategic Impact

One aspect of SOF lore and argument for SOF utility needs some examination before turning to this broader context. Spulak opens his Joint Special Operations University monograph with a characterization of special operations as “missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction.”⁴ Citing Dr. James Kiras’s [Air University] dissertation on special operations and strategy, Spulak extends Kiras’s view that special operations “enable conventional operations and/or resolve economically politico-military problems at the operational or strategic level that are difficult or impossible to accomplish with conventional forces alone” by asking why special operations don’t have strategic roles of their own.⁵ Thus, both Kiras and Spulak accept the proposition that SOF emphasize accomplishing strategic objectives. Does the historic record validate this assertion? If not, in what ways does the lore differ from the record and what is the impact of that difference?

Admiral McRaven’s primary concern is not whether the operation pursued a Clausewitzian center of gravity that would result in strategic impact. He concentrates on analyzing the cases to derive principles to improve the chances of success and then looks for conformity or divergence from those principles. Admiral McRaven provides a succinct definition of success that he applies to most of the cases he studied. He writes, “[i]n wartime the success of an operation is judged almost solely on the achievement of the objectives.”⁶

But the objectives he considers are the immediate tactical ones rather than the intended strategic impact. Thus, he can conclude that most of the cases he examined succeeded.

This focus also allows Admiral McRaven to conclude that the Son Tay raid to recover American prisoners of war (POWs) in Vietnam, Operation Kingpin, “is the best modern-day example of a successful special operation and should be considered textbook material for future missions.”⁷ If one’s focus is on the intended outcome, the fact that there were no POWs in the compound means the mission failed to meet its objective. As he notes, the public reaction to war escalation and the press indictment of the intelligence community for failing to verify the continuing presence of POWs in the compound both had an impact on public attitudes.⁸ The lack of public support of course violates the Clausewitzian trinity of people, army, and public, which has been known to American military readers since Army Colonel Harry Summers published his immensely influential study, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context*.⁹

The focus on military tasks without linkage to political objectives is not at all unusual, even among some who evoke Clausewitz as a theoretical mentor. In a work that looks back at the 1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) to determine whether the technical advantage U.S. and coalition forces enjoyed over the Iraqi Army required reassessing Clausewitz’s concept of friction, Barry Watts concludes:

[T]here was no shortage of friction at any level—tactical, operational, strategic, or even political. Indeed, close examination of Desert Storm suggests that frictional impediments experienced by the winning side were not appreciably different in scope or magnitude than they were for the Germans during their lightning conquest of France and the Low Countries in May 1940.¹⁰

Watts cites an assessment of the concept of a Military Technical Revolution, then in vogue, that would “imbue the information loop with near-perfect clarity and accuracy, to reduce its operation to a matter of minutes or seconds, and—perhaps most important of all—to deny it to the enemy.”¹¹ Watts rejects the conclusion that technological advances will obviate the concern over the concept of friction. Yet, Watts too foregoes any connection between the conduct of war and its political aims. To restore this connection, it is necessary to recognize interrelations among elements of national power

in the analysis of a policy challenge and in the formulation and execution of a response.

Policy Objectives and the Focus of Military Campaigns: Harnessing Essential Elements of National Power

With many regimes that replace predecessors that repressed a majority of the populace, the successor asserts its power with majoritarian support and fails to safeguard minority rights. Examples are easy to find as far apart as the Reign of Terror following the 1789 French Revolution and the Mugabe regime in Zimbabwe that replaced British colonial rule in Rhodesia. Similarly, the competition among political parties seeking to replace civil administrators who were members of an ousted regime offers a challenge the U.S. government has consistently failed to address, with examples readily available from WWII, the aftermath of the 1992–95 Bosnian war, and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The trajectory toward interagency collaboration has a long arc. In modern military history, an early touchstone lies in the observation by the long-serving chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke, the elder, that the lack of mutual support across the combat arms constituted an urgent problem to be rectified.¹² In time, similar reasoning applied across land, sea, and air services. In turn, jointness in the post-Goldwater-Nichols era built a foundation for interagency collaboration in the execution of campaigns. An interagency approach to assessment and planning should also have been forthcoming, but conducting a whole-of-government approach to foreign-policy challenges has been stymied by both institutional prerogatives and structural hindrances in the deployment of civilians. In the aftermath of the Northern Alliance defeat of the Taliban and the U.S. and coalition defeat of the Iraqi Army, a common theme in Washington corridors was the need for a “Goldwater-Nichols II,” to do for the interagency environment what the 1986 legislation did for joint forces. For about a decade, think tanks and various Washington agencies devoted considerable attention to the need for national security professionals conversant with the capabilities and perspectives of various federal agencies, for personnel to take assignments in other agencies to develop such expertise, and for professional development to address whole-of-government responses to security challenges through a National Security University.¹³

The response to various foreign challenges prior to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom had uncovered significant gaps in interagency collaboration. In 1997 (during the President Bill Clinton administration), the White House issued Presidential Decision Directive 56, “Managing Complex Contingency Operations,” which directed mechanisms to establish and conduct: (1) an interagency executive committee, (2) a political-military plan, (3) an interagency rehearsal of the plan, (4) interagency training, (5) agency review, and (6) an after-action review.¹⁴ In 2002, the Association of the United States Army and the Center for Strategic and International Studies jointly published “Post-Conflict Reconstruction,” which offered a framework that specified tasks under four general categories—security, justice and reconciliation, social and economic well-being, governance and participation—without assigning tasks to any specific agency. Two years later, the Defense Science Board devoted its summer study to “Transition to and from Hostilities,” and in the same year, the Center for Technology and National Security Policy issued a volume that explored interagency contributions to stabilization and reconstruction.¹⁵ The following year, the President George W. Bush administration promulgated National Security Policy Directive 44, “Management of Interagency Efforts Concerning Reconstruction and Stabilization,” which identified roles for 10 federal agencies that were to respond to foreign crises through a coordinator for reconstruction and stabilization. In 2006, the Iraq Study Group, co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, echoed this call for interagency training and operations “following the Goldwater-Nichols model” as well as for improving the response of civilian agencies to stability operations.¹⁶

The path to National Security Presidential Directives (NSPD) 44 was by no means an even one. The consolidation of the Iraq campaign had demonstrated both competition among agencies for influence and lack of collaboration in conducting an occupation to empower a replacement for the Saddam Hussein regime. In 2003, NSPD 24 had given the Department of Defense (DOD) the lead for reconstruction, but in 2004, NSPD 36 assigned that responsibility to the Department of State. The root of the failure to address the key issues in establishing the structure for a transition to a representative democracy however, lay in the failure to coordinate between State and Defense in planning that transition. The Department of State had undertaken a significant effort known as the Future of Iraq project. The project’s working groups held 23 meetings with some 200 expatriate Iraqis

who identified issues across sectors of Iraqi society. Although the project did not produce a blueprint for transition that either Lieutenant General Jay Garner (U.S. Army, Retired) or Ambassador Bremer could pick up and seek to implement, it did present a broad background on each of these sectors and identified both desired outcomes and pitfalls to avoid.¹⁷

State Department personnel indeed saw the need for expertise from other federal agencies if Iraq was to become stable. The fate of this State Department project is a benchmark that advocates for reform of the national-security structure use to call for changes in structure and process. *The Washington Post* journalist Bob Woodward writes that National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley saw the question of stability broadly: “It wasn’t just achieving stability—political or otherwise. The president wanted to achieve democracy. So Hadley realized they needed a comprehensive postwar plan.”¹⁸

In the early stages of the civilian surge, there was considerable public criticism regarding the inability of the State Department to deploy personnel to hardship posts, first Iraq, then Afghanistan.¹⁹ Criticism came from the DOD as well, which had to fill civilian positions in Provincial Reconstruction Teams with military personnel. A *New York Times* reporter interviewed Admiral Edmund Giambastiani, then Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and quoted him as saying, “[w]e send out orders, we execute orders, we deploy our military, and guess what happens? They turn up and do their job.”²⁰

Missing in this description is any perception of the differences in career patterns, employment modes, and support structures between military and civilian personnel. Even the DOD encountered substantial difficulties deploying its civilian staff. The term-hire option, typical for the United States Agency for International Development, which most frequently uses implementing partners (contractors), became routine through various mechanisms for other agencies as well.²¹ This option was common in the DOD’s experience of filling positions through the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce, though the pattern was to use term-hires (typically of one-year duration) in the early stages of the program and gradually transition to career employees. But the impact on the careers of volunteers was not sanguine: approximately one third of career civilians who deployed lost their positions when they returned to their previous stations.²²

Unconventional Warfare and Steady-State Operations

These issues were primarily attributable to the scale of the civilian surge. The major problem civilian agencies have in deploying personnel is meeting the numbers required, which would not be true for civilian support to special operations. In 2007, there were over 200,000 more civilians in DOD than civilians with skills appropriate for stabilization activities across 10 domestic agencies with applicable missions.²³ Since there have always been volunteers for deployment assignments, small-footprint operations, such as SOF undertake, can more easily obtain access to civilian expertise than can their conventional counterparts, in some instances on operations, in others for support in field sites or headquarters.

In his 2016 monograph, Will Irwin states with conviction that “unconventional warfare is an inherently interagency affair.”²⁴ Noting that “non-wartime UW efforts rarely succeed,” Irwin addresses factors and actors in non-violent civil resistance to achieve policy goals at the lower end of the conflict spectrum, but above steady-state diplomatic engagement. His description evokes Sun Tzu’s dictum, “To subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill.”²⁵

As Irwin concludes, states subjected to the range of activities he describes may very well react to the threat against their power as an act of war. The gray zone of supporting a non-violent insurgency will remain controversial in the absence of international agreements on the level of influence that crosses a threshold recognized as interference in the polity of another state. Consequently, the potential for escalation demands consideration of the affiliation, by agency, of personnel sent to conduct specific activities. Not only does a public association of foreign military personnel with anti-government activity offer a regime a propaganda point of foreign interference, as Irwin notes, but activity outside a civilian agency’s normal range of expertise can also backfire.

The matter of state fragility and the factors that contribute to it lie well beyond the focus of this chapter, as does consideration of the circumstances that would engender a U.S. government response to threats to a state’s stability. But assessment of these conditions should be an on-going process. A salient point in an article about the need to understand societies and their politics before tensions turn violent is a focus not only on the adequacy or character of security structures in these societies but on the character

of the societies themselves.²⁶ That analysis requires multiple perspectives obtainable from members of a country team steeped in the expertise of their home agencies.²⁷ Herein lies a potential SOF role, if carefully scoped and adequately prepared.

The choice of agencies to assess conditions in fragile states colors the type of response and reflects the priorities of ambassadors and their country teams. In an article in *The National Interest*, “Fixing Fragile States,” former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair, Ambassador Ronald Neumann, and Admiral Eric Olson call for empowering ambassadors to direct resources through their country teams rather than having representatives on the country team send recommendations back to home agencies for approval in Washington.²⁸

In addressing a state’s stability, the default recommendation from the defense sector has become to follow the strategy of building partner capacity. But ambassadors may be wary of this recommendation, both from recent analyses and prior history. A 2013 RAND study that looked at the effectiveness of building partnership capacity found that securing access to the country was a higher priority than building the partner state’s defense capacity.²⁹ Moreover, in describing persistent presence as Phase 0, the model of campaign phasing presented in Joint Publication 5-0 (*Joint Operation Planning*) can easily strike diplomats as supporting confrontation when they would prefer de-escalation.³⁰ Recent events in Mali implicated troops in the oppression of citizens, and although SOF advocates can point to the reliability of the battalion the U.S. elements had mentored, the overall public impression is still that support of the military in some countries makes them more proficient at repression.

Such a record of events recalls Army General Stanley McChrystal’s comments in his 2013 interview by *Foreign Affairs*: “When we first started, the question was ‘Where is the enemy?’ ... As we got smarter, we started to ask, ‘Who is the enemy?’ ... and then ... we asked, ‘What’s the enemy trying to do?’ And it wasn’t until we got further along that we said, ‘Why are they the enemy?’”³¹ Answers to these questions reflect the perspectives of the agencies supplying them. Herein lies a potential assessment role that SOF is well qualified to undertake.

The challenge lies in the compilation of agency assessments. Because SOF field elements, particularly both special forces and civil affairs, are accustomed to working in interagency environments, they are better situated than

any institutional structure outside an embassy’s country team to conduct such a holistic analysis. The SOF education model comes closest to that projected for a national security university since that concept was introduced. During the brief period the Civilian Response Corps existed, its pre-

Because SOF field elements, particularly both special forces and civil affairs, are accustomed to working in interagency environments, they are better situated than any institutional structure outside an embassy’s country team to conduct such a holistic analysis.

deployment qualification program introduced its practitioners to the capabilities resident across federal agencies. The closest such programmatic introduction of capabilities is at the senior service colleges, where the theme of “all elements of national power” gets its due but is primarily theoretical. Interagency participation occurs at this level, but it is limited in its reach across agencies, and

familiarity with agency capabilities is still missing. The SOF education model introduces these themes at an earlier stage in the practitioners’ careers.

Conclusion

To return to the departure point of this discussion—the strategic impact of special operations—one can conclude that the best example of a special operation that truly had a strategic impact is the Entebbe hostage rescue. The narrow objective was self-contained in that its accomplishment concluded the crisis. As this exploration has shown, for strategic impact, the desired outcome must be clear, and this outcome is not the province of a specific agency so much as it is a U.S. government goal. In the absence of both multi-agency perspectives and an office that seeks to integrate agency analyses, it is unlikely that any given agency will develop a sufficient operational picture to propose a holistic response to meet the national policy goal. Whereas a good number of senior executives in the foreign policy arena have embraced the notion that unstable states can harbor threats to the security of the United States, its friends, and allies, the defense-sector response of building partner capacity addresses only part of the challenge. If conducted with sensitivity toward multiagency analysis, the low profile typical of special operations offers options that do not currently exist elsewhere in the U.S. government. To demonstrate utility across the spectrum of conflict, the SOF community

needs to address not only its contribution to the military instrument of power but also to long-established connections between power and policy. Such an approach provides a useful starting point for developing further theories that undergird the effectiveness of special operations.

