

United States Special Operations Forces and the War on Terrorism

ANNA SIMONS and DAVID TUCKER

The War on Terrorism

Nine days after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, echoing and amplifying thoughts expressed by President George W. Bush, told the press that the war on terrorism:

is something that is very, very different from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Kosovo, Bosnia, the kinds of things that people think of when they use the word 'war' or 'campaign' or 'conflict'. We really, almost, are going to have to fashion a new vocabulary and different constructs for thinking about what it is we're doing.

A few days later he told reporters that the war would not begin with something comparable to a D-Day or end with something like the signing of surrender documents on the deck of the USS *Missouri*. 'The truth is,' the Secretary told reporters, 'this is a broad, sustained, multifaceted effort that is notably, distinctively different from prior efforts. It is by its very nature something that cannot be dealt with by some sort of a massive attack or invasion. It is a much more subtle, nuanced, difficult, shadowy set of problems.'¹

Comments like these about how different the war on terrorism would be from other wars have become less frequent as the war has progressed. The cause of this, perhaps, is that the most visible initial part of the war – the fighting in Afghanistan – turned out to have aims similar to those in many past wars. In Afghanistan the US-led coalition set out to defeat the armed forces of another government as the necessary condition for achieving its political objectives. Even the methods of fighting would have been familiar to students of recent conflicts. As in the war in Bosnia, for example, the coalition succeeded in Afghanistan by joining its air power to an indigenous ground force trained and supported by small numbers of American personnel. In Bosnia this was Croats trained by advisors from Military Professional Resources Incorporated, while in Afghanistan it has been members of the Northern Alliance supported by advisor-combatants from US Special Operations Forces (SOF).

The war on terrorism may see (and now has seen) other campaigns like the one waged in Afghanistan, at least in the sense that the military forces of two or more governments will clash, with the political outcome to be determined by the results of military action. Indeed, the President's new national security strategy leads us to believe that any government that supports terrorism or which employs it in pursuit of its political objectives would be a potential target for sustained military action. We should not be misled, however, by these more traditional aims into thinking that the Secretary and others were wrong in claiming that the war on terrorism will be different still. It both will and will not be given its dual objectives. The first of these is to deter. By demonstrating the ill-effects that come from supporting terrorists, we want to dissuade other governments from harboring or assisting them. This is, in part, what the campaign against the Taliban was meant to do. But the US also had to get through the Taliban to get at Al Qaeda, whose suppression is its second objective. To suppress Al Qaeda requires an altogether different set of tactics, techniques, and procedures. It also demands a different approach and strategy, one that differs from conventional war in the same way – and precisely because – Al Qaeda differs from the Taliban.

Unlike the Taliban, Al Qaeda is not a government and does not use military forces, or even irregular military forces, as a violent means of achieving its objectives. Instead, it employs terrorism. Terrorism is a more directly political and psychological struggle than war, since terrorists maneuver around a country's military shield and strike directly at the political process by targeting the noncombatants who carry on that process. As terrorism is a political and psychological struggle, so must countering it be. Destroying the Taliban or even the leaders of Al Qaeda will not necessarily mean the defeat of the terrorism they support, inspire, and organize. To defeat or suppress such terrorism requires us to deal with more than just the terrorists. In the same way they maneuver around our military shield to strike at the political process, we must maneuver around them to counter their political-psychological support. This is why suppressing Al Qaeda, and organizations like it is the 'subtle, nuanced, difficult, shadowy' problem Secretary Rumsfeld claimed it was.

From this perspective, the war in Afghanistan is only a small supporting operation in a much larger, more complex conflict. The fighting in Afghanistan destroyed Al Qaeda training bases – a conventional military objective – and increased intelligence about the organization sufficiently so that policemen in Europe and Southeast Asia could arrest terrorists and roll up their support networks, and financial analysts could identify bank accounts for closure. Equally important for success, though, was to do this in such a way as to not build additional support for the terrorists and win them more recruits, but to undermine them both in Afghanistan and around the world.

