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# Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When do Special Operations Succeed?

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"When the hour of crisis comes, remember that 40 selected men can shake the world." -- Yasotay (Mongol warlord)[1]

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The frequently quoted words of Yasotay penetrate to the core of the strategic utility of special operations forces. That utility reposes most essentially in two qualities, economy of force and expansion of strategic choice.[2] In the most general of terms, special operations forces (SOF) offer the prospect of a favorably disproportionate return on military investment. Moreover, SOF provide the possibility of a range of precisely conducted military activities more extensive than that reliably feasible for regular warriors conducting regular operations.[3] Whether or not SOF--or others nominally competent to carry out special operations--can fulfill the strategic promise just suggested may be analyzed usefully in terms of a historically based assessment of conditions for success and failure: that is the mission for this article.

It is tempting to label conditions either as necessary or desirable, but so diverse is the legacy of special operations that such classification exceeds the bounds of confident judgment. One can neither specify conditions that guarantee success nor identify the circumstances that guarantee failure. Given the variety of ways in which special operations can achieve positive strategic results, it is clear that the definition of success for special operations is not straightforward. Tactical failure at the right time, in the right way, and for the right reasons can amount to strategic success (it might lift popular morale or impress the foe and allies).[4] Findings on the conditions for the success or failure of special operations cannot sensibly be presented as a formula, a kind of strategist's cookbook. The conditions for success identified here simply point to historical factors that increase the prospects for achievement of significant strategic effect.

The opportunity to extract strategic utility has to depend on opportunities presented by the enemy. Enemy vulnerability is critical for the success of special operations. The performance required of friendly forces alters dramatically with the competence of the foe. All enemies are vulnerable, but some are more vulnerable than others. Nonetheless, not all vulnerabilities lend themselves to useful exploitation.

In sum, first, many of the conditions for success discussed in this article are interdependent. Second, the relevance, certainly the precise meaning, of these conditions varies with individual cases. Third, some substitution is possible among conditions. Fourth, special operations can succeed even against the odds, when supposedly important conditions appear far from permissive: virtually by definition, special operations tend to affront conventional standards of conditions for military success. Finally, specific historical contexts must determine how great, or limited, can be the strategic utility of special operations.

## Conditions for Success

The conditions for success are grouped in the categories summarized in Figure 1. Each will be discussed in turn.

**Special Operations: Categories of Conditions for Success**

Policy Demand	Enemy Vulnerabilities
Politics	Technological Assistance
Feasible Objectives	Tactical Competence
Strategy	Reputation
Flexibility of Mind	History
Absence of Alternatives	

**Figure 1. Conditions for Success**

*Policy Demand: Suitability for the Age*

- *SOF need to meet the distinctive policy demands of each era.* SOF are useful in all kinds of conflicts. Nonetheless, the policy demand for their strategic services varies from decade to decade. Notwithstanding the experience of Desert Storm in 1991, US policy today places demands upon SOF principally in the region of low-intensity conflict.[5] Just as the redesign of US grand strategy and defense policy reflects changes in international security conditions, the course of events as interpreted by policymakers shapes demand for the services of SOF.

The crafting of special operations capabilities to meet policy demand applies to all levels of conflict.

- *SOF need to change with the diminishing availability of conventional military options.* As the United States downsizes its military forces, so the scope for SOF success (and failure) could expand. The mixture of regional instability, continuing US interest in international order, and a reduced scale of conventional forces suggests an increase in the use of SOF.[6] SOF can be thought of as another kind of precision force to that being prepared through exploitation of new information technologies.

This claim refers most specifically to mid-intensity conflict, since the reduction in the armed forces trained for regular warfare has little or no effect upon demand for SOF in low-intensity conflict. (With respect to terminology, SOF are regular troops trained to fight irregularly.)

*Politics*

- *SOF need permissive domestic conditions, a tolerant political and strategic structure.* Attitudes toward irregular warfare, toward the particular foes in that warfare, and toward the ability of the government to employ SOF capabilities in socially acceptable ways are subject to change. Some of the qualities of SOF that appeal to politicians--low investment but potentially high political return, deniability, and flexibility--include qualities that some critics find troubling. To illustrate: consider the contrast among the British, French, Israeli, and US political systems and cultures vis-à-vis special operations. Whether due to brutal cynicism or sophisticated appreciation of the needs of realpolitik, French or Israeli special operations have to become major sources of public embarrassment before they attract much negative comment at home. By way of contrast, when Britain's SAS shot IRA terrorists in Gibraltar in March 1988, there was a domestic outcry couched substantially in ethical terms. One can just imagine the domestic furor that would ensue were US SOF truly unleashed in peacetime to wage war properly on the foreign enemies of American society.

Despite a long and sometimes distinguished history in irregular warfare,[7] the United States in this century has been a difficult home for the development of SOF. For different reasons, neither the United States nor Germany in World War II was culturally friendly toward SOF. Britain and the Soviet Union, by contrast, had cultures that fostered a *strategic* approach to SOF. In the United States, the American way of war has not accommodated SOF as an important strategic instrument.[8] The US Army is heir to the proud Jominian tradition of applying overwhelming force at the decisive point.[9] That tradition, as interpreted and applied, has difficulty finding useful roles for SOF.

T. E. Lawrence in Arabia in 1916-18, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in the Kachin hills of Burma in 1944, and the SAS in Borneo in 1964-66 all came to terms with local mores. The tolerance of local political culture, whether

foreign or for the SOF at home, depends in part upon how well SOF activities are crafted and explained with regard to popular beliefs and cultural symbols. US ability to use SOF to their full potential requires that their operations express the dominant American idea of civic virtue, and (probably) that they recreate the persona of the frontiersman.[10]

The need for an accommodating political and strategic culture applies to special operations across the board of operational possibilities. However, the higher the intensity level of conflict, the stronger the resistance to a strategic view of SOF. The American way of war barely addresses low-intensity conflict,[11] which helps explain the poorly organized US opposition to SOF at that level of war. Cultural empathy is necessary if SOF are to work effectively with allies.

- *SOF need an educated consumer, political and military patrons who appreciate what SOF should, and should not, be asked to do.* Strong patrons for SOF are like gift horses, and they tend to be welcomed and humored regardless of their grasp of military realities. Particular peril derives from the fact that a sponsor's view of special operations, indeed of war generally, coalesces during his or her formative years, no matter how relevant that period to the current context. Winston Churchill, who was critical to the formation of the British Commandos in 1940, had an approach to war shaped by his experience of the Boer War (1899-1902).[12] Indeed, the title "commando" derived from the Boer way of war in that conflict. In addition, Churchill's unrealistic popular beliefs in the 1930s about the value of a civilian, or paramilitary, "fifth column" (with reference to Franco's drive on Madrid in the Spanish Civil War) influenced expectations of the Special Operations Executive (SOE).

In Nazi Germany, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and the *Abwehr* controlled the *Brandenburger* special forces. His political weakness, however, and the relative isolation of the *Abwehr* both from the mainstream of authority in the army and increasingly from Hitler, helped to condemn the *Brandenburgers* to minor roles and even to outright misuse. After 1943, Otto Skorzeny's SS commandos filled the vacuum left by the fading of Canaris's special forces. Overall, however, German army SOF were frustrated by culture and historical context. A continental power bent upon the achievement of rapid and decisive victories by main force is not a power likely to find great strategic utility in SOF. Canaris's *Brandenburger* special forces were true to the strategic culture of Germany when they were abandoned to the elite division of the army, the *Grossdeutschland*.