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Chapter 7. Outside the Box: A Theory of Special Operations

Tom Searle

Every book, article, and movie about special operations includes at least an implied theory of special operations. However, all this theorizing has produced myriad competing theories rather than a consensus theory. The most common flaw in these theories is that they start from each author's ideal special operation, and then attempt to connect all other special operations to that ideal. That approach breaks down because there is no consensus on what defines an ideal special operation.

For example, Admiral William McRaven (U.S. Navy, Retired), in his book *Spec Ops, Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, treats direct action raids as the ideal special operation, and claims that other types of special operations are closely related to direct action.¹ Hy Rothstein disagrees. For Rothstein, the direct action raids that Admiral McRaven studies are more like “hyperconventional” operations than special operations.² Rothstein believes the real special operations are things like psychological operations and support to foreign resistance forces trying to overthrow a government or drive out an occupying army.³ Yet another approach used, for example, by Robert Spulak Jr., is to start with the troops who conduct special operations—Special Operations Forces (SOF)—and work backwards from

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Adapted from JSOU Report 17-4, *Outside the Box: A New General Theory of Special Operations* by Tom Searle, a publication of the Joint Special Operations University Press.

the supposed common characteristics of all SOF to a theory of the special operations that require SOF.⁴

This lack of consensus on the ideal special operation and what exactly all special operations have in common leads to unsatisfactory general theories of special operations. (In fairness, Rothstein did not even attempt to fit “hyperconventional” and “unconventional” operations under a single theory. He instead argued that calling both “special operations” caused the United States to overemphasize the hyperconventional and neglect the unconventional.)

Defining special operations positively, i.e. in terms of what all special operations have in common, leads to flawed theories because special operations should not be defined that way. As Admiral Eric Olson (U.S. Navy, Retired), former commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, pointed out at the 2016 symposium on special operations theory, “special operations are defined negatively,” i.e., in terms of what they are not rather than what they are.⁵ Specifically, special operations are operations that are not conventional operations.

This chapter agrees with Olson’s view and accepts the negative definition of special operations as different from conventional operations. It also accepts the related fact that different types of special operations might be quite different from each other. Further, it builds on the fact that special operations are heterogeneous to present a new theory of special operations—one that does not see special operations as a minor addition to conventional operations but as the vast universe of potential military operations that, for any reason, are not conventional. The theory relies on a particular visualization, developed through a series of figures, to demonstrate that special operations are outside the conventional box. The chapter also investigates the implications of this theory for special and conventional operations and what happens as conventional operations evolve.

To introduce the visualization, let’s start by imagining conventional military operations as a box. Inside the box are conventional forces (CF) conducting all the conventional operations they were designed for: Army Divisions and Brigade Combat Teams are attacking and defending; Navy Carrier Task Groups are clearing the seas of enemy ships; Marine Air-Ground Task Forces are conducting amphibious assaults; Air Force strike aircraft are dismantling the enemy’s integrated air defenses before destroying the things that make it possible for the enemy to function as a coherent system, etc. Since special operations are different from conventional ones, they are by definition,

Conventional vs. Special Operations

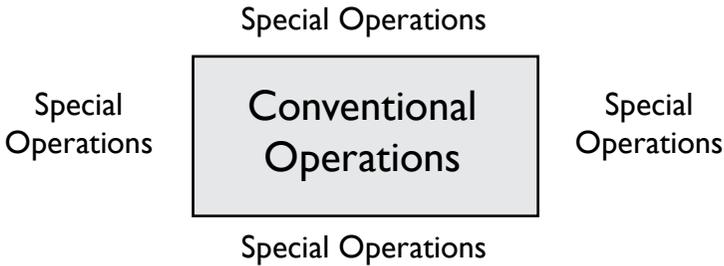


Figure 1. Special operations are outside the conventional operations box.

outside the conventional box. Figure 1 depicts this relationship, with conventional operations in the center surrounded on all sides by various types of special operations outside the box.

The ‘special operations’ outside the conventional box include all special operations activities listed in Title 10 U.S. Code § 167 (direct action, strategic reconnaissance, unconventional warfare (UW), foreign internal defense (FID), civil affairs (CA), military information support operations (MISO), counterterrorism (CT), humanitarian assistance, theater search and rescue, and such other activities as may be specified by the President or the Secretary of Defense), but are not limited to that list.⁶ Special operations likewise include all special operations core activities listed in Joint Publication 3-05 (direct action, special reconnaissance, countering weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism (CT), UW, FID, security force assistance, hostage rescue and recovery, counterinsurgency (COIN), foreign humanitarian assistance, military information operations, and CA operations, and other such activities as may be specified by the President and/or Secretary of Defense), but are not limited by this list either.⁷ The current (2011) edition of U.S. Special Operations Command Publication 1, *Doctrine for Special Operations*, provides yet another unique list, this time broken down into Core Operations and Core Activities, and including many items not found in the other two lists.⁸ Together, the fact that: a) all three lists are in effect; b) they differ from one another and; c) the lists often include escape clauses about “other activities” that are not listed, suggests no list of special operations could be complete. Still, this poses no problems for our definition since a negative

definition can include a large number of cases (i.e., conventional may include a small number of similar cases but not conventional will include a vast array of potentially dissimilar items).

Figure 1 suggests that the field of special operations extends indefinitely in all directions away from the conventional box, but there is a limit. The scope of special operations we are considering is limited by the authorities given to the military. (In the United States, these authorities are given to the Department of Defense (DOD) by the U.S. Congress.) For U.S. purposes, a large circle around the conventional box represents the full range of operations the military is authorized to conduct. As depicted in figure 2, this large circle representing all military operations contains a box in the center representing conventional operations. Everything inside the circle, but outside the box, is a special operation.

Civilian and military leaders of U.S. DOD, with guidance from Congress and the President, allocate resources based on national strategic goals and expectations about the future. They define conventional operations as the ones that the DOD will focus its resources on, and the DOD puts the vast majority of its resources into CF, to conduct conventional operations. But figure 2 is a reminder that emphasizing conventional operations does not eliminate DOD's other responsibilities.

Conventional vs. Special Operations

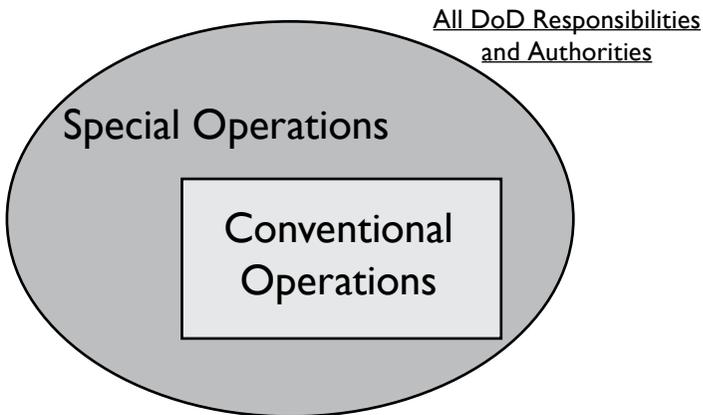


Figure 2. Special operations are inside the large circle containing all military operations but outside the conventional operations box.

Figure 2 naturally emerges from our definition, and it helps us understand several important aspects of the relationship between special and conventional operations. The first thing to emphasize is that a narrower definition of conventional operations allows CF to improve their performance in those operations (since they are dividing training time among fewer different activities).⁹ However, narrowing the definition of conventional operations also makes the conventional box smaller, causing more activities to fall outside the conventional box and become special operations. As a result, efforts to focus CF on a smaller range of tasks, and thus increase their proficiency, should be coupled with expansion in special operations capabilities (since the DOD will still need to maintain some capability in areas no longer considered conventional operations).

Figure 2 demonstrates that special operations are desperately important to DOD, and may even cover the majority of the DOD's responsibilities, regardless of whether they directly facilitate conventional operations. Neglecting the special operations capability leaves the DOD unable to perform the tasks assigned it and such neglect would, arguably, constitute professional negligence and dereliction of duty by DOD leadership.

Another way of looking at figure 2 is to see special operations capabilities as insurance against the possibility that leadership might misjudge the type of operations the department would need to conduct and focused on conventional operations that are inappropriate for the new threat. When conventional operations are inappropriate, the DOD will have to rely on special operations and the ability to conduct such operations will be vitally important. The DOD has two obvious options for creating and sustaining the ability to conduct special operations. One is to require CF to devote some training time to special operations. The other is to reclassify a small portion of the force as SOF and organize, train, and equip them to be experts in special operations. Building special operations capabilities by expanding the responsibilities of CF makes those forces less capable of conducting their conventional missions. On the other hand, building competent and robust SOF allows the rest of the force to concentrate on conventional operations, thus indirectly enhancing conventional capabilities while directly mitigating risk.

Insurance against guessing wrong is desperately important. As Admiral Michael Mullen (U.S. Navy, Retired) admitted when he was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "We're pretty lousy at predicting the kind of warfare

Competent SOF are the insurance that protects against "lousy" predictions.

we'll be in."¹⁰ Competent SOF are the insurance that protects against "lousy" predictions. Fortunately, the United States purchased this insurance at a startlingly low cost. United States Special Operations Forces receive a tiny portion of DOD resources: less than 5 percent of the total and often closer to 1 percent of the total, depending on the resource in question.¹¹

In addition to mitigating the unforeseen problems of guessing wrong about enemy threats, special operations capabilities also create new options and unanticipated opportunities. For example, in late 2001, when the United States found itself preparing for a totally unexpected war in Afghanistan, it was enormously helpful that the nation already had units that were organized, trained, and equipped to link up with irregular indigenous forces and assist them in liberating their country. (In U.S. military doctrine this type of operation is UW.) These units were, of course, the Army special forces and other special operations personnel who helped topple the Taliban government. The existence of this special operations capability before the conflict began made it possible for the United States to drive the Taliban and their al-Qaeda allies out of Afghanistan much sooner, and with many fewer U.S. casualties.¹²

Ironically, special operations capabilities are just as important when we guess right, as when we guess wrong. Our preference is to deter conflict rather than fight wars, and build an array of CF to deter potential enemies. But what happens when we correctly assess the way an adversary wants to confront us, and we respond correctly by building and deploying CF that successfully deter that adversary? Some potential adversaries might abandon confrontation in favor of cooperation, but others might abandon conventional military confrontation in favor of an approach that evades conventional deterrence. In such cases, special operations capabilities may be vital to countering the adversary's non-conventional approaches. Thus the better we are at conventional operations, the more successful we will be in deterring the enemy from confronting us conventionally, and the more likely it is that we will instead have to conduct special operations.

Arguably, this is exactly what is happening in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) eastern flank, where NATO CF seem to be successfully deterring Russian conventional operations. Rather than cooperating with NATO, Russia chose a confrontational approach using what some

call hybrid warfare.¹³ To date, this approach successfully advanced Russian interests by force but without justifying a NATO conventional operation response. If NATO conventional operations cannot counter Russian hybrid warfare, then special operations may become NATO's main military option.

Figure 2 also explains the origins of the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and congressionally mandated Major Force Program (MFP)-11, SOF funding. Congress defined the large circle of activities it wanted the military to be able to conduct, but conventional-minded service chiefs chose to see their duties as confined by the much smaller, conventional box. As a result, when Congress authorized funding to address concerns associated with special operations as depicted in figure 2 (i.e., inside the military circle but outside the conventional box), the military services consistently redirected those funds to address conventional priorities inside the box. The failed attempt to rescue hostages from Iran in 1980 provided objective proof that this approach was leaving the U.S. military unprepared for hostage rescue missions, CT more generally, and, by extension many other special operations outside the conventional box. Congress finally lost patience. In 1986, over the objections of all the Services chiefs, Congress created a funding stream, MFP-11, outside the control of the services. Congress also created USSOCOM, a combatant command with service-like responsibilities, to manage MFP-11 funds and address special operations challenges that the Services neglected.¹⁴ Figure 2 highlights the gap between what Congress saw: the whole circle; and what the Services saw: the conventional box; and thus helps clarify the pre-USSOCOM disagreements between Congress and the Services over special operations.

Unfortunately, there are still conventional officers who see the edges of the conventional box as the limits of military responsibility. They value special operations only to the extent that they directly support conventional operations, suspect that preparing for special operations distracts people from more important conventional operations, and believe any resources devoted to SOF are wasted. Perhaps figure 2 will help these officers realize that when SOF provide special operations capabilities they are relieving the conventional force of those tasks. They might then value the way SOF improve conventional capabilities by allowing CF to focus on fewer tasks. Ideally they would

They might then value the way SOF improve conventional capabilities by allowing CF to focus on fewer tasks.

also recognize that SOF create options and opportunities that would not otherwise exist and insure the nation against adversaries who confront us in a manner that makes conventional operations inappropriate.

Implications of the Theory for Conventional and Special Operations

Figure 3 depicts many aspects of special operations and the relationship between special operations and conventional operations. For example, a glance at figure 3 reminds us that special operations extend to the boundaries of what the DOD is authorized to do whereas conventional operations do not. As a result, special operations will be unusually sensitive to changes in DOD authorities and to different interpretations of existing authorities. Another important implication is that, as shown in figure 3, extending to the outer edges of what DOD is authorized to do means special operations are much more likely than conventional operations to overlap with the authorities and activities of other U.S. government agencies such as the Department of State, Department of Justice, Central Intelligence Agency, Drug Enforcement Agency, etc. Also as depicted in figure 3, special operations are more likely than conventional operations to involve cooperation with foreign governments. Furthermore, the routine overlap between special operations and the activities of other U.S. government agencies and other governments means that forces who conduct special operations will need specific expertise in working with these entities.

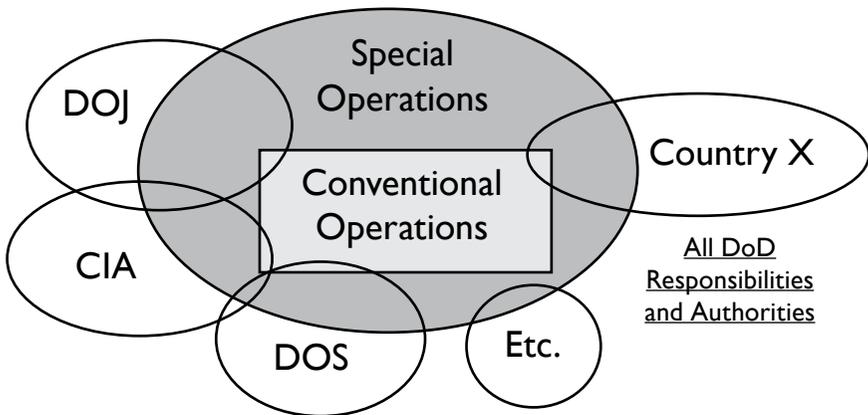


Figure 3. Relationship between conventional operations, special operations, international partners and interagency partners.