With Churchill's patronage, the British Commandos operated under the newly created Combined Operations Directorate and, in effect, were a separate service. Churchill's sponsorship of Orde Wingate for his proposal to insert columns (of "Chindits") into the Japanese rear in Burma, thinking that he might repeat Lawrence of Arabia's exploits in the First World War, and Field-Marshal Claude Auchinleck's backing of David Stirling and his SAS idea, are further examples of successful patronage. For the United States, President Franklin Roosevelt's support of "Wild Bill" Donovan was necessary for the creation and success of the OSS, while--in a later era--President Kennedy's patronage was important for the status and employment of US SOF. The fate of SOF when they lose their patron can be bleak. Following the assassination of President Diem in November 1963, South Vietnam's SOF (LLDB--Luc Luong Du Biet) descended from the status of political favorite to a backwater under successor regimes.

Because of ignorance, lack of strategic grasp, or plain ill will, SOF can find themselves misused as shock troops (they are elite warriors, after all--the trouble is that they are few in number), dispatched on forlorn hopes, or wasted on missions that make no strategic sense, even if tactically feasible. The assignment of the US Army's Green Berets to border protection in South Vietnam at the end of 1963 was a classic misuse of the unique talents of SOF. To be fair to political and military patrons, there have been cases when elements of SOF have been more concerned to play than they have been to play effectively via whole team effort. For example, Operation Urgent Fury in October 1983 demonstrated that US SOF were committed to play their parts in the liberation of Grenada, whether or not those parts fitted together usefully for coherent strategic effect.

Among the major powers one can rank the national acceptance of special operations. In descending order, the rankings are: Israel, the former Soviet Union, Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. (Among minor powers--in these cases now lapsed--historians of special operations need to register the strategic excellence of the SOF of the Republic of South Africa under the former regime and of Rhodesia.[13]) Even of the relatively benign environment of the British military establishment, an author can write that "there is also in the higher echelons of the British Army [of the early 1980s] a traditional skepticism about `funnies.'"[14] As for the United States, in the words of Alfred H. Paddock,

Jr.: "The manner in which psychological and unconventional warfare evolved from 1941 until their union as a formal Army capability in 1952 suggests a theme that runs throughout the history of special warfare: the story of a hesitant and reluctant Army attempting to cope with concepts and organizations of an unconventional nature." [15]

The need for strategically educated sponsors of special operations applies to conflicts at all levels of intensity. At the high end of warfare, commanders may assign SOF to wholly inappropriate combat roles, while at the low end they may be thrown at a problem area that really calls for police work.

For US SOF to fulfill their strategic potential, they must have sponsors in the unified commands, in the military service and central civilian bureaucracies, and in the White House and the Congress. There is much to be said in favor of the education of the military establishment as a whole about the limited but important roles for SOF. Since education can be a long and uncertain enterprise, and one that is unlikely to register complete victory over ignorance and prejudice, wise SOF recognize the need for politically powerful protection. Unsurprisingly, politicians often have a grasp of the strategic application of SOF superior to that achieved by the regular military minds and institutions of professional regular soldiers. For example, this certainly was the case with respect to the deployment of the SAS to Northern Ireland in 1976-77, and the unenthusiastic response of regular minds at British army headquarters in the province to that political decision. [16]

- *SOF need a politically legitimate mission.* Special operations are more likely to generate strategic utility when the mission they support has political legitimacy. Both domestic and international conceptions of political legitimacy determine the viability of policy. In many cases, political legitimacy is not a problem: for radically different examples, one can cite World War II and the Iranian hostage rescue attempt of 1980. Indeed, political legitimacy lends respectability to a *modus operandi* for irregular warfare which otherwise could raise legal and moral questions. The American public was suitably politically receptive to claims for the political legitimacy of the Grenadan intervention in 1983, as well as for the action in Panama in 1989. If the political legitimacy of a mission is doubtful or contested, however, the political sensitivity of special operations increases. For example, in Malaya in the 1950s and in Borneo in the 1960s, Britain had to maintain firm political control of special operations. Also, it is the case that special operations can suffer castigation, or acquire accolades, by association with policies that are less, or more, politically legitimate. For example, the OSS benefited from being an instrument of US strategy in "The Good War" that was World War II, while the reputation of US Green Berets in Vietnam suffered when a politically significant portion of American society came to regard Vietnam as not being a "good war."

This condition is especially critical with respect to low-intensity conflict--though both Korea and Vietnam showed that even wars of mid-level intensity can trigger a political controversy that hinders the strategic effectiveness of military effort.

- *SOF need an attractive political message for the recruitment of local allies.* To recruit local auxiliaries for guerrilla or counter guerrilla operations, it is essential to have an attractive political program (of course, economic incentives might suffice). In World War II, for example, SOE and OSS were in the business of liberating captive peoples by supporting local resistance movements, albeit for the strategic goals of Britain and the United States. Nonetheless, the political message had to fit the local strategic context. In Malaya in the 1950s, and in Borneo (Malaysia) in the 1960s, British special operations could be portrayed convincingly and truthfully as directed toward the political independence and security of a local client. Both France and the United States failed to provide this quality of positive political clothing necessary for the strategically effective conduct of special operations in Southeast Asia.

By way of contrast with the British situation in Malaya and Borneo, the French in Algeria based their conduct of the war against the FLN upon an unsound political premise. [17] All the French army could offer was *Algérie française*--a slogan unappealing to most of the indigenous population. The French army had learned a great deal about *la guerre révolutionnaire* in Indochina. [18] But successful counterrevolutionary war is not really a matter of military, or even paramilitary, technique. The fundamental problem in Algeria was that France lacked a political cause adequate to bear the weight of war. The US political situation in Vietnam was somewhat better than the French dilemma in Algeria, though the military problems in Southeast Asia were more severe. [19] Ultimately, however, the United States too failed to advance a political story with sufficient local appeal.

This condition applies rigorously in cases of low-intensity conflict, while it can be relevant also in contexts of mid- and even high-intensity conflict when the recruitment of local auxiliaries, or the encouragement of local resistance, is desirable.

- *SOF can benefit from a positive political message for the enemy.* Special operations in political and psychological warfare require a message that the enemy finds attractive if he is to be turned from a current political allegiance. Both the Germans and the Western Allies in World War II failed to provide conditions wherein political warfare could succeed. The abhorrent racial theory which underpinned Hitler's state guaranteed that Nazi political warfare would fail among non-Germanic peoples. The Third Reich was too stupid politically even to pretend to offer benefits to non-"Aryans." In 1941 there was ample evidence of the willingness of many of the Soviet peoples to give the invader/liberator the benefit of the doubt--if only the Germans had shown a modicum of political intelligence. On the Allied side, the demand for unconditional surrender specified at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 meant that any internal revolt against the Third Reich could have no hope of thereby saving the country from total defeat.

Whenever special operations aim to influence the minds of enemy personnel in the hope of changing their behavior, this condition must apply.

- *SOF need support from regular military forces generally judged likely to win.* It is a ubiquitous and perennial human phenomenon to rush to the aid of the victor, but only to shuffle hesitantly to the aid of the probable victor. Notwithstanding some heroic exceptions, the general record of World War II, for example, shows a dramatic correlation between Allied military superiority or the physical proximity of Allied military power and the willingness of local populations to resist German or Italian occupation. France is a classic example. Active French resistance to German occupation escalated from insignificant to widespread open revolt between the summer of 1940 and June 1944. The people of France were sensible. From the American Revolution to Vietnam, a "bandwagon effect" functions as people hasten to join the winning side.

For SOF to be effective in circumstances where they need to work with civilians at immediate risk to the enemy, it is essential that the locals believe both that our side will be the inevitable victor and that they, the locals, will be on the winning side.

### *Feasible Objectives*

- *SOF need objectives that they can secure without the aid of regular units.* It is difficult for SOF to succeed tactically, or achieve strategic utility, when commanders commit them to combat situations for which they are not suited. French paratroops at Dien Bien Phu and US Army Green Berets along the border in South Vietnam (to control infiltration), are examples of the misuse of elite light infantry and SOF.[20] The dilemma is particularly acute for airborne, ranger, and marine raiding units. German paratroopers on Crete in 1941, US Rangers in Italy in 1943, and British Chindits in Burma in 1944 all tested or extended the limits of commitment to feasible objectives.[21] So rich is the variety of special and special-purpose units around the world that generalization can be perilous. The point simply is that SOF, and especially SOF that evolve into large-scale raiding units, are apt to be misused by commanders.

This condition applies particularly to high- and mid-intensity conflict, but even in low-intensity contexts an enemy concentration easily can overwhelm SOF.

- *Special operations need to be conducted at the right time.* The timing of special operations affects both their tactical feasibility and their strategic merit. The British Commando raid upon the docks at St. Nazaire in March 1942, for example, was tactically feasible, but not strategically useful, because Hitler had no intention of risking his remaining large surface vessels in the Atlantic in 1942.

Timing is a factor in all manner of conflicts and requires a quality of judgment that easily falls short.[22]

- *SOF need protection from the fantasies of political sponsors.* Both Winston Churchill in 1940-41 and President Lyndon Johnson in the mid-1960s harbored unrealistic expectations for the utility of SOF. Johnson believed that light cross-border raiding could reduce Hanoi's will to fight on. Moreover, he hoped to achieve momentous results cheaply and quietly.

The fantasies of political sponsors have no limits. The solution is a better-educated patron.

- *Decisionmakers must consult special operations experts before deciding upon missions.* Viewed tactically, "special warfare is an esoteric art unto itself." [23] SOF perform most successfully when people who understand special warfare select and plan operations. This is a matter of degree, not of absolutes. The abortive Iranian rescue mission of 1980, though planned competently in its several pieces, was subject to distinctive phase-related command and control which affronted the gods of special operations tradecraft, while some of the ways in which the Americans used Green Berets in Southeast Asia after the early 1960s amounted to waste of a scarce excellent asset. By way of contrast, SEAL operations in the Mekong Delta provide a near perfect example of the proper employment of SOF. In the SEAL case, the SOF themselves largely determined what they attempted, and how.

This is a general truth applicable to all special operations in all strategic contexts.

### *Strategy*

- *SOF need a high command that possesses a strategic mentality.* A high command that is unable to function strategically is unlikely to appreciate the strategic value of SOF. A country's high command which fixates upon battles and campaigns neglects the realm of strategy. Moreover, even a country that remembers strategy may still neglect to fight in ways that promote the political objectives of the war.

If one is not to waste tactical successes, they must occur within the context of a strategy appropriate to political victory. For example, the US government misassessed the character and structure of the war in Vietnam, and therefore could not--except by accident--implement plans at all likely to achieve the goals specified. As a consequence, planners vastly overestimated Hanoi's willingness to tolerate Chinese intervention in the war, and therefore were needlessly tentative toward the use of US or allied military power in the North.

Special operations must occur within the framework of strategic purpose if they are to have positive strategic utility. Except for those rare cases when a special operation *is* the conflict--e.g., a rescue mission or a punitive raid in peacetime--the strategic value of SOF is always hostage to the strategic quality of its political and military masters.

- *SOF benefit from a supportive strategic context, particularly one in which regular forces need assistance.* British Commandos and US Rangers (50 of them, fighting with the British) performed well at Dieppe in 1942, but the attrition suffered by the regular Anglo-Canadian forces was so rapid and substantial that the SOF contribution translated as a competent contribution to a tactical disaster. Notwithstanding the general truth that special operations can accelerate success and slow the pace of defeat, truly beaten troops are beyond the help of SOF; conversely, successful troops will not greatly benefit from SOF assistance. In August-September 1944, for example, the speed of the Allied advance negated the need for intervention by airborne forces, resulting in the cancellation of a series of proposed operations. Neither armies in dire straits, nor armies in the flush of victory, can benefit very much strategically from special operations.

In the Central Pacific drive of the Pacific War, the United States found little need for SOF capabilities (though this was not the case for Douglas MacArthur's drive in the Southwest Pacific theater, from New Guinea to--especially--the Philippines). Once the balance of materiel had shifted decisively in the US favor in the second half of 1943, the very character of the maritime theater of operations itself fulfilled some critical special operations functions. The anchoring of the defense of Japan's maritime flank upon island fortresses which could not support each other, backed up by an Imperial Combined Fleet inadequate to its mission, meant that even strategic and operational deception could be attempted on a grand scale by the United States. The Japanese were confused as to the principal direction of the Allied threat--as well they might be [24]--and as to the identity of precise insular targets. The US Navy could either bypass isolated Japanese island fortresses or take them reliably, if expensively, by brute force. Beyond the valuable services of the UDT's (underwater demolition teams), [25] US commanders saw little need for special operations assistance in the Central Pacific drive toward Japan's home islands.

The type of conflict and its course are critical to the applicability of this condition. In low-intensity conflict, brief raids, or other isolated special operations, the condition of the regular forces will matter either not at all or only

minimally.

- *SOF need a political-military framework into which they can fit.* Prior to the US Civil War, special operations was an--if not the--American way of war, notwithstanding the frequently unduly "regular" way in which "hostiles" were pursued on the frontier. Since 1865, however, only the quite recent revival of serious strategic commitment to the problems of low-intensity conflict in the Third World has provided a "way of war," a framework, into which special operations and SOF fit naturally.[26] The British army has had a tradition of peripheral raiding (in the Seven Years War, 1756-63, for example), and it was to a degree captivated by the legend of Lawrence of Arabia. Also, British colonial and even post-colonial Third World experience kept a tradition of irregular warfare alive.[27] Germany had experience with unconventional warfare in 1914-18 in her beleaguered colony of Tanganyika.[28] However, the "special operations" that caught the German popular and military professional attention were not the irregular tactics of Lettow-Vorbeck in East Africa, but rather the infiltration attacks by shock troops (*not* SOF) at Caporetto, and in the *Kaiserschlacht* of 1918. German feelings about guerrilla warfare in Europe were dominated by the bitter memory of the *franc tireurs* of 1870-71.[29] Overall, Germany, like the United States, has had no recent framework of war into which SOF easily could fit.

By firsthand experience, the example of others, or through study, a military establishment can educate itself to the strategic merit in SOF.

- *SOF need a stable overall war strategy to which they can contribute.* This was a fatal weakness in the French attempt to gain strategic value from SOF in Indochina. One can argue whether or not instability in strategy is more harmful than absence of strategy. Although shifting strategies can deny special operations an opportunity to succeed, a readiness to alter strategy can be a positive sign of flexibility. Game plans may need to be rewritten in real-time. None of the eventual participants entered World War II with careful preparation for the use of SOF. Britain, by far the most liberal of combatants toward the creation and employment of SOF, literally had to invent a special operations capability in the summer of 1940. As the game plan for victory in the war as a whole was rewritten in response to events (in this case, the defeat of regular forces in May-June 1940), so new capabilities were added.

Whether SOF constitute the strategy, or whether they play a team role, they need direction by a coherent theory of victory.

### *Flexibility of Mind*

- *SOF need the ability to support regular military operations, as well as to perform independently.* Every level of command prefers to withhold SOF for use at its particular level of war--political, strategic, operational, tactical. The SAS and SBS (Special Boat Service of the Royal Marine Commandos) in the Falklands War of 1982 illustrate this point in all aspects. British SOF functioned at all levels of this conflict, but the ground force commander regarded them as something of a "loose cannon on a rolling deck." The independent lines of communication from the SAS in the field to its regimental headquarters in Hereford, to Task Force headquarters outside London (Northwood), and even to the Prime Minister's office, did not make for close working relations in the South Atlantic.[30] The US experience in Vietnam, particularly with its cumbersome, even bizarre, command arrangements, did not support a desirable flexibility toward SOF employment. The challenge is for policymakers, regular military commanders, and SOF leaders to be willing to consider a range of missions.