Figure 3 also suggests forces that routinely conduct special operations occupy a middle ground between U.S. CF and non-DOD agencies, both foreign and domestic. As a result, forces that routinely conduct special operations will often serve as liaisons between U.S. CF, and both international and interagency partners. This liaison role will come naturally, since other nations and agencies will often encounter forces conducting special operations before conventional ones.

This is not to say that conventional operations do not frequently overlap with the activities of other U.S. government agencies and especially foreign militaries. For example, U.S. CF in Europe and Korea have been working closely with foreign CF for generations. But these are exceptions. Conventional U.S. military operations are usually intended to create a gap between military operations and the activities of other U.S. government agencies. Foreign forces tend to be added to, rather than incorporated within, conventional U.S. military thinking. By contrast, special operations, such as FID, UW, CA, etc., are tightly integrated with other U.S. government agencies and with the activities of friendly foreign governments and organizations.

What Happens as Conventional Operations Evolve?

Some authors are uncomfortable defining special operations as different from conventional ones because this definition makes an operation special or conventional based on the then-current definition of conventional rather than some timeless aspect of specialness.¹⁵ Their insistence on a positive and unchanging definition of special operations is a mistake. Our understanding of special operations and how they evolve is enhanced by accepting the negative definition of special operations.

To understand how the evolution of conventional operations affects special operations we need to consider some of the many types of special operations. Figure 4, on the following page, depicts five types of military operations: FID; CA; UW; psychological operations (PSYOP); and COIN. The first four were among the “Principle Special Operations Missions” listed in USSOCOM Pub 1 dated 25 January 1996, and that list was still current on 11 September 2001.¹⁶ The term ‘COIN’ was still out of favor in DOD, as it had been since Vietnam. It is, however, included with an asterisk in figure 4 because if the term had been acknowledged, it would almost certainly have been listed as a special operations core activity, as it is now in the 2014

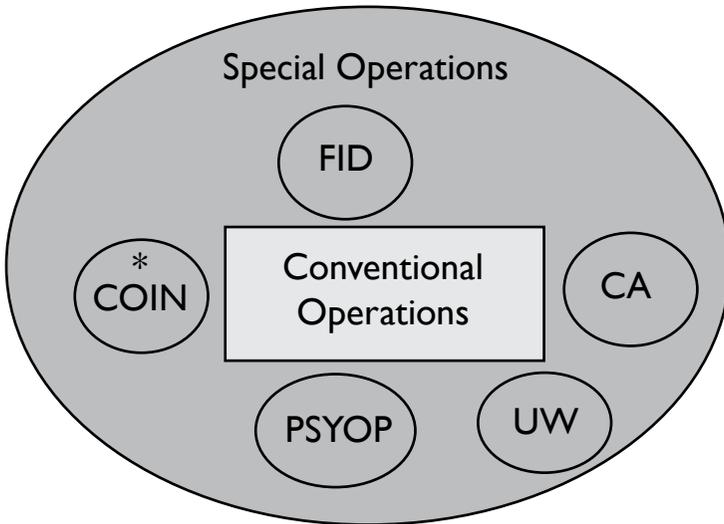


Figure 4. Some of the principle Special Operations Missions included in doctrine before 9/11.

edition of Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations*.¹⁷ (The five missions depicted in figure 5 are, of course, a severe oversimplification of the true diversity of special operations, but including more activities and missions associated with special operations would make the figure more confusing without advancing the argument.) Figure 4 thus depicts specific 2001 missions that were (or would have been) officially classified as special operations rather than conventional operations.

Now compare figure 4 to the situation at the height of the Iraq War, in about 2008, depicted in figure 5. Several things changed. COIN was reinstated as an accepted doctrinal term, and even became fashionable in some circles. It was also identified as a special operations core activity. PSYOP was renamed MISO. Most importantly, the long occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by U.S. CF has forced U.S. conventional operations to expand into areas that were previously considered special operations. By 2008, certain CA, MISO, FID, and COIN operations were all routinely conducted by CF and there were prominent conventional officers, such as General David Petraeus (U.S. Army, Retired), who were trying to permanently expand the U.S. Army's view of conventional operations to include elements of COIN, FID, CA, and MISO. UW, on the other hand, remained strictly a special

Changing Nature of Conventional Operations

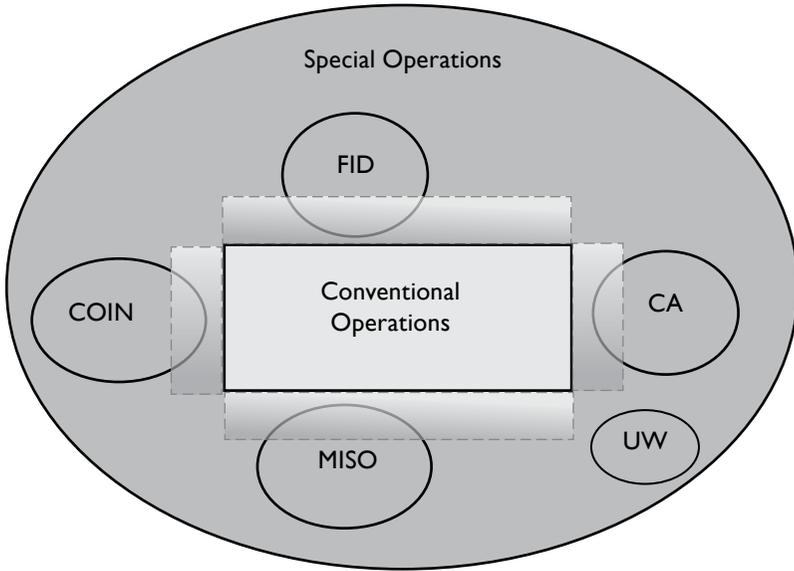


Figure 5. The situation at the height of the Iraq War with the conventional operations box expanding to include parts of CA, MISO, COIN, and FID, but not UW.

operation. In terms of our visualization, the conventional operations box expanded to include parts of CA, FID, MISO, and COIN, but not UW.

The expansion of the conventional operations box depicted in figure 5 may prove to be temporary. Certainly there are conventional officers who want to narrow the scope of conventional operations (shrink the box) back to pre-9/11 size, and there are special operations personnel who want to keep these missions, and the forces who conduct them, entirely within the special operations community.¹⁸ But the fact remains that in recent years, the conventional operations box expanded and changed its shape to include things previously considered to be strictly special operations. This sort of evolution in the size and shape of the conventional operations box is both natural and desirable.

Figure 5 helps us understand the implications of changes in conventional operations for both SOF and CF. The fact that the conventional operations box expanded after 9/11 to include, for example, some portions of CA does not mean that CA was never a real special operation. It instead means that

the situation changed, and CA, previously peripheral to success in conventional operations, is now central to conventional success. Fortunately for CF, prior to 9/11 the DOD did not put 100 percent of its resources into conventional operations as defined at that time. Rather, it invested a small, but prudent amount in maintaining a CA capability within the special operations community. That pre-9/11 investment in special operations CA meant that when conventional operations required it, a capability already existed and could expand to meet new, and unexpected requirements. The same holds true of FID, COIN, and MISO/PSYOP.

Thus SOF not only create and maintain capabilities outside the conventional box, they also serve as scouts preparing the way in case the conventional box needs to expand into those areas. This scout role requires SOF to share their techniques and expertise with their conventional brethren.

Figures 1–5 depict operations, but not forces. There is, however, a connection to forces, since certain forces are commonly associated with specific tasks. For example, CA teams are routinely assigned civil affairs missions (depicted by the CA circle entirely outside the conventional operations box and inside the special operations area in figure 4, but partly inside the expanded conventional operations box depicted in figure 5 and partly still outside that box in the realm of special operations). As the situation changed between figures 4 and 5, some SOF CA teams became CF, or SOF who routinely supported conventional operations versus special operations. By the same token, conventional infantry, armor, and artillery units that would have been conducting conventional combined arms maneuvers inside the conventional box in figure 5 had their mission set expanded into FID and COIN (in figure 5). This might have started out as CF performing a special operation on a temporary basis, but later (as the situation changed from figure 4 in 2001 to figure 5 in 2008) transitioned into CF conducting a conventional operation that used to be a special operation. Case in point, the conventional portion of the U.S. Army embraced FID and COIN to such an extent that entire Advise and Assist Brigades were organized, trained, and equipped, within the conventional force, for the specific tasks of FID and COIN.¹⁹

Conclusion

The outside the box theory of special operations starts from a definition of what special operations are not: special operations are not conventional

operations. It uses a simple graphic to depict the relationship between special operations and conventional operations: a large circle represents everything the military is authorized to do; a box in the center of the circle represents the portion of those responsibilities that are conventional operations; and everything inside the circle but outside the box is a special operation. This visualization shows that SOF (i.e., the capability and capacity to conduct special operations) enable conventional operations by allowing the DOD to focus on conventional operations without neglecting its non-conventional responsibilities. Robust SOF covering a wide range of special operations allows the military to use a tighter definition of conventional operations and thus, achieve higher levels of proficiency in those operations.

The proposed theory explicitly recognizes that the edges of the military circle expand and contract as military responsibilities and authorities change over time. Also, the conventional box within that circle changes its size and shape as the definition of conventional operations evolves. The visualization makes it obvious that special operations will be extremely sensitive to changes in the size and shape of the circle, and at the edges of military authorities and responsibilities, special operations will frequently overlap with activities of other U.S. government agencies and both friendly foreign governments and non-governmental actors. Special operations will also be extremely sensitive to changes in the size and shape of the conventional box, since special operations expands when the conventional box shrinks, and special operations roles and missions become conventional when the conventional box expands.

In sum, where other theories of special operations define special operations narrowly and see conventional operations as the archetypal military activity, this chapter reframes special operations as a vast array of military activities outside the narrow confines of the conventional box. As the authorities and responsibilities of the military change, special operations change. As conventional operations change, they also affect special operations. The theory explores how these changes come about and demonstrates that, through all these evolutions, the ability to conduct special operations remains an essential requirement for the DOD and the nation.

Endnotes

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7. Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations* (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 2014), II-1–II-18.
8. United States Special Operations Command, USSOCOM Publication 1, *Doctrine for Special Operations* (Tampa, FL: USSOCOM, 5 August 2011), 20–28. The core operations are: counter weapons of mass destruction, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, foreign internal defense, stability operations, support to major operations and campaigns, and unconventional warfare. The core activities are: civil affairs operations, direct action, hostage rescue and recovery, interdiction of offensive weapons of mass destruction, military information support operations, preparation of the environment, security force assistance, special reconnaissance, SOF combat support and combat service support.
9. The author is reminded of his role in training and advising a heavy-mech task force in the Royal Saudi Army during Operation DESERT SHIELD and Operation DESERT STORM. The initial mission of the task force, before large coalition conventional forces arrived in the kingdom, was 'delay defense,' and that was what we helped them train for. As coalition forces built up, the mission changed to deliberate defense. Later still, it changed to deliberate attack through minefields and prepared defenses. The repeated changes of mission meant that the task force never achieved the level of proficiency it could have achieved if we had trained for just one mission the entire time.
10. Quoted in: Micah Zenko, "100% Right 0% of the Time: Why the U.S. military can't predict the next war," *Foreign Policy* 16 October 2012, accessed 8 December 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/16/100-right-0-of-the-time/>. Mr. Zenko also includes similar quotes from Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, Commander, U.S. Central Command General James Mattis, and other prominent DOD leaders.
11. General Joseph L. Votel, Commander, United States Special Operations Command, statement regarding "Special Operations Forces in an Evolving Threat

Environment: A Review of the Fiscal Year 2017 Budget Request for U.S. Special Operations Command” (House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities, Washington, D.C., 1 March 2016); and “About the Department of Defense (DOD),” U.S. Department of Defense, accessed 3 May 2016, <http://www.defense.gov/About-DoD>. For example, USSOCOM contains about 4 percent of U.S. active duty military personnel (56,000 out of 1.3 million in DOD), less than 1 percent of the DOD civilian work force (6,600 out of 742,000 in DOD), and less than 1 percent of National Guard and Reserve personnel (7,400 out of 826,000 in DOD).

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14. USSOCOM History Office, *United States Special Operations Command History: 1987–2007*, (MacDill AFB, FL: USSOCOM History Office, 2008), 5–7.
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17. Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations* (U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 2014), xi. Shortly after Vietnam, the term “foreign internal defense,” or FID, was invented to describe COIN when the term was being expunged from official Army doctrine post-Vietnam.
18. For a conventional officer calling for a rush back to the old definition of conventional operations, see Daniel P. Bolger, *Why We Lost* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2014).
19. Sergeant Benjamin Kibbey, “Advise and Assist Brigade: A familiar unit with a new mission in Iraq,” U.S. Army Public Affairs, 25 August 2010, accessed 22 Dec 2016, <https://www.army.mil/article/44206/advise-and-assist-brigade-a-familiar-unit-with-a-new-mission-in-iraq>.

Chapter 8. The Future is Now: The Need for a Special Operations and SOF Theory¹

Emily Spencer

Introduction

Theories help to provide an understanding of relationships. They are not necessary for relationships to occur, but knowledge acquired from proven theories can help maximize the potential of these relationships. For instance, the law of gravity, developed from a theory, enabled the theory of relativity to develop, which in turn contributed to numerous scientific discoveries and developments. For example, without an understanding of gravity, apples still fall from trees. The law of gravity, however, enabled theorists to build upon this knowledge and develop and test further theories, which eventually led to the creation of rocket ships amongst many other things.² Clearly, understanding the theory of relativity did not change the physical environment, but it enabled further developments to occur.