Decisionmakers require open and flexible, yet educated and disciplined minds in order to comprehend the range of SOF options in conflicts of all kinds.

- *SOF should not be doctrinaire.* Beyond the tactical "tradecraft," and appropriate, if unremarkable, general wisdom (e.g., do not alienate a native population from which you need to find recruits), SOF must approach each conflict with a distinctive theory of victory; there should be no formulae specifying what ought to work.[31] The successful conduct of unconventional warfare requires a state of mind that can innovate nonstandard solutions to problems. The British SAS has demonstrated the enviable ability to reinvent itself from challenge to challenge as British security, and SAS organizational, interests require.

Skill in the tactical tradecraft of special operations--let alone the talismanic wearing of distinctively colored berets and

formal designation as "special" units--does not necessarily amount to true special operations capability. Rather than assigning the operational tasks of SOF to fit a traditional understanding of SOF capabilities, it is important that flexible SOF be tailored to novel operational tasks. One cannot demonstrate that special operations might have been conducted--and to what strategic effect--in particular conflicts, but it is probable that SOF are underexploited. Neither the special warriors themselves, nor their political and military sponsors, would appear to press SOF close to the limits of their strategic potential.

Unconventional warfare of all kinds and in all circumstances needs direction by unconventional minds.

- *SOF need to exploit surprise.* Surprise is critical for the tactical success of special operations, while "surprise effect," or the effect of surprise, can define the strategic utility of such operations. Politically expressive special operations rapidly lose their strategic value if SOF repeat them formulaically. For example, British Commandos in 1940-42 and Israeli SOF in the War of Attrition in 1968-69 unimaginatively repeated previous activities. People rapidly redefine what were once shocking surprises as regular occurrences. From the perspective of substate terrorist groups, the first few aircraft hijackings or bombs in shopping centers transmit an alarming message. Repetition of these missions, however, reveals minds lacking in either imagination or strategy.

Surprise is critical for tactical success, and surprise effect is vital for strategic utility, in special operations of all kinds and in all circumstances. Surprise effect is the answer to the quintessential question of the strategist, "So what?" The commander of SEAL Team Six, Captain William H. McRaven, advises wisely that "special operations forces do not generally have the luxury of attacking the enemy when or where he is unprepared. Such forces must attack in spite of enemy preparation. Surprise means catching the enemy off guard." [32] In other words, SOF typically must be content to strive to achieve only tactical surprise, because operational and strategic surprise often will be unattainable.

#### *Absence of Alternatives*

- *SOF prosper when conventional operations are prohibited by political factors, ruled out as too expensive, or otherwise are deemed inappropriate.* As a general rule, the Israeli government has denied the Israeli Defense Forces permission to violate borders and wreak damage upon Israel's foes in regular ways (and even when they were so licensed, the results have not always been those expected--e.g. Lebanon in 1982). Special operations have been politically mandated as the only type of permissible military action. In Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in the 1960s, Washington prohibited taking the ground war to the enemy in the North or in other sanctuaries (Laos and Cambodia), resulting in SOF being, by default, the leading instrument of choice. In the "confrontation" with Indonesia in 1964-66, Britain resorted to stealthy, precise, and low-profile special operations to win the war in the jungle. London was adamant against initiating large-scale initiatives against Indonesia. [33] Harold Wilson's Labour government strove both to maintain conventional deterrence of major escalation by Indonesia and to deny Jakarta the evidence of British provocative acts that might require Indonesia to escalate in order to save face.

Conflicts on all scales and of all kinds can provide unattractive conditions for the use of regular forces, so that special operations are promoted to be the instrument of choice. Conventional action may promise a Pyrrhic victory, if victory at all, or simply may lack the reach and agility to do the job.

- *Special operations prosper in conflicts suited to the skills of SOF.* There are conflicts for which large-scale conventional operations are all but irrelevant because the enemy lacks vulnerability to such actions. Although SOF can play useful roles in virtually all conflicts at all levels, there are particular challenges to which conventional forces, functioning conventionally, can provide no answers. These are the conflicts one will lose if a special operations mentality does not guide the principal thrust of one's efforts. Examples abound but must include the French and American wars in Indochina, the emergencies in Malaya and Borneo involving the British, and most antiterrorist and some anti-drug-trafficking operations. (This is not to deny that opposition to terrorists can, and sometimes should, take the form of conventional threats and punitive action against their sponsors.)

This somewhat circular point--special operations will be demanded when the prowess of SOF is at a premium--does not contradict the earlier claim that the *absolute* value of special operations to the country may be the greatest in mid- and high-intensity conflicts. The *relative* strategic value of special operations will be at its highest in those contexts wherein SOF provide a unique effectiveness, which is to say in low-intensity conflicts, and in *coups de main*

(including raids).[34]

- *SOF prosper in a strategic context of diminished conventional options.* Just as nations sometimes conduct special operations as an expedient pending the readiness of large-scale conventional forces, so radical peacetime reductions in conventional forces should increase interest in the strategic value of SOF. If there is merit in the old saying that necessity is the mother of invention, then a relative poverty in brute-force options should encourage a country to "plan and act smarter." Of course, an America convinced that it will enjoy "dominant battlespace knowledge" for the near-immaculate conduct of precise, information-led, "networked," conventional war for the next half century or so may well be an America underpersuaded of the cost-effectiveness of irregular operations.[35]

### *Enemy Vulnerabilities*

- *SOF need an enemy with exploitable vulnerabilities.* A vulnerability is not a vulnerability if it is not exploitable. Every combatant has vulnerabilities which SOF theoretically could exploit. The reasons why an apparent vulnerability to SOF attention may be only theoretical, however, include: political guidance prohibiting the relevant kinds of special operations, lack of technical assets to execute the special operations, or weakness in the conventional forces which must exploit special operations success.

This condition applies to all kinds of conflicts.

- *SOF benefit from a stupid enemy unable or unwilling to learn from its mistakes, or unable to reduce its vulnerabilities.* In World War II, the Third Reich could not repress its repulsive, racist nature, despite the German army's tradition of brutal professional self-criticism. The tactical excellence encouraged by the self-criticism could not negate the geostrategic conditions that supported special operations by the Grand Alliance. While Germany could not defend everything, it could ensure that the strategic effect of unpleasant surprises achieved by Allied special operations would be in the tolerable range.

The ability of the enemy to learn from its own or others' mistakes is relevant to the strategic utility of special operations in all conflicts. In every case, however, there are limits to the degree to which combatants can protect their war effort from special operations.

- *SOF fare well when they can turn an enemy's strength into a weakness.* The state of economic, social, and political development of a country has a significant bearing upon its vulnerability to special operations of all kinds (including political or psychological warfare). The growth of industrial society in the last century both expanded the potential scope for special operations, while--for a period--denying useful targets. Both the ethos of the period (notions of gentlemanly conduct, which lingered on in the US Army into World War II), and the sheer distribution of value among the products of industrial-age warfare, helped eclipse the special operations mentality. To risk exaggeration, the great contending coalitions of 1914-18 were virtually "special operations-proof" in Europe. The political warfare to which all parties eventually resorted was selectively effective only over the long haul of three and four years of war.[36] The contrast between the two world wars could hardly be more stark. Sir Douglas Haig did not fear for his safety from German commandos (the Germans had no commandos in that war, at least none that Otto Skorzeny would have recognized).[37] As our society pursues goals with little concern for the risk of malevolent action, so vulnerability to special operations can increase. The centralization and interdependencies that characterize modern society are features that attract the SOF planner and the terrorist--people who, to a notable degree, share skills and tactical outlook.[38]

In all classes of conflict, it is highly desirable to design special operations so that they turn enemy strength into weakness.

- *SOF can benefit from an oppressive enemy.* It is difficult to operate in your opponent's territory if the population is sympathetic to the enemy.[39] Given the power of national feelings over ideology, religion, or other belief systems, the relationship between an enemy state and its people in the operational theater usually defines the limits of special operations. Because an oppressive enemy will generate opposition to its rule, it follows that it is usually in our interest if the enemy is oppressive. Caveats include the considerations that enemy oppression may be so effective that it crushes local resistance, while SOF reconnaissance missions benefit from a quiet environment. Also, there is the moral consideration that the pursuit of our strategic interests may exacerbate oppression. In World War II the Germans

functioned as a highly oppressive occupying force. Even in Asia, where the Japanese Empire initially appealed with some success to anticolonial and racial sentiment, the Co-Prosperity Sphere rapidly revealed itself as colonialism by another name. In Southeast Asia in the 1960s, the United States faced an oppressive enemy, but the circumstances of that complex war did not allow for effective and lasting exploitation of that fact.

This condition applies strictly to the conduct of unconventional warfare in the enemy's rear.

- *SOF need a substantial and accessible enemy rear area in which to operate.* Occupation of foreign territory increases an enemy's vulnerability to a wide range of special operations. The acquisition of territory and subject peoples is a two-edged sword. While the German territorial gains of World War II provided economic benefit, they also set the stage for the Allied conduct of special operations.

Since the enemy generally has a rear area or hinterland, it is useful to note the possible opportunities for special operations opened by an enemy's territorial conquests.

### *Technological Assistance*

- *SOF need every advantage that technology can provide.* Strategic utility rests upon tactical feasibility, and tactical feasibility for handfuls of heroes who are hugely outnumbered requires technical assistance. Even minor deficiencies in equipment can have disproportionately large negative consequences for SOF who, virtually by definition, are acting at the edge of the envelope of military feasibility.

The lack of good roads before the 19th century--and later, in Eastern Europe--inhibited the rapid movement essential to deep insertion and extraction of SOF. The availability of aircraft, particularly helicopters, presented new options for employing those forces. Sealed roads, railroads, and aircraft do, of course, assist both sides in conflict. But on balance, modern means of transport assist SOF more than defending forces because the special warriors should be functioning stealthily, with the initiative, and therefore should be able to exploit the benefit of tactical surprise.

The novel availability of demolition-quality munitions in the third quarter of the 19th century also had positive implications for special operations (when political-military conditions again proved permissive of such operations). The invention of plastic explosives in Britain just before World War II greatly assisted sabotage in that conflict. Similarly, the introduction of fairly reliable portable radios improved distant cooperation and allowed command and control of deployed SOF that was not previously possible. Wingate's Chindit operations in 1943 and 1944 were built upon radio communication and air support including, in 1944, aerial insertion of units.[40]

The lack of large numbers of suitable aircraft contributed to the military failure of the French campaign in Indochina. Geographical conditions were somewhat friendlier in Algeria, where the availability of helicopters helped the French design effective tactics against the FLN, at least in the rural dimension of the struggle. French strategy and politics in that conflict are another matter entirely.

### *Tactical Competence*

- *Only SOF skilled in their trade should conduct special operations.* As a rule, tactical competence is fundamental for strategic utility. The extensive history of special operations in modern strategy repeatedly identifies the tactical qualities critical for success. Specifically, special operations need:

- a simple chain of operational command
- to be planned and executed in ways that are agile, flexible, and versatile
- excellent leadership qualities, initiative, and resourcefulness in all ranks[41]
- timely and accurate intelligence on mission targets
- secrecy, so as to preserve the tactical surprise mandated for operations that typically will be self-contained
- highly trained and suitably equipped personnel
- simple, fault-tolerant plans
- plans by some of the same people who will lead the missions

- to be coordinated carefully with supporting arms, consistent with the need for security[42]

The importance of tactical competence is so obvious that it requires no particular emphasis. Special operations will rarely be masterpieces in all respects. Among the enabling factors, the errors of the enemy, one hopes, can compensate for some deficiencies on our side. Also, tactical excellence on the part of SOF may find negative offset in weaknesses elsewhere in the military establishment. With reference respectively to undue planning time (which translates as a lack of currency of intelligence), lack of fault-tolerance in planning, and lack of coordination among different SOF elements and regular forces, one can cite--respectively--the abortive Son Tay POW rescue mission of 1970, Desert One in 1980, and Grenada in 1983.

Tactical competence is fundamental for the strategic utility of SOF in all conflicts. The probability that a special operation will fail when its soldiers make mistakes (and lack the skills to correct them), will vary with the relative ease of securing timely external support. Generally, such timely external support will not be reliably available.

- *SOF need intensive and comprehensive study of their targets.* US SOF prepared for Grenada with maps roughly on a par for inadequacy with those used by the British in Gallipoli. The contrast between the excellent intelligence available to French forces in Algeria and the almost always inadequate, or just nonexistent, intelligence available in Indochina illustrates the point. Special operations cannot succeed without good intelligence; in common with tactical surprise it is close to constituting an absolutely necessary condition for operational success. The thoroughness with which Soviet Spetsnaz studied their targets in Western Europe, including travel to actual targets, is the ultimate exemplar of this point. The excellent tactical intelligence required by SOF often can be provided with requisite confidence only by the SOF themselves. Whatever one makes of the frequently abominable best-selling novels of Richard Marcinko, his references to the "sneak and peek" necessities of special warfare ring decidedly true.

Again, this condition is fundamental and ubiquitous for success.

- *SOF need exceptional human and material assets.* By definition it should be true that even in the largest military establishments, SOF, broadly defined, will not number more than the low thousands (preferably the high hundreds), and the number usually will be much fewer. It follows that the diversion of money, men, and material to SOF is modest. The high-risk, small-scale, and frequently self-contained character of special operations means that small economies in resources tend to have distressingly large consequences at the "sharp end." For example, weaknesses in radio equipment have been exceedingly hazardous to SOF (witness the SAS experience in the Falklands, where the risk of detection by Argentinean direction-finding was significant). For an older example, the French faced the dilemma in Indochina that although they could insert SOF raiding parties deep into Vietminh territory, the absence of long-range helicopters meant that they could not extract them rapidly (or, generally, at all).

Very small forces engaged in high-risk operations of war cannot afford weak links in people or equipment. The compensation of additional mass is not available to SOF; quality is key. For SOF, more does not mean better. Resisting a mindless growth in the size of SOF, in parallel with the no-less-important need to resist inappropriate missions, or "mission creep," is essential for maintaining the quality of this military instrument.[43]

- *SOF require coordination with conventional operations, or with the activities of the police.* It was a strength of the Soviet conduct of its war with Germany that they coordinated partisan and Spetsnaz activities with the relevant "Fronts" and field armies. The finest hour of the SAS and the OSS came in France in June 1944, when raiders, often working in conjunction with the French Resistance, turned large segments of the German rear into "bandit country." [44] For negative examples, the French in Indochina demonstrated how not to coordinate regular and irregular forces, while the United States was bound to fail to coordinate special forces and regular operations in Vietnam because it lacked both a clear political aim and--necessarily--an overall strategy of victory.

There are few conflicts wherein SOF do not need coordination with either regular military units or the police. In most cases the quality of cooperation is critical to the outcome of the conflict.