Modern special operations and Special Operations Forces (SOF) date back to WWII, and preexist any specific theory of these special missions or people. While arguably effective forces in this conflict, many Western SOF were disbanded after the war only to reemerge periodically as capability gaps or crises arose. Since the mid-1980s, however, many nations not only maintain a SOF capability, they also expand special operations mission sets. Moreover,

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SOF have retained a more continuous, high-profile presence within military institutions and the national defense realm as they have increasingly been called on to fulfill a variety of engagements across the spectrum of conflict.³ With the expansion of special operations and the growth of SOF, military practitioners, theorists, and historians must now ask if a theory is required

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The answer in short is ‘yes.’ A special operations theory is required for SOF to continue to succeed. Importantly, a special operations theory is, however, insufficient to examine the complex

relationships of SOF’ most valuable asset—its people. As such, a SOF theory is also required to explore this realm. In brief, a special operations theory is needed to harness the potential of the missions and a SOF theory is required to harness the potential of its people. The two are related but distinct enough to require their own examination.

As special operations and SOF expanded and evolved, generic military theories are no longer sufficient for understanding the uniqueness of special operations and SOF. Also, the absence of a specific theory for each prevents them from being used to their full advantage. Specifically, and notably not exclusively, a special operations theory could allow for a deeper understanding of the relationships between: a) special operations and the global environment; b) special operations and conventional operations, and c) special operations and decision makers. Additionally, a SOF theory could allow for a deeper understanding of the relationships between: a) SOF and the global environment; b) SOF and conventional forces; c) SOF and special operations; d) the different units within SOF, and e) operators, supporters, and staff within units.

This chapter will therefore demonstrate how the development of specific special operations and SOF theories can maximize the utility of SOF power and maintain SOF’ current status as the force of choice within many defense departments. In essence, we must now ask: Are we satisfied with falling apples? Or are we ready to harness the power of rocket ships, and devote

the time and effort toward establishing well-researched special operations and SOF theories?

The Utility of Theory

Notably, the fact that the SOF community is still asking whether or not they need a theory is paradoxically both simultaneously surprising, and not. It is surprising because SOF should be so much further in their evolution. Undeniably though, by their very nature, SOF hate being boxed up—something that theory, by its very nature, implies—and thus the lack of an established special operations and/or SOF theory is also not too surprising. Nonetheless, it is time to move beyond fears of being normalized through theory, and of potentially losing what has become known as a SOF mystique. The community must realize that at this point in SOF' evolution, it needs a SOF theory to continue to exude SOF power and be the force of choice into the future.

Notably, the acknowledgement that 'need' is a very strong word should be addressed. Do we 'need' a special operations and/or SOF theory? Clearly, to exist, the answer is no. Historically, SOF were created to fill a gap or respond to a crisis, and when no longer needed they were minimized, marginalized, or disbanded. And they did so valiantly without any special theory. Arguably, however, the last couple of decades represent a new era of international conflict in which SOF proved their strategic worth to many Western governments by providing what has become known as 'SOF power.' For many Western governments, SOF are now the force of choice for low-intensity warfare and to fight belligerents beyond their borders with a minimal footprint.

Like so many important terms, there is no singular definition of 'theory.' At their core, theories try to explain relationships, causal or otherwise, and help form mental constructs to make order out of chaos, and thereby affect the relative importance and relevance given to items. Notably, and due to the multiple variables at play, theories that deal with humans and reside in the social sciences are particularly complex. War clearly exists in this realm. And, despite claims by the movie *The Theory of Everything*, there is really no theory that covers everything. Instead, specific theories were developed in specific areas, ones considered unique enough to require their own understanding. Similarly, although there is no theory of everything, there also cannot be a theory for everything. At times, common sense is enough. Still, and even in these instances, theories assist common sense by

helping raise the level of consistency, are more evidence based, and tend to be broad in scope.⁴

Specifically, military theory explains how to conduct and win a war. For military practitioners, doctrine takes theory from the realm of thought into the realm of action. As such, a prerequisite for good doctrine is generally good theory.

The issue of whether special operations and/or SOF need a theory hinges on what level of military theory is required for optimal employment. Ultimately, the issue becomes how micro is too micro and vice versa (how macro is too macro)? Are SOF and special operations sufficiently unique from other environments to require their own theories? Or can an effective understanding of special operations and SOF be found in military theory at-large, or within land, sea, or air theories?

Special Operations Theory

As Clausewitz noted, “The primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled.”⁵ Subsequently, a good start point of this discussion is the definition of special operations. A current definition of special operations is:

Special operations require unique modes of employment, tactics, techniques, procedures, and equipment. They are often conducted in hostile, denied, or politically and/or diplomatically sensitive environments, and are characterized by one or more of the following: time-sensitivity, clandestine or covert nature, low visibility, work with or through indigenous forces, greater requirements for regional orientation and cultural expertise, and a higher degree of risk ... Although special operations can be conducted independently, most are coordinated with conventional forces (CF), interagency partners, and multinational partners, and may include work with indigenous, insurgent, or irregular forces. Special operations may differ from conventional operations in degree of strategic, physical, and political and/or diplomatic risk; operational techniques; modes of employment; and dependence on intelligence and indigenous assets.⁶

As such, special operations are operations—we are not talking about people, rather missions, whether independent or joint. Most importantly,

special operations differ from conventional operations in fundamental ways, specifically, the degree of risk, methods, and value.

In fact, as social constructs, special operations are dependent on conventional operations. Conceptually, we can have conventional operations without special operations, but special operations cannot exist without conventional ones (as conventional operations help define special operations). From a special operations perspective, one can visualize this relationship as a double helix. As the two strands evolve, they remain at an equal distance from each other. What was a special operation may ultimately become a conventional one. By that time, however, special operations did not stand still, and continued to evolve. Thus, like a double helix, the distance between the two remains the same.

The point being, by their very definition, special operations are sufficiently unique from conventional operations to require its own theory. As such, it is important to consider what a special operations theory can bring to the table. A special operations theory would help clarify the unique relationships between: 1) special operations and the global environment; 2) special operations and military and political decision makers; and, importantly, 3) special operations and conventional operations. Using this definition, relationships between special operations and the global environment, and special operations and military and political decision makers are sufficiently different that those of conventional operations to require its own theory. Additionally, and in the contemporary operating environment, an understanding of relationships between special operations and conventional operations is vital to understanding how to both win and conduct a war. As such, a theory that helps clarify these relationships could help enable the full potential of special operations in these areas. Notably, current theories do not have the level of detail required, and moving forward in an ad hoc manner could result in misuse/misemployment of special operations resources.

Consequently, a special operations theory that looked at these relationships could help clarify, among other things, our understanding of: a) the effects of special operations (vs. intent and/or perceived effect); b) how the global environment shapes special operations; c) and the optimal type, duration, and environment in which to conduct special operations. More precisely, a special operations theory could provide military-political decision makers with information about relationships between special operations and the environment, and with it outline optimal conditions in which to conduct

special operations (and thereby help to minimize misemployment of the resource). Additionally, this theory could shed light on how special operations and conventional operations relate to each other. Again, visualizing

Additionally, this theory could shed light on how special operations and conventional operations relate to each other.

this relationship as a double helix one can see the potential of each strand to be optimized. It is a matter of understanding both how they work independently and how they relate to each other.

Importantly, theory is about what is, which may not necessarily be the same as what you want it to be. The three relationships discussed above (i.e., special operations and the global environment, special operations and military and political decision makers, and special operations and conventional operations) are not fully covered in military theory at-large and/or Service theories. Instead, people rely on common sense, intuition, and personal beliefs on where and when to conduct special operations. Alternatively, special operations theory could help ensure, for example, that governments are getting value from phase zero operations, that training and assistance missions are achieving desired ends, that counterterrorism operations are placed in the right priority, and, importantly for our discussion, that the right people are being selected, trained, and educated appropriately.

SOF Theory

Indeed, an important element for ensuring special operations achieve its desired effect is to make sure the appropriate people are conducting the operations. As such, this chapter now moves from a discussion of missions to one of people, or SOF. Again, a good place to begin is with a definition. The Canadian definition of SOF is:

Special Operation Forces are organizations containing specially selected personnel that are organized, equipped, trained and educated to conduct high-risk, high value special operations to achieve military, political, economic or informational objectives by using special and unique operational methodologies in hostile, denied or politically sensitive areas to achieve desired tactical, operational and/or strategic effects in times of peace, conflict or war.⁷

In brief, SOF represent specially selected, trained, and equipped individuals to conduct special operations. They are the men and women who perform the mission(s).

Notably, by the same logic that distinguishes special operations from conventional operations, SOF are sufficiently unique from conventional forces to require their own theory. A SOF theory could help explain SOF-specific characteristics not sufficiently detailed in other military theories. Specifically, are SOF organizing their human resources effectively? Do those in charge of SOF know what their men and women are capable of (and do they understand their limitations)? Are SOF selecting the right people for the right tasks and achieving desired effects?

With the rise of multiple special operations commands and special operations forces, understanding relationships between different units within these commands can maximize the potential of each individually, as well as collectively through the formation of special operations task forces. A SOF theory could help explain how all the pieces fit together, and which pieces are needed to achieve a government's desired strategic effect.

A SOF theory could also help to explain relationships between staff, supporters, and operators. It is clearly a case where the whole is greater than simply the sum of its parts: no operator can achieve strategic effect sans supporters and staff.

Stated above, relationships between SOF and conventional forces can also be visualized as a double helix, one where SOF define themselves in contrast to conventional forces while remaining continuously distinct (based on government need). A theory would provide a deeper understanding of the similarities and uniqueness of each of these two groups, also how and when the two should act independently or collectively. A theory could also help to explain differences in aptitude, skills, training and education, for example.

Finally, one reason why we need both a special operations and SOF theory is that the two are distinct yet interrelated. As such, a SOF theory could explore whether we are selecting and training the right people for the right special operations missions. Notably, this level of specific analysis is not covered within other military theories.

To return to the word 'need,' it is a strong word, but so is 'mediocracy.' For SOF to continue as the force of choice in future operating environments and for the full potential of special operations and SOF power to be realized, theory must be formulated and applied. A critical first step is to allocate

resources required to conduct unbiased research upon which to base a special operations and SOF theory.

Endnotes

1. The following chapter is based on a presentation prepared for the Special Operations Theory, summer 2016 Symposium, held 30–31 August 2016 at Joint Special Operations University. Specifically, I was asked to argue in the affirmative on a panel titled “Do We Need a Theory at All?”
2. Notably, this overview is an extremely simplified version and used only as an analogy, not as a scientific explanation.
3. See, for example: Bernd Horn, “‘Avenging Angels’: The Ascent of SOF as the Force of Choice in the New Security Environment,” in Colonel Bernd Horn and Major Tony Balasevicius, eds., *Casting Light on the Shadows: Canadian Perspectives on Special Operations Forces* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 160–161.
4. Adapted from: Mark L. Mitchell & Janina M. Jolley, *Research Design Explained*, 8th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2010).
5. Carl von Clausewitz, as cited in: Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Clausewitz: Toward a Theory of Applied Strategy,” *Defense Analysis* 11, no. 3, 1995, 229–240, accessed 13 December 2016, <http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/Echevarria/APSTRAT1.htm>.
6. Department of Defense, Joint Publication 3-05, *Special Operations* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, July 2014), I-1.
7. *Canadian Special Operation Forces Command. An Overview* (Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2008), 7, <http://www.cansofcom.forces.gc.ca/pub/doc/ove-ape-eng.pdf>.

Chapter 9. Do We Even Need a Theory?¹

James Kiras

Over the last two decades, special operations and the forces that conduct them, shifted from ancillary roles into a cornerstone of national security policy in responding to the challenges of terrorism. Policymakers are attracted to special operations for three main reasons: they are effective in accomplishing missions with a high degree of success; they are efficient in that they achieve disproportionate results relative to the amount of resources committed; and, they minimize political risk for decision makers. The shift from conventional force actions to special operations is evident in recent casualty figures. According to Dave Philipps, over the last twelve months Special Operations Forces (SOF) “have died in greater numbers than conventional troops—a first” as “the Pentagon, hesitant to put conventional troops on the ground, has come to depend almost entirely on small groups of elite warriors.”²

The growth in utility and use of special operations was accompanied by expansion in force numbers and organization. Such expansion is not limited to the United States. Other nations, such as Canada and Russia, created specific special operations command headquarters and reorganized their forces to ensure special operations can be sustained and conducted as effectively as possible. Within nations with relatively small armed forces such as Sweden and Denmark, special operations were elevated to the level of an armed service comparable to their respective army, navy, or air force.³

Given their increased visibility and prominence in defense and national security, there remain calls to create a specific theory for special operations.

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Such a theory might be desired by the special operations community but is it really warranted? This chapter makes the argument that while a theory of special operations or SOF is possible, it is simply unnecessary. To answer

This chapter suggests related and existing military theory is sufficient for understanding special operations.

the main question, this chapter explores four related points. The first two examine theory generally, including its boundaries, sufficiency, and overall purpose. Theory can provide great insight but is based on its purpose and (the second two points) the nature of special operations and their influence on theory development. This chapter suggests related and existing military theory is sufficient for understanding special operations.

Theory

Theory, in a general sense, consists of a supposition or hypothesis intended to explain actions or behavior based on systematic exploration of its nature through a series of codified, related propositions, backed by sufficient analysis and evidence. Theory should reduce complex phenomena down to an elegantly simple, abstract explanation. There are several ways to parse theory. One category of theory, military theory, explores as its central phenomenon war or armed conflict. Armed conflict involves the use or the threat of use of violence to impose one's will against a dynamic, adaptive opponent seeking to deny it this goal and impose their own will upon it. Given the range of actors in contemporary irregular warfare, the current debate within military theory is whether this central assumption about opponents and imposition of will is still valid.⁴ Most military theories, however, start from the assumption that war, in its most abstract form, is a rational undertaking for a political purpose and involves a dynamic between competing wills. In other words, the nature of armed struggle remains a reflection of, and is heavily influenced, by human nature.

To paraphrase George Orwell, not all theories are created equal but some are more equal than others. This statement is especially true for military theory, including any theory of special operations. Harold Winton, Professor Emeritus of the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, provided an exceptionally useful and informative method for evaluating military theory. Winton suggests that the sufficiency of military theory should be

assessed according to its five functions: define, categorize, explain, connect, and anticipate. Defining clarifies the subject under investigation by outlining what is comprised within it and what is not, in a general sense. It establishes the boundaries for enquiry.⁵ Categorizing “break[s] the field down into its constituent parts.”⁶ An important and often neglected aspect of categorizing lies not just in identifying and separating out the constituent parts, but relating them together. Next, and perhaps most importantly, a military theory should explain the phenomenon under investigation through “repetitive observation and imaginative analysis” or Albert Einstein’s “intuition, supported by being sympathetically in touch with experience.”⁷ For a theory to have explanatory power, it must explore both the scope and limitations of such operations relative to other methods or means. Winton concludes pithily that “theory without explanation is like salt without savor—it is worthy only of the dung heap.”⁸ Military theory can and should connect to other fields of study. As Winton argues, Clausewitz’s genius lies not in defining the character of battle or identifying timeless principles of war but rather connecting war to politics.⁹ Lastly, theory can anticipate; this function can be especially valuable as it should provide a clear direction for future military operations and guide the organizing, training, and equipping in times of great change and uncertainty.

The Purpose of Theory

There are different types of military theory, depending on the scope of their inquiry and purpose. One difference is between pure theory, based largely on logic and argumentation about the nature of a phenomenon, and pragmatic theory, which seeks to develop a set of principles based on the activity under investigation. Pure theory seeks to abstract away contextual clutter to determine the essence, or philosophical truth, of the subject of investigation.

Another way to categorize military theory beyond its approach is the scope of inquiry. Military theory can be general or specific.¹⁰ General theories examine broadly a phenomenon, such as armed conflict. Examples of general military theories are theories on war, the art of war, or strategy. Specific military theory, in contrast, explores particular sub-phenomena within armed conflict, and often focuses on an individual physical operational domain in which wars are fought, such as land, sea, air, or space. More recent specific theory attempts to scrutinize less tangible domains such as the virtual one

of cyberspace, or the social, 'human domain.' Other specific theory can be even more circumscribed in the scope of its inquiry. Specific theory can assess particular special operations organizations or units, as well as roles and missions, such as counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. Admiral William McRaven's (U.S. Navy, Retired) work *Spec Ops*, which some identify as a theory of special operations, is instead a highly specific theory of a specific special operations mission set, raid or direct action.¹¹

One final way of categorizing military theory relates to the function it is designed to serve. Historically, military theories serve a variety of different purposes including describing, prescribing, integrating, and advocating. It is important to note these purposes are not mutually exclusive but frequently privilege one or more functions over others.

Of all the functions theory is designed to serve, descriptive theories tend to appeal to those seeking to understand the nature of phenomena. Descriptive theories tend to be general, and begin at a line of inquiry along the lines of Clausewitz's *On War*, in which he was trying to understand the complexity of war as it changed during the course of his lifetime.¹² In a similar manner, Emile Simpson places into a much broader context what he observed in Afghanistan, and what is different about contemporary conflict.¹³ Such theories are philosophical explorations and attempt to identify, connect, and explain general causalities. Descriptive or general theory, however, is not theory for theory's sake. The manner of inquiry serves a pragmatic purpose as well. Clausewitz intended his readers to pursue a broader understanding of the phenomenon of war, which would help to develop critical thinking skills. It would inform the judgment of future commanders, and serve as a guide for a more structured and analytical reading of military history. He went to great pains to insist theory cannot and should not accompany a commander to the battlefield. Descriptive theory, then, attempts to answer the question of why a phenomenon occurs.

Prescriptive theory has a different purpose than descriptive. Given their directive nature, professional military educators teach prescriptive theories such as Baron Antoine de Henri Jomini's *The Art of War* and J.F.C. Fuller's *The Foundations of the Science of War* (1926).¹⁴ Prescriptive theories remain popular as they tell the reader how and what to do, and are not as concerned with deeper connections or explanations. More often than not, prescriptive theory focuses specifically on a different core truth within war—the method of or formula for achieving decision or victory. Much of modern doctrine

and planning, as a result, borrows heavily from the concepts and terms used by prescriptive authors. For example, three domain-specific but enduring prescriptive theories of victory, by Jomini, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Giulio Douhet, place exclusive weight on massing forces at the decisive point to achieve success in battle.¹⁵ To be fair, Clausewitz mentions the importance of doing so but does not elevate this suggestion to the level of the central proposition of his theory. According to Jomini, Mahan, and Douhet, the battle at the decisive point leads to decisive victory. Prescriptive theories place a premium on simplifying the process of battle, identifying causal mechanisms for success, and suggesting how specific means used in particular ways will lead to desired outcomes.

Prescriptive approaches to theory often mask an ulterior motive, namely advocacy. Such theories advocate for investment in capabilities or independent services. The means of such capabilities or independent services, linked to decisive battle, have the potential to determine national welfare or survival. Failure to invest in such means, so the line of reasoning goes, puts a specific armed service or a nation at a competitive disadvantage at best, or vulnerable to their technologically superior opponents at worst. For Mahan, once the decisive battle was fought, a grand fleet comprised of capital ships was linked directly to command of the sea and its unfettered exploitation.¹⁶ For Douhet, given the importance of popular will and domestic support to wars in which nations mobilize resources against one another, grinding through military resources is costly and wasteful. Through the domain and vast expanse of the air, fighting forces could be avoided and the source of national will and support, the population, could be attacked and influenced directly by a grand fleet of battleplanes.¹⁷ Although the central propositions of both theories were invalidated by subsequent experience, Mahan and Douhet remain popular as sources of inspiration and emulation. For example, in countries such as Russia and the People's Republic of China, armed service leaders attempt to justify their expansion while others employ logic of both authors to advocate for growth in the prestige, status, budget, or independence of nuclear weapons and space forces. The power and persuasiveness of advocative theory rests on its simplicity: it promises a favorable and decisive outcomes via technologically advanced means, and at a greatly reduced price.

A last purpose of theory, to integrate, also has economy at its root. Put simply, integrative theory is the polar opposite of advocative in how it

identifies the primary means of success. Authors of integrative theory stress unique attributes of different domains but dismiss or downplay the ability of any one means to achieve decision independently. The watch phrase for integrative theory is ‘interdependence of means.’ Employing means in an interdependent manner explains how the sum application is greater than the value of the independent means, such as armies, navies, or air forces. In other words, the efficiency of using combined means leads to greater overall effectiveness. Integrative theories incorporate objectivity and nuance into their assessment of combined means, and explore ways to employ them together to achieve the desired end. Examples of integrative theories include *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* written by Julian Corbett, and *Air Power and Armies* by John Slessor.¹⁸ Corbett reasoned maritime strategy differed from naval strategy in its scope and scale, and as a result concluded dispersion of forces was necessary to achieve local control of the sea to guarantee open sea lines of communication, along which flowed commerce essential for the survival of maritime nations. Slessor identified a key vulnerability of industrial armies—its supply lines: airpower possessed the ability to strike at vulnerable targets deep behind the frontlines. Despite being more objective and holistic, integrative theories tend to offer modest recommendations often ignored by armed services jockeying for budget, prestige, and influence.

Of the four different functions theory can serve, those that prescribe, advocate, and integrate have the least longevity. All three tend to connect the ends and ways of strategy to specific means that change, sometimes rapidly. Such theories tend not to anticipate developments that render some of their key assumptions invalid, such as radar, submarines, underwater mines, stealth, and precision-guided munitions, among others. In particular, prescriptive and advocative theory privilege solutions above understanding the nature of a problem. In short, by putting action and advocacy above critical thinking, such theories served institutional purposes at the expense of deeper understanding of conditions under which such action is unwise, counterproductive, or even paradoxical.

The reason for this extended survey on the purpose and function of theory is to point out how descriptive theories ask and answer fundamentally different questions than prescriptive, advocative, or integrative. The purpose of theory drives its assumptions, function, and outcome. Stated another way, the purpose theory eventually will likely determine its sufficiency. In the case of special operations theories, they may be unnecessary

for two compelling reasons. The first reflects a paradoxical logic, and the second, a function of the context in which the theory is written, a time of special operations ascendance. The theory the special operations community wants is not the one it ultimately needs. By the same token, the theory the community needs is also the one most likely to be ignored or rejected. This is given the nature of special operations and the pitfalls contained within, as the next two sections demonstrate.

Stated another way, the purpose theory eventually will likely determine its sufficiency.

The Nature of Special Operations

Any serious scholarly enquiry into special operations begins with a single question: what exactly is special about them? More pedantic investigations parse the word ‘special,’ while others are content to cite official definitions, often from sources of doctrine, without a second thought. Definitions for military or national security often begin by linking together the following elements: actions taken by an actor against a target for an explicit purpose, or to achieve a specific effect.

For the purpose of this argument, special operations are “unconventional actions against enemy vulnerabilities in a sustained campaign, undertaken by specially designated units [SOF], to enable [military or other governmental] operations and/or resolve economically politico-military problems at the operational or strategic level that are difficult or impossible to accomplish with [military or other government] forces alone.”¹⁹ There are a number of key attributes about special operations implicit from this definition as well as ones from other theoretical inquiries:

- They are small-scale actions that can have disproportionate effects relative to their size and scale, but lack sufficient mass to achieve decisive effects on their own;
- They are enablers for other actions operationally and strategically—conventional, other government department and agencies (individually or integrated), proxies, and/or host nation forces—often by setting the conditions for the success of future operations ... but cannot resolve problems at the level of strategy by themselves;
- They have a relationship to time, but not a unique one, against an adversary by speeding up or slowing down the tempo of conflict, often

to buy strategic time and space but also to wrest the initiative from an adversary;

- They have strategic utility primarily by providing national security leaders and commanders with appealing economy of force options, because of their high degree of success, with immediate results, relative to other military options;²⁰ and
- Their use conforms to, and is shaped by, the orientation of strategy and policy, and should be tailored to meet the unique policy demands of the era.²¹

The sum of these qualities and characteristics is that special operations are useful tools for political and military leaders because they appear to address immediate problems successfully and economically.²²

The preceding definition is necessary but ultimately insufficient, as the key distinction is between conventional and that which is not. To expand the definition somewhat, and to cut to the heart of the matter, special operations are discrete actions that are extra-normative in their preparation, planning, execution, and effect. There is an established set of norms of warfare and special operations operate on their fringes. Such operations blur the distinctions, or operate in the gray zones, between war and peace, moral and immoral, legal and illegal, or systemic and anti-systemic, as recent scholarship suggests.²³ As context changes—norms, opponents, technology, and methods—so do special operations. Therefore, special operations are relativistic in nature, and their distinctiveness is a function of the prevailing norm and behaviors. At the risk of being overly simplistic, the special characteristics of such operations change over time; what used to be special is now the norm.

There is a relationship between special operations relativism, scale, and enabling function. Because of their limited scale, any inquiry into special operations must acknowledge they are operational and strategic enablers. Special operations, by definition, cannot be conducted in sufficient mass to achieve independently decisive effects relative to the problem sets against which they are used. To attempt to develop sufficient mass risks turning what is unique into the mundane. It puts at risk the unique knowledge, abilities, and skills of selected and highly trained individuals capable of conducting them. Put in different terms and regardless how vigorous the application, special operations alone cannot defeat terrorism or insurgency. Such operations can devastate terrorist groups, sometimes with great success, as the

campaign against al-Qaeda in Iraq from 2006-2008 suggests.²⁴ Yet, special operations did not resolve the underlying conditions that led to terrorism; but contributed to the metastasizing of the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq into a more powerful form, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. As Colin Gray has suggested, a primary problem for special operations is the challenge of converting the currency of tactical actions into more meaningful strategic effect.²⁵

Enabling operations, no matter how unorthodox, are insufficient to require theory. A historical driver of theory, however, is a sufficiently unique operating environment or domain, such as space or cyberspace. Special operations do not operate in a unique, much less new, domain. Much effort has gone into arguing that social contexts, regardless of where they are, are a domain unto themselves. Neither the concept of “Strategic Landpower” nor the Joint Concept for Human Aspects of Military Operations make a sufficiently compelling argument that there is a separate and distinct “human domain” which is the exclusive preserve of special operations.²⁶ Through the ability of the units that conduct them, special operations have value within domains and context to serve a crucial integrative function, or vital connector, between disparate elements. For example, special operations succeed when working “by, with, and through” other forces, which includes conventional forces, proxy forces, and other governments and government departments, and agencies.²⁷ In other words, the bridging function special operations perform reflects their enabling function rather than a specific domain or operating environment. While armed conflict for the foreseeable future will reflect individual and collective human nature, turning this crucial element of the context into its own domain of action risks focusing so much on the trees that one misses the forest in the process.

Given their extra-normative and relativist characteristics, as well as their scale and enabling function, special operations face one more challenge on the road linking their nature with theory. At a level above mission execution, special operations remain bound by the overarching phenomenon to which they belong: armed conflict. If special operations remain within armed conflict, they must conform to a host of other theoretical pairings operationally and strategically. These pairings, or strategy types as Colin Gray labels them, include, but are not limited to, the following: offense versus defensive; direct versus indirect; attritional versus maneuverist or annihilationist; sequential versus cumulative, among others.²⁸ Sufficient military theory must make

appropriate connection to these pairings or, at the very least, acknowledge their existence and relevance. Based on the characteristics and attributes of special operations inherent in their nature, there is little to suggest they are sufficiently unique to escape the logic inherent to strategy or war. For this we have a wealth of provocative, educational, and useful theory.²⁹ To make the case that special operations operate beyond the contexts of war and strategy would require connecting them to associated theories for activities such as diplomacy and development, intelligence, and the like. While such a task is possible, it is unlikely that a single individual is capable of doing so without a lifetime of reading, reflection, and experience. Even more so for a unified field theory for any phenomenon, especially one as extra-normative and relativistic as special operations.

The Influence of Special Operations on Theory

Theory is not written in a vacuum. It is a product of its time, influenced by individual and institutional desires and ambitions, the contemporary operating environment, as well as other internal and external inputs. The primary problem with a theory of special operations today is not with theory development per se—one which can and should critically survey and assess the landscape and anticipate future changes. The main problem is a reflection of the purpose for which theory is written. Rather than engaging in a critical inquiry of the nature of the phenomenon, to assist in educating the mind, theory may serve entirely different purposes. To connect back to earlier arguments in this chapter, there are two challenges endemic to special operations that make theory development problematic. The two challenges will likely lead to an operationally unsatisfying, intellectually underwhelming, and potentially dangerous final product.