### *Reputation*

- *It is most desirable that SOF should be feared.* A country cannot make a powerful political point with the menace of

discrete action if SOF are incompetent or politically chained. Credibility is the key. That credibility pertains not only to the tactical skills of the SOF, but also to the political willingness of a government to unleash those warriors in action.

Deterrence is always uncertain, particularly in cases of low- and mid-intensity conflict, where the inherent credibility of US action is not substantial. Nonetheless, a reputation for tactical effectiveness in special operations, and for political willingness to unleash SOF, will maximize the chances for deterrence to work.

### *History*

. *Special operations need to be launched at the right time.* Strategic utility is a function of historical context as much as tactical accomplishment. Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989), for example, when viewed as special operations, acquired much of their significance from historical timing. Grenada, notwithstanding the tactical glitches, made a powerful political statement about the role of the United States in the world. Operation Just Cause in Panama had its strategic significance much enhanced because of its timing with the dissolution of the Soviet hegemonic empire. Tactical matters aside, the Panama invasion reminded everyone that there was still a superpower in the world (would that Saddam Hussein had been paying attention!).

This historical condition does not apply to special operations in high- or mid-intensity conflicts. The relevance of this claim is for special operations in peacetime.

. *Special operations need to be studied as integral to the strategic history of conflict and war.* As military history isolates special operations from mainstream treatment, its study is unlikely to yield knowledge about the strategic utility of those operations. What special operations and SOF need is better strategic history, not more operational narratives.[45] The vast literature on special operations does little to advance understanding either of their utility in war as a whole, or of the conditions that promote their strategic value.[46]

. *SOF need to engage the strategic imagination of historians.* It is difficult to learn from what did *not* happen in history. History is a thoroughly open-ended story of courses of action not taken, and hence of consequences that failed to ensue, as well as of the unique sequence of events which actually did unfold.[47] History-as-possibility can be employed as a framework for the generation of special operations might-have-beens. This author is impressed by the systematic underemployment of SOF in modern strategic history.

### **Special Operations Forces as a Strategic Asset**[48]

Truly it has been said that if you focus upon details, none of your errors will be small. But it is the details which both point the way to appropriate principles and translate theory into practice. We can identify in a general way the conditions that favor success in special operations. Ideas about conditions for success, however, require historical specificity for applicability: type of conflict, character of missions, time, and adversaries. The conditions specified in this article as tending to promote success in the conduct of special operations can be stated as recommendations for policy. Special operations forces need:

- to fit the demands of policy
- a tolerant political and strategic culture
- political and military patrons who understand their strategic value
- to be assigned feasible objectives
- to be directed by a strategically functioning defense establishment
- flexibility of mind, and particularly an unconventional mentality
- to provide unique strategic services
- to find and exploit enemy vulnerabilities
- technological assistance
- tactical competence (preferably tactical excellence)
- a reputation for effectiveness

- a willingness to learn from history

These are not trivial conditions, but the potential benefits to national security of a first-class SOF instrument are not trivial either.

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## NOTES

I am grateful to James Kiras, Kevin O'Brien, and Alastair Mackenzie, with the Centre for Security Studies at the University of Hull, for their helpful comments. Also I wish to thank the members of the 1998 SPEC OPS course at the Naval Post Graduate School, Monterey, Calif., upon whom I tested many of these ideas. The argument in this article has grown out of a chapter prepared for Colin S. Gray, ed., *Special Operations: What Succeeds and Why? Lessons of Experience*, Phase I, Final Report (Fairfax, Va.: National Institute for Public Policy, June 1992). My analysis, then and now, is heavily indebted to historical studies by Dale Andrade, David Charters, Dore Gold, Williamson Murray, Sam Pope, Douglas Porch, and Michael Vlahos.

1. Quoted most recently in Robin Neillands, *In the Combat Zone: Special Forces since 1945* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), p. 1.

2. These claims are presented and developed in Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), ch. 8, "The Strategic Utility of Special Operations: Lessons of History." I argue that special operations forces (SOF) also can: advance innovation in military equipment and methods, boost public morale, showcase military competence, reassure the public that action is being taken, humiliate the enemy, function in ways that maximize the likelihood that unwanted escalation of a conflict will not occur, and help the political future of important territories.

3. Definitions of special operations abound, most of which are unsatisfactory. A superior definition has been offered by Maurice Tugwell and David Charters. Special operations are: "*Small-scale, clandestine, covert or overt operations of an unorthodox and frequently high-risk nature, undertaken to achieve significant political or military objectives in support of foreign policy*" (emphasis added). "Special Operations and the Threats to United States Interests in the 1980's," in *Special Operations in U.S. Strategy*, ed. Frank R. Barnett, B. Hugh Tovar, and Richard H. Shultz (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1984), p. 35. The emphasis added to key terms in the quotation helps to underline the high-calorific value of this particular formula. Alternatively, there is merit in the usefully terse definition suggested by John Arquilla: Special operations are "that class of military (or paramilitary) actions that fall outside the realm of conventional warfare during their respective time periods." "Introduction," to John Arquilla, ed., *From Troy to Entebbe: Special Operations in Ancient and Modern Times* (Lanham, Md.: Univ. Press of America, 1996), pp. xv-xvi.

4. Special operations in the form of raids may be conducted more for the sake of raising public morale at home, and impressing neutral opinion, than for any direct damage they can inflict on the enemy. British Commando raids on the coast of German-occupied Europe in 1940-41 had no great intended military significance, but they did speak usefully to the public sentiments that Carl von Clausewitz noted as important in his trinitarian analysis of the character of war. Clausewitz associated "the passions that are to be kindled in war" primarily, though not exclusively, with "the people" ("the commander and his army," and "the government," are the other elements in the trinity). Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 89.

5. A crude tripartite categorization of conflict into high, medium, or low intensities is employed in this article strictly for the sake of ease and clarity of terse communication. The author believes that all conflict is of high-intensity for those on the sharp end. Conflicts can vary in scale, among other principles for discrimination, but not really in intensity. I explain my dissatisfaction with the still popular intensity discriminator in my *Modern Strategy* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford Univ. Press, forthcoming 1999).

6. The principal, but not exclusive, forward-looking focus of this article is upon SOF in US defense policy and strategy. Some of the contemporary expectations for information-led American regular conventional forces can appear to imply less, rather than more, strategic room for special operations. I am skeptical of the strategic promise of technology to enhance the power of regular conventional forces in low-intensity conflicts. For some commentaries

skeptical of the historical significance of technology for strategic effectiveness, see Williamson Murray, "Thinking About Revolutions in Military Affairs," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 16 (Summer 1997), pp. 69-76; Colin S. Gray, "RMAs and the Dimensions of Strategy," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 17 (Autumn/Winter 1997-98), pp. 50-54; and A. J. Bacevich and Brian Sullivan, eds., *The Limits of Technology in Modern War*, forthcoming.

7. Notwithstanding the tradition of irregular combat bequeathed to the US Army by noticeably irregular frontiersmen-combatants, that Army typically was not a sharp instrument for frontier warfare. America's premier historian of the frontier Army in the 19th century, Robert M. Utley, has written as follows: "[George Armstrong] Custer never thought like an Indian. With most of his peers, therefore, he was doomed to fight Indians with the techniques of conventional warfare. For a century the army fought Indians as if they were British or Mexicans or Confederates. Each Indian war was expected to be the last, and so the generals never developed a doctrine or organization adapted to the special problems posed by the Indian style of fighting." Robert M. Utley, *Cavalier in Buckskin: George Armstrong Custer and the Western Military Frontier* (Norman: Univ. of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 206. Two other books by Utley are especially relevant: *Frontiersmen in Blue: The United States Army and the Indian, 1848-1865* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967); and *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1891* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

8. Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), remains the basic work.