The first challenge is an institutional purpose that will influence the writing and acceptance of theory. The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) was created thirty years ago to ensure the special operations community was adequately resourced, the health of its component organizations—the Army, Navy, and Air Force SOF (and much later, the Marine Corps)—assured to conduct a wide range of unconventional missions. As the utility and prestige of special operations grew, so too has the bureaucracy of USSOCOM and the ambition of its leaders. Jessica Turnley warned persuasively of the danger inherent in an overly bureaucratic

USSOCOM—one that threatens the culture of innovation resident in subordinate component organizations. The same challenge, she said, exists for theory.³⁰ At the bureaucratic level of USSOCOM, leaders and managers value theory that amplifies the uniqueness of special operations to fulfill the ambition of its leaders. This ambition is to become an armed Service on par with the departments of the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force. Many of the other armed

Many of the other armed Services have their own theories, so a theory of special operations should make its community just as important and prestigious by extension.

Services have their own theories, so a theory of special operations should make its community just as important and prestigious by extension.

The second challenge relates to the incompatibility of most theory with the utilitarian mindset of subordinate special operations organizations and ‘the operators’ themselves. SOF are eminently pragmatic—a reflection of the time and resources they spend in training and rehearsal for missions—a quality that makes them unique. Success or failure in such missions, which are often risky and at the limits of personal and equipment performance, depends on training and tactical excellence. The implications for theory and its acceptance at this level are clear. For theory to have utility within the special operations community, it should explain how to do a job better. In other words, theory should provide prescriptive insights that will lead to mission success. Arguably such insights are already available. Existing special operations tactics, techniques and procedures, concepts of operation, and doctrine fill these needs currently. In consequence, it is doubtful theory would have much to add at this instrumental level. A theory at the instrumental level, such as a theory for special warfare or surgical strike, will have limited application and provide few insights outside of a specific community. It is akin to creating a ‘theory of a hammer’ or a ‘theory of a nail.’³¹ Other dynamics at the component level within the special operations community will influence theory development. A theory made by consensus that reflects the interests of the components will have to meet with their approval individually. In the bid for equal representation, this will dilute explanatory power and reflect specific organizational interests. There is a high likelihood of theory developed within the special operations community descending into squabbling. For instance, which organization is the

most special, or more unique than the others, as well as which roles and missions are the most important.

The net effect of bureaucratic politics as represented by USSOCOM, and the organizational dynamics of the special operations components, will be a subjective quest for a theory that demonstrates the unequivocal uniqueness of special operations at the expense of objective, critical inquiry. Critical inquiry characteristic of descriptive theory seeks to answer different questions from aspirational and prescriptive ones, such as why a phenomenon occurs (its nature) and so what (or its implications). Such inquiry must challenge prevailing assumptions that operators and the special operations community take as matters of faith, and should be prepared to turn over every rock in the process. In other words, for a special operations theory to be sufficient, it should strive to meet and pass with flying colors Winton's five criteria for sufficiency, not merely seek to stagger across the finish line to serve institutional agendas.

The foundation of critical inquiry has a keystone of submitting cherished notions and core beliefs to scrutiny. For example, the special operations community accepts a current assertion about the misuse of special operations based on a number of precedents during WWII, Vietnam, and the Gulf War.³² The implication from history is that conventional minds do not sufficiently understand the more subtle approach and nuances of special operations. Is this misuse still the case? Other questions driving critical inquiry relate to roles and missions, which are often at the core of a special operations organization's identity and culture. For example, the unconventional warfare mission is central to the identity of special operations generally and Army Special Forces specifically. The mission, however, is not as unique as the ones Central Intelligence Agency paramilitary forces can conduct, ones often with greater operational and legal flexibility but on a much smaller scale. In addition, the special operations community does not have a satisfactory understanding of the overall strategic or operational effectiveness to ascertain how often UW succeeded or failed.

Other avenues of critical inquiry are likely to ask even more heretical questions. For example and given globalization and the role of social media, if a theory is to connect and anticipate, what will UW look like in the future? More to the point, who is better suited under these conditions to "Free the Oppressed" (motto of Army Special Forces) in the future? Should it be candidates selected and screened for physical toughness who can grow beards

and integrate into tribal structures? Or pale and callow youths whose skills are mental dexterity, computer aptitude, and an ability to influence social networks virtually? A more challenging question for special operations strategically, which runs counter to its culture, is when should special operations not be used—under what circumstance and condition are they not the answer? The point is sufficient theory requires asking and providing answers to questions based on roads of inquiry that may seem uncomfortable or unnecessary to operators, organizations, and the broader special operations community. Such questions are likely to cause a closing of ranks if they are asked by those outside the community, individuals who have not passed through the crucible of special operations selection, and whose qualifications and motivations may be looked upon with suspicion.

Conclusion

The sufficiency of any theory is a function of the purpose it is designed to serve. The type of theory the special operations community is most likely to value and embrace is prescriptive and/or aspirational. Prescriptive theory provides answers to pragmatic questions such as: what should be done differently, or in what way, to achieve victory or improve tactical performance. From the operator's perspective, a theory that does not have direct application has no value. Given that the distinct attributes of special operations change over time, a theory that answers 'what' or 'how' questions is likely to have marginal utility and questionable longevity.

The more dangerous purpose of theory, however, is aspirational. A theory that reflects organizational ambitions is likely to gloss over or ignore questions that provide deeper insight in the nature and future direction of special operations. In the quest to enhance the reputation and stature of special operations, it instead caters to institutional requirements and cherished missions and myths. Starting points for any theory of special operations must accept that they are useful strategic enablers first and foremost, do not exist in a vacuum, and allow others to perform more effectively.

Put simply, if the special operations community wants theory badly enough, it will get bad or insufficient theory at best, or a shallow and dysfunctional collection of organizational aphorisms at worst. Theory that describes and is designed to facilitate critical inquiry, one that acts as a guiding light for current study and future judgment, requires time to develop and must

submit prevailing wisdom to scrutiny. As Clausewitz suggests, such theory is linked directly to education. In this case, theory acts as a guiding light for education, which in turn requires deep reading, reflection, and querying. It takes time to develop patterns of thought and habits of mind and inquiry of the critical thinker and strategist.

If the purpose of theory is for education, existing theory may be sufficient. There is a wide range of theory and scholarship that can educate special operators and illuminate their path to critical inquiry. At its very least, such theory can provide special operators with insights into the pragmatic questions about which they care the most. There is a vast body of theory on war, specific operating domains, not to mention core phenomena related to special operations. One example is relatively recent scholarship on civil wars. Civil wars may not fall neatly into the list of special operations roles and missions, but the scholarship tackles a portion of irregular warfare that is USSOCOM's charge. Its focus includes but is not limited to: the logic of violence within irregular conflicts and the agency of the populations in settling local vendettas;³³ insurgent organizational types and their robustness or brittleness based on pre-war social networks;³⁴ the challenges terrorists face in trying to balance control over subordinates against remaining hidden from security forces;³⁵ the relational, constructed, and emergent nature of clandestine political violence;³⁶ the logic and disproportionate success rate of non-violent civil resistance compared to violent;³⁷ alliance formation and dissolution as a function of weighing rational cost calculations.³⁸

On special operations specifically, there are also a wide range of works that provide useful insights into the nature of special operations. While not theory per se, such works cover subjects including the various dimensions of special operations organization,³⁹ the mindset and culture of SOF and operators,⁴⁰ strategic utility and effect,⁴¹ strategic effectiveness,⁴² special operations civil-military relations,⁴³ as well as a wealth of historical material.

In sum, there is a vast range of useful works that provide theoretical insights into special operations and do not require reinventing the wheel as a theory of special operations. Existing theory and scholarship, which will continue to grow and evolve, is more than sufficient to educate the special operations community. That is, if its operators are willing to invest the energy and, above all else, the time, patience, and reflection and self-introspection to do so.

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Chapter 10. The President of the United States and Special Operations Theory

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Over a decade ago, a prescient Colin Gray foresaw the coming of a golden era for special operations in the 21st century.¹ According to former United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) commanders Admiral William McRaven (U.S. Navy, Retired) and General Joseph Votel (U.S. Army), we are living in a golden age of Special Operations Forces (SOF).² Indeed, both leaders were honestly descriptive in their comments, for between 2001 and 2016, USSOCOM grew in personnel from 33,000 to about 56,000 total active duty, 7,400 reservists, and 6,600 civilians assigned to its headquarters, its four components, and subunified commands, budgets, headquarters, and missions.³ The rapid growth of SOF is not solely an American phenomenon, but a global trend occurring in the major powers as well as in some middle and small nation-states.⁴

A study by Thomas and Dougherty underlined that after more than a decade of continuous combat operations, SOF emerged as the most cost-effective “weapons system” in the U.S. arsenal and a major source of strategic advantage for the nation.⁵ But to maintain the competitive advantage that SOF provides the United States into the future, they recommend a prudent course that:

Would *retain* what has proven successful over the last decade, *repurpose* that which is effective but overly focused on today’s challenges, *rebuild* the capabilities and knowledge that have declined while SOF have been consumed in current operations, and *develop* innovative solutions to emerging problems.⁶

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U.S. defense strategy is emphasizing the prevention of wars and building the capacity of partner nations through persistent engagement. But as the new USSOCOM Commander General Raymond Thomas stated, “We are very, very kinetic right now; very direct action.”⁷ Recently, a group of experts including a former Assistant Secretary of Defense and six former SOF commanders participated in a Center for Naval Analysis discussion prior to the 2016 presidential election. Among the four general themes discussed, one was balancing the future force. A recommendation was that policymakers and SOF leaders should reexamine the balance between surgical strike (raids) and special warfare capabilities, personnel, and resources.⁸ The establishment of a separate SOF unconventional/special warfare command, whose primary mission would be to work ‘by, with and through’ indigenous forces rather than killing and capturing the enemy, is a controversial idea gaining support among some elements of the force.⁹

Theorizing

Concurrent with the rise of SOF is the search for its theoretical underpinnings. Joe Osborne notes the emphasis on qualitative, non-randomized historical case analyses susceptible to selection bias, like former USSOCOM Commander Admiral McRaven’s study of direct action raids, also a dearth of quantitative studies applying the scientific method with variable analysis and testable hypotheses. To promote the latter, Osborne presented four propositions, but did not identify and operationalize the relevant variables and the nature of their relationships.¹⁰

At the 2016 Joint Special Operations University symposium on special operations theory, subject matter experts and participants addressed the status and pros and cons of special operations theories. Viewpoints ranged from support for an integrated general theory of special operations,¹¹ an American theory of special operations,¹² to a more modest argument for improved doctrine and codification of lessons learned.¹³ This chapter, after briefly noting two useful theoretical works from peers, concludes by discussing the role of the President of the United States (POTUS) in the SOF theory development process—an often overlooked role.

Two Viewpoints

Robert G. Spulak Jr., featured in this volume, published a qualitative model of an integrated theory of the origin, qualities, and use of SOF.¹⁴

Special operations are missions to accomplish strategic objectives where the use of conventional forces would create unacceptable risks due to Clausewitzian friction. Overcoming these risks requires special operations forces that directly address the ultimate sources of friction through qualities that are the result of the distribution of attitudes of SOF personnel.¹⁵

Spulak believes a theory of SOF and a theory of special operations “cannot be separated.”¹⁶ Therefore, he sought to integrate the two by blending, among others, McRaven’s seminal theory of direct action special operations (raids) with [Naval Postgraduate School, Dr.] Hy Rothstein’s treatment of unconventional warfare in Afghanistan.¹⁷ In his view, the need for a theory of special operations is based on the enduring limitations of conventional forces and should guide the application of SOF to strategic ends beyond the ad hoc. It is needed for at least three reasons: (1) conventional wisdom sees a growing role for SOF in the extant security environment, (2) special operations have been discussed in terms of their potential and actual strategic impact, and (3) for strategic capability, and to improve the institution of SOF.¹⁸

Spulak disagrees with Dr. James Kiras’s [Air University] characterization of special operations as a definition by exception, namely that special operations are defined only relative to what is unconventional.¹⁹ The reason is that, for him, as well as for Dr. Jessica Turnley [JSOU Senior Fellow], it is not the missions that define special operations but rather the personnel.²⁰

While Spulak proffers a unified and universally applicable theory of SOF, Rich Yarger, also featured in this volume, seeks to syncretize extant theories and schools of thought into a unified American theory of SOF.²¹ He believes an American theory of SOF is justified because “American values, strategic culture, and experience make the practice of military operations by the United States distinctive, and these differences have given rise to a particular school of thought and set of constructs.”²² Yarger brings rigor to his work by clarifying and defining terms before integrating them into 26 qualitative premises or propositions. As a military historian, Yarger does not present variable analysis, testable hypotheses, or quantification. However,

even Yarger suggests approaching his theory as a work in progress, that it “leaves much for deeper consideration and further development.”²³

Yarger brings rigor to his work by clarifying and defining terms before integrating them into 26 qualitative premises or propositions.

Both conceptual models better depict reality when one considers the cultural, legal, and institutional differences between global SOF. In nearby Canada, for instance, a recent report complains that unlike the Americans, Canadian SOF, part of the global SOF network, and the American, British, Canadian, New Zealand Coalition, are not being used enough because the political authority appears to have an inchoate understanding of how and when it is best to use and deploy this capability.²⁴ Another difference is that, unlike in the United States where legal, structural, and functional lines of authority and responsibilities separate USSOCOM and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)—with USSOCOM entrusted with counterterrorism responsibility outside the continental United States and the FBI with domestic counterterrorism—in Canada, the Canadian Special Operations Forces Command has the domestic counterterrorism mandate.²⁵ Significantly, the report resonates the mantra that “With large-scale deployments of conventional forces improbable in the foreseeable future, SOF has emerged as the force of choice to achieve kinetic and non-kinetic strategic effects.”²⁶ The contributions of Spulak and Yarger are noted to reflect a growing interest and a sense of urgency in developing a theory that would help guide civilian policymakers and military leaders in understanding the true nature and proper use of SOF.²⁷

The Rise of SOF

Two sets of explanatory hypotheses were proposed by Boas Shamir and Eyal Ben-Ari to explain the global rise and expansion of SOF, ones based on the perception that they are adaptive organizations. The first focuses on the role of the changing, exogenous environment of armed conflicts while the other focuses on internal domestic factors.²⁸ The external hypothesis views SOF expansion as a reaction to new types of conflicts like hybrid warfare. As noted by [Retired Colonel] T.X. Hammes:

“the underlying nature of war will not change. War will continue to be driven by Clausewitz’s primary trinity of violence, chance, and reason. Fog and friction will remain a constant element in conflict, and must never be assumed away. What will change, however, is the character of war—how it is fought.”²⁹

To fight terrorism after 9/11, the argument goes, the United States turned to SOF because of their unique suitability to engage in hybrid conflicts due to their diverse capabilities—agility, precision, discretion, and adaptability to local conditions.³⁰ Paradoxically, according to Bartles, SOF’ adversaries and peer competitors resorted to indirect and asymmetric methods in response to the so-called new western way of war.³¹ Russia’s “Gerasimov Doctrine” presents a new way of conducting war by emphasizing nonmilitary means where warfare is started by persistent and subtle information operations before any official acknowledgment:

This new form of warfare makes it more difficult to distinguish the lines between strategic, operational, and tactical military objectives. All state assets are theoretically enlisted into the fight. Business, economic, information and even religious assets work in concert with security and military forces to attain the political objectives.³²

In March 2014, Gerasimov’s doctrine was put into practice leading to the annexation of Crimea and conflict in Eastern Ukraine. The description of this response to the “Western way of war” closely resembles an application of the decades old Chinese theory of unrestricted warfare on steroids.³³

A second set of explanations focuses on the relationship between domestic factors and the rise of SOF. It is argued that the United States and other industrial democracies shrunk their security budgets due to the growing number of casualties on both sides of a conflict. This is due to humanitarian concerns, also technological advances in intelligence-gathering, and advanced guided munitions that changed the character of warfare from mass-on-mass confrontations to precision strikes. The use of SOF provides policymakers in a reduced budget environment with a less costly, small footprint, highly lethal instrument of war.³⁴ Furthermore, in addition to professional competence and unique capabilities, SOF provide greater discretion and deniability.³⁵

While not mutually exclusive, the above sets of explanations are insufficient to account for the fast growth and importance of SOF. A third complementary explanation exists that combines both viewpoints within an organizational theory approach. In brief, the argument is made that the huge growth of SOF in the industrial democracies is the outcome of the actions of military organizational entrepreneurs—boosters, mentors, sponsors, or promoters—who in concert with influential backers have identified the needs of militaries and marketed SOF as uniquely suited to meet those needs.³⁶

The great value of SOF is that they are “specialized generalists,” local level integrators that link between the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of action in ways that may enhance the autonomy of the military. SOF are therefore hybrid forms of organizational response to environmental pressures: to reduce risk, to manage the links between the armed forces and external environments and to integrate specialties.³⁷

This viewpoint calls attention to the warning in former President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s farewell address:

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist . . . We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.³⁸

POTUS as the Sponsor

Article II Section 2 of the Constitution of the United States established that POTUS shall be the commander in chief of the United States Army and Navy, and of the militia of the several states, when called into the actual Service of the United States.³⁹ In addition to this express delegation of power over the military, POTUS has some inherent constitutional powers to respond to terrorist attacks without prior Congressional authorization. This was called the “POTUS defensive war power.”⁴⁰ The preceding analysis, and the cited

work from Shamir and Ben-Ari, postulates that in developing an American theory of special operations, POTUS, as commander in chief, is the key driver (independent variable) operating upon the development, structure, growth, and use of SOF.

Historical record reveals that past and recent presidents exercised their defensive war power by promoting the growth of SOF. President John F. Kennedy, for example, holds a special place in the history of U.S. Army special forces. In 1961, prior to his visit to Fort Bragg, the president asked Brigadier General William Yarborough, commander of Army special forces, that his troops wear green berets. Shortly thereafter, President John F. Kennedy authorized the green beret as Army special forces' official headgear, and sent them a message stating, "I am sure that the Green Beret will be a mark of distinction in the trying times ahead."⁴¹ The following year, Kennedy affirmed his support by calling the green beret "a symbol of excellence, a badge of courage, a mark of distinction in the fight for freedom."⁴² Under the Kennedy administration, Army special forces grew by seven groups. A few years later, the Kennedy family requested that the Green Berets be the honor guard at the president's funeral; he was laid to rest with 43 Green Berets by his side. The United States Army Special Operations Command trains at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, and every November 22nd, on the anniversary of the late president's 1963 assassination, they place a wreath and a green beret on his grave at Arlington National Cemetery.

More recently, President Barack Obama's strong support for SOF bears comparison to Kennedy's dedication to the Green Berets. During the Obama Administration, as the conventional forces numbers, budgets, and missions declined, those of USSOCOM increased. In a 2015 interview, however, outgoing Army Chief of Staff General Ray Odierno bitterly blamed the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria on the president's mission change requiring the military to back efforts in Iraq. He argued that if the

The United States Army Special Operations Command trains at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Warfare Center and School, and every November 22nd, on the anniversary of the late president's 1963 assassination, they place a wreath and a green beret on his grave at Arlington National Cemetery.

United States had left more troops in the region, the Islamic State of Iraq

and Syria would not have been able to capture territory in that country or in Syria.

“I go back to the work we did in 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010 and we got it to a place that was really good. Violence was low, the economy was growing, politics looked like it was heading in the right direction. Odierno also sounded the alarm on the massive cuts Obama has made to the number of army troops. They are expected to fall to 450,000 ... down from 570,000 in 2010. With Russia becoming more hostile and ISIS recruiting a record number of new members, this is hardly the time for America to scale back the military.”⁴³

General Odierno’s criticism of President Obama for cutting the military force is somewhat misplaced and harkens back to the pre-9/11 period. In a 1999 speech at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, then presidential candidate, Governor George W. Bush addressed the issue of American defense by stating that “a president must be a clear-eyed realist. There are limits to the smiles and scowls of diplomacy. Armies and missiles are not stopped by stiff notes of condemnation ... Unless a president sets his own priorities, his priorities will be set by others—by adversaries, or the crisis of the moment.”⁴⁴ Additionally, presidential candidate Bush later complained that under the Clinton Administration:

“not since the years before Pearl Harbor has our investment in national defense been so low as a percentage of GNP ... Thousands of members of the armed forces are on food stamps ... Sending our military on vague, aimless and endless deployments is the swift solvent of morale ... We must be selective in the use of our military ... homeland defense has become an urgent duty ... We will defend the American homeland by strengthening our intelligence community—focusing on human intelligence and the early detection of terrorist operations both here and abroad ... I know that the best defense can be a strong and swift offense—including the use of Special Operations Forces and long-range strike capabilities.”⁴⁵

About two years later, during the first President George W. Bush administration, the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place. Since that time, the U.S. has been fighting a “long war” against Islamic terrorism while undergoing a military drawdown and a comparable increase in the numbers, funding, and

importance of its SOF.⁴⁶ President George W. Bush's first term administration initiated and oversaw U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. Following a top-to-bottom review by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld that concluded the invasion and occupation of Iraq was an anomaly, the second term Bush administration sought a larger and more aggressive special operations force with broader latitude to work with indigenous forces and act against small cells of al-Qaeda and its radical offshoots in countries where the United States was technically not at war.⁴⁷

Gregg Jaffe notes that prior to 9/11, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was already speaking of "a faster, more agile military," expressing suspicion about committing U.S. forces to expanded nation-building missions. He was "intent on laying a foundation for future administrations to use the military's elite commandos more expansively. The current plan would increase the number of special-operations troops by 14,000 to about 64,000. Meanwhile, conventional ground forces will by 2011 return to their prewar levels. The Air Force and Navy will absorb even deeper personnel cut[s]."⁴⁸ Therefore, the critique of President Obama by General Odierno is arguably somewhat misplaced because he faced a severe economic downturn and his military drawdown plan was consistent with previous presidential decisions.

A second hypothesis is that the relationship between POTUS, his Secretary of Defense, powerbrokers, and military stakeholders, such as USSOCOM current and former leaders, is a critical intervening variable in the use and future of SOF.

The American political system is founded on the principle of civilian control over the military. Military leaders are part of a tight, professional class imbued with military culture and views. The U.S. society is one with a volunteer military force, a minuscule percentage of the total population.⁴⁹ When so many have not undergone military training and discipline, interpersonal skills are very useful in conducting civil-military affairs. For example, the current commander of USSOCOM, General Thomas, was quoted as saying, "our strategy is by nature ill-defined and harder to achieve."⁵⁰ A U.S. Army Ranger like his predecessor General Joseph L. Votel, General Thomas did not have time nor opportunity to develop the close personal relationship with POTUS established and cemented by former USSOCOM leader Admiral William McRaven during the Osama Bin Laden takedown period.⁵¹

General Thomas sees the future of USSOCOM as a command transformed, almost, into a quasi-intelligence agency.⁵² Former Secretary of

Defense Ashton Carter and other SOF sponsors, mentors, and boosters (i.e., Congressional committees and military contractors) support his vision for a command committed to a ‘left of bang’ approach, one where SOF focus on anticipatory special operations. For General Thomas, “Left of bang is less a technological approach than a people-access approach: being there ahead of time, having relationships there ahead of time, identifying problems before they become crises, developing that partner capacity, prior, not after a response.”⁵³ Left of bang apparently is the indirect action approach in Phase 0, consistent with the Obama doctrine (one of several principles) of fighting special warfare “by, with, and through” local forces.⁵⁴ It aims to rebalance USSOCOM’s emphasis on kinetic operations by seeking actionable intelligence to provide early warning to eliminate threats.

This chapter highlights challenging questions and issues that could be considered by special operations theory builders. Much work lies ahead. There is a need for a parsimonious, lessons-learned work to guide policymakers and practitioners on this important subject. It is the author’s hope that others will continue to refine and sustain their efforts on this topic.

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Chapter 11. Two Special Operations/SOF Theory Challenges: Building Depth and Avoiding Prescription

Harry (Rich) Yarger

Writing theory is not easy. Theory as a concept can be debated in regard to typology—scientific, social, historical, and others—but the value of any theory is the purpose it serves. Well over two centuries ago, Clausewitz argued the best purpose of military theory is to “educate the mind.”¹ Hence, good political and military theory does not prescribe what to do in specific cases but provides a framework (a paradigm) to broaden and discipline thinking in ways that lead to better understanding and choices by leaders and decision makers in the preparation for and conduct of war. Future special operations and Special Operations Forces (SOF) theory can learn from past efforts.

In 2013, I proffered a short monograph *21st Century SOF: Toward an American Theory of Special Operations* to explain what my research and observations revealed about American special operations/SOF theory.² That experience suggested to me that the two greatest challenges confronting the SOF community in developing a shared, comprehensive theory is providing sufficient depth for understanding the nature of special operations and SOF phenomena without plummeting into prescriptive dogma. To fail to do the first would leave the community founded in indefensible assertions. To do the latter would confine thinking to a rote practice of skills. Neither would serve the strategic needs of the United States Special Operations Forces or national defense adequately.

Like more general military theory, any special operations/SOF theory must explain the nature and purpose of the subject, provide essential

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terminology and definitions, explain the essential assumptions and premises of the theory, explain the relationships among these concepts and ideas internally and externally, and perhaps relate the theory to the past, present, and future.³ In essence, a coherent special operations/SOF theory accounts for the past and informs the debate in regard to critical questions that must be answered to guide the American SOF community into the future. Logically examining some of these emerging critical questions might inform the level of detail or depth appropriate for theory (as opposed to doctrine).

In general I would argue that special operations, like war, is a human enterprise. I would also highlight that like the principles of war, a theory's premises and principles are not absolute; they must be understood as being in different relationships and tensions among themselves based on environmental contexts. Consequently, understanding all of these principles and premises is essential, and none can be ignored without risk.

For example, think of the relationship between surprise and mass in the principles of war. There is always a tension between achieving sufficient mass and retaining a favorable degree of surprise. The commander's genius lies in how they understand these principles, and resolve the tension to serve operational or strategic purpose. Of course, they must consider all other principles, relationships, and tensions among them in pursuing the ends.

Likewise, the challenge for any special operations/SOF theory is to identify all appropriate premises and principles, and develop them to be understood both individually and in relationship to one another (in the strategic and operational contexts in which SOF must perform). What these premises and principles are—and how best to explain the relationships and tension in such a way that they have a general or more universal utility (e.g., inform more detailed doctrine and the commander's thinking across diverse environments)—is the proverbial holy grail.

Some argue there is no need for a special operations/SOF theory, and in fact the sanction of a theory might be counterproductive in that it might limit SOF to a "theoretical box."²⁴ Like Clausewitz, however, it is essential to educate

all those who are part of or interface with SOF. Specifically, an accepted SOF theory, even with debate on specific premises or principles, can:

- Provide a basis for better internal SOF discussions and deliberations.
- Offer better external interfaces with policymakers, conventional military, and partner nations.
- Better inform decision making at all levels.
- Improve education about and within SOF.
- Improve doctrine.
- Propose a theoretical basis for resource justification.

Nonetheless, the concern over confining SOF thinking within a theoretical box is valid; any theory should avoid being excessively prescriptive or vague (to facilitate comprehensive understanding).⁵

Propitiously, understanding what questions the current and future environments portend for special operations/SOF informs theory's content and expression. That is, identifying what questions modern war or society poses for SOF can help theorists better express or illustrate a proposed theory's premises. Considering such questions may also help illustrate the intent of the theory's premises, and with it add depth to special operations/SOF theoretical perspectives (albeit if not overly prescriptive while doing so).

For example, in examining the history and research available on special operations/SOF, there are obvious tensions between special operations/SOF and the American body politic, conventional military, and global body politic. These tensions affect special operations/SOF in many ways to include appropriate roles and activities—i.e., the boundaries and consequences for SOF in violating them.

Natural tensions exist between special operations and SOF and the greater American political system and conventional military.