9. Antoine Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1992; rpt. of 1862 ed.), esp. pp. 70-71.

10. I am thankful to Michael Vlahos for the inspiration and development of this intriguing idea. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), has some useful thoughts on related matters.

11. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986); Michael A. Hennessy, *Strategy in Vietnam: The Marines and Revolutionary Warfare in I Corps, 1965-1972* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); and Lewis Sorley, "To Change a War: General Harold K. Johnson and the PROVN Study," *Parameters*, 28 (Spring 1998), 93-109.

12. See David Jablonsky, *Churchill, The Great Game and Total War* (London: Frank Cass, 1991).

13. I am grateful to Kevin O'Brien of the Centre for Security Studies, University of Hull, for emphasizing to me the tactical, operational, and strategic excellence of the (apartheid-era) South African and (white-minority) Rhodesian SOF in their conduct of irregular warfare in the 1970s and 1980s. The excellence of South African and Rhodesian special operations activity appears historically all the more poignant, even ironic, given the hopelessness of the political causes that those special operations sought to advance. See Barbara Cole, *The Elite: The Story of the Rhodesian Special Air Service* (Transkei, S.A.: Three Knights Publishing, 1984).

14. Tony Geraghty, *Who Dares Wins: The Story of the SAS, 1950-1982* (revised ed.; Glasgow: Fontana, 1983), pp. 291-92.

15. Alfred H. Paddock, Jr., *U.S. Army Special Operations, Its Origins: Psychological and Unconventional Warfare, 1941-1952* (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1982), p. 159.

16. I am grateful to Colonel Alastair Mackenzie of the Centre for Security Studies, University of Hull, for his insight on this matter.

17. Martin Alexander, "The Algerian War, 1956-1962," in *Limits of Technology in Modern War*, ed. A. C. Bacevich and Brian Sullivan, forthcoming, is outstanding.

18. See Peter Paret, *French Revolutionary Warfare from Indochina to Algeria* (London: Pall Mall, 1964); and Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare*, trans. Daniel Lee (New York: Praeger, 1964). While six elite parachute battalions of the French army were losing their positional struggle at Dien Bien Phu in March-May 1954, Colonel Trinquier was

waging a highly successful brand of irregular warfare far behind Vietminh lines. See Howard R. Simpson, *Dien Bien Phu: The Epic Battle America Forgot* (Washington: Brassey's, 1994), pp. 170-71.

19. It does not really matter for the integrity of the argument in the text, but I believe that I owe readers explicit acknowledgment of my belief that the United States both could, and should, have won in Vietnam in the 1960s. The Kennedy Administration should not have "given" Laos to the PAVN, a policy decision that all but foreclosed upon a successful defense of South Vietnam; the Johnson Administration should not have exaggerated the danger of Chinese intervention; and--above all else--the US Army and US Marine Corps, *the* agents of strategic effectiveness, should have waged the war on the ground far more effectively than they did. At the present time, to risk overstatement, apologists for the US armed forces in Vietnam are finding scapegoats in Washington for the operational failure of America's warriors in the 1960s. There is no doubt that politically "the best and the brightest" of America, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff appointed to advise them, failed the country abysmally in the 1960s. Anyone still confused on that point can be educated by H. R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997). The trouble is that McMaster is both right and wrong. He is right to emphasize the responsibility of the players and nonplayers in Washington. But by and large the war was not lost in Washington, it was lost by the US Army in Vietnam. The Army is in some danger of pointing to Robert S. McNamara as the scapegoat for its sins against the eternal verities of war in Vietnam, much as German generals after World War II were prone to blame the *führer* for all the failures of German arms.

20. See Shelby L. Stanton, *Green Berets at War: U.S. Army Special Forces in Southeast Asia, 1950-1975* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1985); Francis J. Kelly, *The Green Berets in Vietnam, 1961-71* (Washington: Brassey's [US], 1991); and, especially, John L. Plaster, *SOG: The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997). The Studies and Observation Group (SOG)--actually Special Operations Group--was licensed in December 1963 to wage covert raiding war throughout, and I mean *throughout*, Southeast Asia (including Burma and China). The strategic problem with SOG's OPLAN-34A (15 December 1963) missions--unlike the static border defense duties that were to absorb too much Army SOF capability--was that although they were generally superbly conducted, they were launched in support of an overall war effort that was hopelessly misconceived in Saigon and Washington.

21. British Major General Julian Thompson explains eloquently why true SOF units should be kept small in size. In time of war military commanders are unhappy with the practice of withholding the "super warriors" of SOF from the ongoing battle, while those warriors themselves soon have serious morale problems if they are withheld from combat pending the occasional arrival of "silver-bullet" type missions. Needless to add, perhaps, the larger the special warfare capability, the more likely it is to be sucked into demanding missions of a fairly regular kind. No army can afford to keep large numbers of its better warriors sitting on the sidelines. Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of War Behind Enemy Lines* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1998), ch. 1, is first-rate. Contrary to appearances perhaps, I am not confused about the proper distinction to be drawn among special operations forces, elite light infantry raiding forces (e.g., American Rangers and Airborne, British Royal Marine Commandos and the Parachute Regiment), and special purpose forces. Britain's SAS recruits heavily from the Parachute Regiment, but--paradoxically--most soldiers in the latter are temperamentally and intellectually ill-equipped to be practitioners of "special" warfare.

22. See Ajay Singh, "Time: The New Dimension in War," *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 10 (Winter 1995-96), pp. 56-61; and Gray, *Modern Strategy*, ch. 1.

23. Lieutenant General William G. Yarborough, quoted in Barnett, Tovar, and Shultz, eds., *Special Operations in U.S. Strategy*, p. 299.

24. See Ronald H. Spector, *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (New York: Free Press, 1985), pp. 245-46, 560.

25. The UDTs were the forerunner of today's Navy SEALs. See Roy Boehm and Charles W. Sasser, *First SEAL* (New York: Pocket Books, 1997).

26. "Covert operations . . . were not taught at West Point or Annapolis and were not within the conceptual schema of the armed forces establishment." G. J. A. O'Toole, *Honorable Treachery: A History of U.S. Intelligence, Espionage,*

and *Covert Action from the American Revolution to the CIA* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991), p. 403. Recent improvement in the political fortune of US SOF is ably chronicled in Susan L. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1997).

27. After the fashion of the Byzantines, the British could sustain a huge empire with distinctly limited resources only by taking proper account of the strengths and weaknesses of a wide variety of "tribal" opponents. Just as Byzantine military doctrine in the early centuries looked beyond the need to understand the other superpower, the Persian Empire, so the British came to recognize that maintenance of their global empire required regular British soldiers to be able to counter the way of war of a myriad of irregular foes. The unofficial doctrinal manual for the British imperial forces was Charles E. Callwell, *Small Wars: A Tactical Textbook for Imperial Soldiers* (London: Greenhill Books, 1990; rpt. of 3d ed., 1906). T. R. Moreman: "The British and Indian Armies and North-West Frontier Warfare, 1849-1914," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 20 (January 1992), 35-64; and *The Army in India and the Development of Frontier Warfare, 1849-1947* (London: Macmillan, 1998), are useful.

28. See Charles Miller, *Battle for the Bundu: The First World War in East Africa* (London: Purnell Book Services, 1976); and especially Kevin Brown, "The East African Campaign, 1914-1918," in Bacevich and Sullivan, eds., *Limits of Technology in Future War*.

29. See Michael Howard, *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871* (London: Methuen, 1979; first pub. 1961), pp. 249-56.

30. When necessarily small and equally necessarily elite SOF units are deployed to, or earmarked for, a war zone, they are likely to be a national-strategic asset, not an asset "chopped" to division, corps, or sometimes even unified level of command. In practice, what this means is that even if the "working level" of war has jobs to be done for which SOF are obviously well tailored--typically of a reconnaissance character--the SOF are apt to be "written out" because they are not a local asset reliably responsive to the local chain of military command.