Americans for the most part are opposed to unconventional conflicts and any form of elitism. Such conflicts do not adhere to Americans' preferences for conduct of a decisive war and raise political questions and moral issues for which the right answers are unclear and potentially controversial. As a result of who they are and what they are asked to do, SOF are different. The differences engender a degree of exclusiveness and commitment essential to sustaining a ready force, and that is even admired as part of an American subculture. However, exclusiveness and elitism run counter to America's greater

culture of anti-elitism and egalitarianism. Consequently, SOF must manage a balance of political, public, and conventional military trust and SOF cultural imperatives that sustain an acceptable and sharp military instrument of quiet professionals.⁶

In writing special operations/SOF theory, roles and activities is not about a list, but rather a framework for thinking about what is necessary, appropriate, and acceptable for special operations/SOF and justifying it to the public, policymakers, and conventional military at different times and for different circumstances. Answers lie in American political, social, and military history and theory—and in a body of knowledge and experience that constitutes a SOF theory. For those not concerned about this, what happens if peace breaks out, terrorism and political violence escalate, world opinion of American intervention worsens, or different threats requiring different countering activities emerge? Remember, theory does not provide ‘what to do,’ but guides thinking to help frame and understand potential issues and how to address them. We should be concerned about the appropriate premises and tensions, and building understanding of them.

In a similar manner, theory should also espouse premises about the relationships and interconnectedness of SOF and conventional forces, and SOF and other government agencies in national security.

Military special operations can be conducted unilaterally, in support of, or supported by conventional, interagency, whole of government, and coalition operations, or in concert with all of the above.⁷ SOF and conventional capabilities are complementary, integrative, and mutually supportive.⁸

These allude to a theoretical framework toward collective and mutual understanding of how special operations/SOF fit into the broader national security paradigm. Again, other theoretical frameworks—military, international relations, political, etc., contain useful paradigms. However, a prevailing, if emerging, SOF theory is useful for meaningful deliberation of what this means for any particular time or context. For those not concerned, think about turf battles, wasted or lack of resources, and a less effective national security in changing and challenging times. Members of special operations force development, operational, and scholarly communities deal with these on a regular basis. Still, theory can contribute to a better effort, but it must

be explained and illustrated in a way that leads to a fuller understanding that is both not prescriptive and retains validity over time.

Another key question might be: What are the attributes of the “precarious nature of SOF culture” and how can they be managed?

Organizations dedicated to special operations are inherently precarious. Special operations organizations fare best in times of crises or in situations when unique skills are in urgent demand or in situations where politicians do not wish to acknowledge ambiguous threats as a crisis. “Nor is it odd that when the crisis abates, unorthodox skills should experience a diminution of legitimacy in the minds of the public and the military establishment.”... SOF are also a precarious organization as a result of internal contradictions to their own cultural identity.⁹

How best can SOF understand its own internal and external precariousness? What can other theoretical frameworks tell us about precarious organizations, notably how to lead, manage, and sustain them? How does such ‘precariousness’ interrelate with other premises? What other theoretical constructs can contribute to a specific SOF understanding/paradigm? How can this knowledge be supported with evidence and illustrations that lead to a fuller understanding of special operations/SOF at large?

Another contemporary question is: What is the nature of special operations/SOF strategic value? Additionally, what is the need for SOF strategic acumen (understanding) and how must it be learned? Some thoughts:

- Special operations and SOF are applicable at all the levels of war and interaction—strategic, operational, and tactical.¹⁰
- Special operations represent a distinct military capability of strategic value to national security.¹¹
- Special operations have strategic utility.¹²
- Special operations and SOF’s relative value increase as direct strategic utility is approached.¹³

My concern here is multifold. First, how can theory inform about special operations/SOF’ strategic utility? Second, how do we explain this to ourselves and others? And third, what insights can theory contribute toward developing the strategic acumen needed to maximize SOF strategic utility? Further

development of this subject would validate these premises and also lead to a better understanding.

Another related question is what does social theory—or other paradigms—suggest to better understand gender and/or other diversity roles in special operations?

Special operations benefit from diversity within SOF and among enablers. Diversity is a positive virtue in SOF. It potentially brings more nuanced competencies and insights to bear on special operations mission planning, rehearsal, and conduct. It also provides a similar enrichment to activities related to preparation for war. For similar reasons, SOF value and special operations benefit from diversity among and within enablers. Different enablers bring different perspectives and capabilities to an operation, generating ideas and options for consideration. However, diversity can also be a source of multiple frictions, and value added versus tensions is always a matter of consideration for SOF leaders.¹⁴

My immediate concern here is very simple: What can other theories and experiences tell us about how women can best contribute in special operations? Here again existing premises need further development and illustration. And, women as diversity are but one aspect of this discussion. Of course, other premises and tensions within theory would logically be considered.

Similarly, what does political and military theory suggest in regard to special operations/SOF participation in political violence and/or third party conflicts? It seems this is a valid question for the 21st century strategic environment and the circumstances SOF might find themselves in. One definition that extends existing doctrine:

Special operations and SOF evolve over time according to strategic context. Special operations and SOF are defined by the nature of the threats or opportunities in the security environment, the needs of policymakers, and the ability or inability of conventional forces to provide appropriate policy options. Special operations can be conducted overtly, covertly, clandestinely, or mixtures thereof; however any choice has potential political, legal, moral, and operational risks associated with it.¹⁶

“Political violence” and “third party conflicts” are evolving and becoming more complex; they may have surpassed our past military paradigms. What is needed is a new look, a SOF specific one that adds new theoretical depth to SOF understanding.

One last question: What theory can inform SOF on how to anticipate and deal with change?

Special operations and SOF exist on the cutting edge of change and continuity in the security environment.¹⁷

The concern expressed in the question is that we are living in a period of great change. There is plenty of research out there dealing with change of all types. Are there paradigms available, however, that will enable SOF—or the military more generally—to better understand the nature of change and the use of national power? In exploring this, do any of these existing theories possess specific, named applicability to SOF and with it new depth and clarity in understanding the relation of special operations/SOF to change? If so, such a special operations/SOF theory should first recognize the relationship among change, special operations, and SOF, and substantiate it with evidence and illustrate it as appropriate for proper understanding.

While concerns and examples herein are just illustrative, each premise and others can be further developed from a theoretical perspective. In doing so, they can be appropriately articulated, and illustrated in such a manner that builds depth and understanding in a much needed special operations/SOF theory, one that improves future leaders’ perspectives and special operations/SOF performance. Past works should be considered in any further theory development, but most importantly, any effort must achieve its understanding without being so prescriptive that it becomes doctrine or so general that it is meaningless. Theory’s rightful role is education and its focus is to inform decision making, doctrine, and operations.

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Chapter 12. Special Operations Theory: Looking Ahead

Paul Lieber

Any discussion about theory should be considered a work in progress. No theory is ever razor sharp definitive or conversely broad enough to cover all aspects of a problem set. As this edited volume and its symposium reasoned, thus is the case for special operations or Special Operations Forces (SOF) theory, depending on one's preferred label. More on this point later.

In either instance, defining the term 'theory,' period, is no small feat, especially if taken from a social/natural science perspective. From this point of view, a theory formally assigns idea or presupposition into a proposed collection of fact, one ready and willing to test its mettle via rigorous testing. From this definition, social/natural science theory aspires to inform, direct, and sort ideas potentially useful for longer term use. This organization of ideas, via a named theory, empowers scholars to now advance existing knowledge, but within a nicely defined theoretical framework. This framework can more easily identify strengths and weakness in known ideas to subsequently create new ones. External validity—the steadfastness of social/natural science theory against numerous and diverse problem types—serves as a continuous reminder of the lengths a theory can be applied, and where it may be appropriate to expand/explore theoretical alternatives when the original falls short. If sufficient evidence emerges, a new theory built upon foundations of the original emerges to replace it. And the process starts anew. As Peter McCabe opened this volume, theory exploration should aspire toward more self-aware and informed scholars.

From this social/natural perspective on theory, no theory should be considered 'right' or 'wrong,' rather part of a natural, intellectual evolution

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where theories mature alongside ideas and paradigms. Ergo, falling in love with a particular theory for the sake of said theory leaves those individuals in the knowledge rearview mirror. A social/natural science theory's goal is to explain outcomes; it should never drive them, let alone indefinitely. Reflecting on the bigger question above: Can or should a social/natural science definition of theory be used to explain special operations? And more importantly, what is the utility in doing so?

Yes, and that depends. Much like social/natural science, to do so would require sorting individual areas of special operations into unique theoretical constructs. While theories can be correlated—obviously no special operations or scientific phenomena exists in total isolation—each one is intended to be mutually exclusive for the purpose of testing. Otherwise, there is no way to confidently state that a particular theory is producing a particular result, or lack thereof.

To create its own mutually exclusive theory would require the special operations community to determine the boundaries of said theory. Meaning, firm agreement on a core mission set for special operations/SOF, also on outcomes considered inherently special operations. This agreement only gets muddied by debate on where conventional and special operations capabilities should begin and end, apt to intensify thanks to evolved concepts on how to define an 'adversary' or 'conflict.' Throwing international partners into the mix only further complicates matters. Should theory and capability be defined solely by U.S. models or under a global SOF network concept?

Globally defined or otherwise—and if there's any hope for a social/natural science theory emerging—the special operations community can no longer amorphously define itself by conducting any and every mission deemed 'special,' or those that conventional forces cannot execute. This definition—while a point of pride for the community—is arguably doing itself a disservice in the longer term. Not only does this generality inhibit creating a social/natural science compatible theory, it likewise leaves the community vulnerable to excess risk by reactively adjusting as unprecedented, 'special' challenges emerge.

Tangibly, this broadly termed 'special' definition creates an uncomfortable dichotomy between mission and funding/authorities. Logistically, special operations capability is reasonably determined by current and prior needs for the force; authorities, funding, and capabilities follow in suit. At present, however, special operations is tasked with accomplishing the

unprecedented. What results is an inability for special operations leadership to deliberately plan for future conflict –those ‘special’ challenges—beyond speculative requests on what might happen.

Alternatively, a futurist approach to special operations—i.e., one emphasizing countering weapons of mass destruction or cyberattacks—can lead to wild forecasting and its own excess risk by planning toward hypotheticals separated from current reality and logistical support suited for past conflict. In both scenarios, this disconnect makes forming a social/natural science theory under the current construct nearly impossible.

There is, however, an alternative approach to defining special operations, one compatible with social/natural science theory formation. In lieu of the moniker ‘special,’ the community should explore capability alongside purpose, and with it marry intent to practicality. Much like initial steps to forming a social/natural science theory, the global special operations community (both collectively and as individual forces) should take an inward look on where special operations is and where it should be in the near future. This introspection will empower authorities, funding, and capabilities to march alongside it.

This inward look, however, may create some moments of discomfort. It requires special operations and conventional forces to agree on what missions and capabilities belong in which bin. Then, the theory formation can begin for each. This agreement is long overdue. Despite its exponentially increasing employment, special operations was never intended to be the force of choice for modern conflict. While these conflicts favor asymmetric warfare as a sweet spot for special operators, this does not necessitate this force to account for every possibility within. Second, cuts to conventional force manpower and capability does and should not default to special operations being asked to do more with less. By design, special operations across the globe is a small and precise force.

Throughout this edited volume are an array of recommendations to arrive at this future. For instance, creating a distinction between special operations and SOF can determine core capabilities toward forming useful theory. This distinction may include international partners, many of whom do not make this distinction and/or do not feature joint elements.

On the other end of the spectrum, does special operations even require a theory, social/natural science or otherwise? Is it better served by the current paradigm, limitations and all? One may argue U.S. special operations,

being joint, can logically borrow from theory literally battle-tested in other services, and with it determine fit within a special operations context.

So, where do we go from here? Regardless of one's opinion on the role and place of special operations theory, Lieutenant General Charles Cleveland (U.S. Army, Retired) perhaps said it best in that it is an important endeavor to pursue (either special operations specific, or as an offshoot of the Services). Related, and echoing Major General David Baratto (U.S. Army, Retired), we must actively close the gap between theory and doctrine if either is to remain relevant and, more importantly, current. Conversations on what is or isn't theory, are unimportant in lieu of the utility of a theory to a greater strategic picture.

In doing so, it's key to put this edited volume and related symposium into perspective. While opinions are convincingly presented, no single one should stand alone as the means to define and value special operations or SOF theory. Robert Spulak is on the right path in placing paradigms, not theories, as the end goal. Likewise, Bernd Horn in arguing for operationalizing theory to empower those who rely most on special operations to best fund and employ them. As Colonel Homiak posited, any theory for special operations should educate those tasked with understanding it.

Arguably the greatest achievement of this research endeavor is recognition that, even as the force of choice, special operations cannot do it alone. Ergo, any theory that includes them must also account for Kurt Müller's position that the interagency plays a significant role in special operations success, most notably—as Francisco Wong-Diaz reasons—the U.S. President as its commander in chief. Thus, a special operations theory must account for both domestic and international partners, to include recognition of the key activities Tom Searle details that require such collaboration and reach.

Whether it's a unique or service-driven definition, Emily Spencer and James Kiras will agree that any theory exploration for special operations must be rigorously tested. Today's enemies will be different than tomorrow's, and no theory should ever be problem centric. Rich Yarger's 'strategic value' litmus test for theory is one that should be applied, regardless of definition. If it doesn't check this box, it is not ready for consideration.

Most importantly and beyond this volume, conversations must transcend arguments of the utility of theory and/or where definitions should begin and end. Similarly, abandon hope of determining any sort of theory thanks to seemingly invulnerable enemies who do not value sovereignty or

international law. War has, and always will be a part of human existence as will the need for special operations—which by definition, purpose, and theory—are capable of challenging traditional definitions and approaches to conflict.↑

Acronym List

CA	civil affairs
CF	conventional forces
COIN	counterinsurgency
CSOSR	Center for Special Operations Studies and Research
DOD	Department of Defense
FID	foreign internal defense
IJC	International Security Assistance Force Joint Command
JSOU	Joint Special Operations University
MFP	major force program
MISO	military information support operations
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NSPD	National Security Presidential Directives
POTUS	President of the United States
POW	prisoner of war
PSYOP	psychological operations
SF	special forces
SOF	Special Operations Forces
SOTF	Special Operations Task Force
TSOC	Theater Special Operations Command
TTP	tactics, techniques, and procedures
USASOC	United States Army Special Operations Command
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command
UW	unconventional warfare