31. See Ian F. W. Beckett, "The Study of Counter-Insurgency: A British Perspective," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 1 (April 1990), 46-53.

32. William H. McRaven, *SPEC OPS, Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1995), p. 17. Also see Arquilla, "Introduction," *Troy to Entebbe*, pp. xx-xxi.

33. David Charters, "Two Years of Living Dangerously: The Strategic Value of Special Operations to Britain in the 'Confederation' with Indonesia, 1964-1966," in Gray, ed., *Special Operations*, ch. 10.

34. Building on his Civil War histories (e.g., Herman Hathaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1983]), Archer Jones, *The Art of War in the Western World* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1987), esp. pp. 56-57, draws a useful distinction between "persisting" and "raiding" strategies. The raid has not received the scholarly attention that it merits, a condition that Samuel A. Southworth, ed., *Great Raids in History: From Drake to Desert One* (New York: Sarpedon, 1997), helps correct.

35. In a "Farewell Message," the outgoing Chairman of the JCS, General John M. Shalikashvili, suggested that "our margin of superiority over political foes is arguably greater than it has ever been in the past." *Joint Force Quarterly*, No. 17 (Autumn/Winter 1997-98), p. 1. Lurking none too far behind such a perilously prideful claim are such analyses as: John Arquilla, "The Strategic Implications of Information Dominance," *Strategic Review*, 22 (Summer 1994), 24-30; Joseph S. Nye, Jr., and William A. Owens, "America's Information Edge," *Foreign Affairs*, 75 (March-April 1996), 20-36; Stuart E. Johnson and Martin C. Libicki, eds., *Dominant Battlespace Knowledge* (2d ed.; Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, April 1996).; and James R. Blaker, *Understanding the Revolution in Military Affairs: A Guide to America's 21st Century Defense*, Defense Working Paper No. 3 (Washington: Progressive Policy Institute, January 1997).

36. See Paul A. Smith, Jr., *On Political Warfare* (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1989), ch. 5.

37. The stormtroopers who threatened to crack the Allies' Western Front in March 1918 were conducting a new form

of regular warfare by genuinely combined arms, they were not waging "special warfare," by any reasonable definition. See Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Change in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War*, Leavenworth Papers No. 4 (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Command and General Staff College, Combat Studies Institute, July 1981); Martin Samuels, *Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), esp. pp. 82-93; but see also the highly critical commentary in Holger Herwig, *The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918* (London: Arnold, 1997), ch. 10 (esp. p. 395). Erich Ludendorff's "stormtroopers," though technically speaking elite--specially selected, trained, and armed--were concentrated in attack formations within the 70 divisions earmarked for first-line, or rapid replacement, assault duty, as contrasted with the remainder of the German army, which was allotted merely defensive tasks. Even the most elite of the elite assault formations totaled thousands of stormtroopers. Leaping forward more than a quarter century, it was not the idea of Colonel Otto Skorzeny of the *Waffen* SS that thousands of soldiers should change the course of history. On the contrary, and following the lead of the excellent Yasotay, whose epigraph heads this article, "Skorzeny predicted that wide changes on the battlefield would open the way for ventures by which small groups of men might decide great issues" (Charles Foley, *Commando Extraordinary* [London: Longmans, Green, 1954], p. 189). Now that would be "special warfare" indeed. On the Skorzeny story, and legend, see Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny's Secret Missions: War Memoirs of the Most Dangerous Man in Europe* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1950).

38. Both terrorists and SOF must operate covertly behind enemy lines, necessarily in conditions of extreme personal hazard, and hugely outnumbered. From an exceedingly large literature on terrorism, Bruce Hoffman's recent book *Inside Terrorism* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998) is of outstanding quality. Because of the gross asymmetries between regular warfare and terrorism, SOF typically are the sharpest sword in the tactical and operational struggle to suppress terrorism. Massive regular conventional operations engaged in for the purpose of counterterrorism are apt to be no less massively counterproductive. It takes terrorists, at least counterterrorist SOF, to catch terrorists. Indeed, it could be said that SOF are "terrorists in uniform."

39. Classic illustration of this point pervades the best-selling memoirs of the most disastrous SAS mission of the Gulf War. Andy McNab, *Bravo Two Zero* (London: BCA, 1993).

40. Orde Wingate's "Training Notes" on "General Rules for the Employment of Deep Penetration in Modern Warfare," contained the thoughts that "the soldier of Deep Penetration must also realize to the full why it is that this method, which has never been practiced in previous wars, is now possible. He must realize that it is due to the introduction into warfare of two comparatively new factors, the full application of which was not realized until the present war. These factors are Wireless Telegraphy and Aircraft." Reprinted in Otto Heilbron, *Warfare in the Enemy's Rear* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 214.

41. John Arquilla's excellent "Introduction" to Arquilla, ed., *Troy to Entebbe*, pp. xxvii-xxviii, rightly emphasizes the importance of leadership in the warrior's world that is the context of special operations. However, Major General Julian Thompson reminds us that leadership can degenerate into a "cult of personality" that becomes dysfunctional. *War Behind Enemy Lines*, pp. 421-22.

42. This is a major conclusion of Edward N. Luttwak, Steven L. Canby, and David L. Thomas, *A Systematic Review of "Commando" (Special) Operations* (Potomac, Md.: C&L Associates, 24 May 1982). The potential clash with the principle of secrecy, above, is all too obvious. These nine principles, or points, bearing directly on the tactical qualities necessary, or at least highly desirable, for special operations success, can be checked readily enough against the modern history of special operations. In addition to Luttwak, Canby, and Thomas, *Systematic Review*, see especially: Gray, ed., *Special Operations*; Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, *Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993); Arquilla, ed., *Troy to Entebbe*; and McRaven, *SPEC OPS*.

43. Bearing in mind the principle that truly first-class warriors are always in short supply, and hence will be much in demand, the "proper" size for genuinely "special" SOF--see the definition of special operations in note 3--should risk error on the low rather than the high side. In his book *SPEC OPS*, SEAL Team 6 Commander McRaven presents six principles for special operations that are likely to be met only if the relevant SOF are kept modest in size. McRaven's six principles are: simplicity, security, repetition, surprise, speed, and purpose. The training, arming, and preparation of

large forces has to imperil the ability to adhere tightly to these six principles. It does *not* follow that if a few SOF are good, many more SOF have to be a lot better. As citizens of a large wealthy country, Americans can have difficulty appreciating the merit in the idea that small is beautiful--and more effective for SOF.

44. See David W. Hogan, Jr., *U.S. Army Special Operations in World War II* (Washington: Dept. of the Army, Center for Military History, 1992), pp. 47-58; and Thompson, *War Behind Enemy Lines*, ch. 10.

45. Special operations and SOF are not quite synonymous. Special operations may be "what SOF do," but they are not what only SOF do. Special operations can be executed by small numbers of soldiers from non-SOF units.

46. It is only a slight exaggeration to claim that there is no *strategic* literature in special operations and SOF. Whereas much of the scholarship on modern strategic studies is unduly strategic, with scant attention to vital detail--the highly theoretical literature on nuclear deterrence, for example--the enormous literature on special operations and SOF is almost entirely innocent of truly strategic commentary. We are told in excruciating detail about the heroic deeds of SOF, but we look in vain for other than casual judgments on the strategic utility of those deeds.

47. Niall Ferguson, ed., *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Picador, 1997), is a landmark.

48. I acknowledge a debt to the title of Chapter 24 in D. M. Horner, *SAS: Phantoms of the Jungle, A History of the Australian Special Air Service* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989), "The strategic asset, the SAS today."

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