The idea that to succeed against terrorism you must do more than just catch terrorists should not be interpreted to mean that we must appeal to or even appease terrorists' potential supporters. On the contrary, intimidation and fear can be highly effective tools. Indeed, experience suggests that what is needed is some blend of cooption and coercion – or sticks and carrots – the proportion impossible to specify in the abstract but to be adjusted as the campaign goes forward, and according to the character of the target audience. One constraint on the use of intimidation and fear will be the tolerance of the home political community for harsh measures, a tolerance that may change as the terrorist campaign continues. In any event, whatever the mix of rewards and punishments, the point should be to direct them not only to the terrorists, but beyond them to their sources of support, just as the terrorists direct their violence around military forces to attack the political process directly.

One way to conceptualize this strategic struggle is to think in terms of an onion: At the innermost layer is the terrorist organization itself, comprised of strategists and operatives firmly committed to the cause. In the layer immediately surrounding the terrorists are their supporters who provide them logistical assistance and intelligence. They, in turn, are protected by a layer of sympathizers, who help fund and resource them. Then there are the neutrals. Finally, in the outer rings of the onion are individuals who oppose the terrorists, their methods, and their aims. If they are to operate, the terrorists must stay hidden and protected, for which they need their layers of supporters and sympathizers, but they must also convert the neutrals into sympathizers and supporters if they are to grow in strength. They generally do this through suasion, using argument or force. To counter them thus requires stripping away their sympathizers and supporters, and keeping neutrals from being intimidated or seduced. Given the political-psychological nature of this struggle, force may well play a role, but air campaigns, cruise missile strikes, and garrisons full of ground forces will hardly do the trick, and can ultimately prove counter-productive.

This is why the claim that the war on terrorism differs from other wars makes sense if it refers *not* to military engagements like those fought in Afghanistan, but to the less conventionally military efforts undertaken to suppress terrorism by the US over the past 30 years. In this struggle, sources of power other than military have long been used.² Indeed, economic and diplomatic sanctions, painstaking police work, and even the fitful effort to build an international consensus against terrorism have all proven more effective than the application of conventional military force. One could even say that the only things that distinguish the current, post-9/11 war from previous campaigns against terrorism are the intensity and seriousness with which the US government is now using these means. Commensurate with

what it claims to be at stake – the moral and political, if not physical, survival of the US, and the fate of Western civilization – the government's intensity and seriousness have reached the level at which one can reasonably, though not conventionally perhaps, speak of a war. We should be clear: in this war the relative unimportance of conventional military forces derives *not* from the limited interests at stake, but from the decision by the enemy to avoid the West's overwhelming conventional strength and pursue its objectives via other means.

In choosing these other means, Al Qaeda has placed itself in a tradition of political violence that has proven to be a longstanding and effective alternative to the power typically wielded by nation-states. In many respects, Al Qaeda's campaign is similar to national liberation struggles of the last 50 years, though it is more global and much less confined in scope. Al Qaeda wants to liberate the nation of Islam from its enthrallment to the West. To do this, it uses secrecy and violence to show its self-appointed enemies – the Western powers and, most importantly, the most powerful of those, the US – that they are not in fact so powerful; they can be taken by surprise and they can be hurt. Its methods are both purposive and instrumental, since in causing destruction Al Qaeda rallies support among those it wishes to liberate and also intimidates any among them who oppose its means or objectives.

Because in struggles such as the one engaged in with Al Qaeda, the enemy operates clandestinely in small groups, without the infrastructure of established military organizations, and can easily blend in with ordinary populations, intelligence is decisive. Yet, while our technical means of collection are unparalleled, impressive, and useful, they are also limited. Our best sources of intelligence are likely to be the layers of people among whom the terrorists hide. Gaining their cooperation and eliciting the intelligence they hold is another reason to work on the terrorists' supporters and sympathizers. Peeling them away will not only get us closer to the terrorists themselves, but will limit terrorists' operational effectiveness. It is here that SOF, especially, can help.

Special Operations Forces

Although the term 'Special Operations Forces' has been used interchangeably with 'Special Forces' (SF) since 9/11, and retired Marines have been identified in the media as having special operations expertise, SOF comprise specific units with a range of different, but sometimes overlapping capabilities. SOF units fall under the purview of the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), and include US Army Special Forces units (popularly referred to as Green Berets), US Army Rangers, special

mission units, the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, Civil Affairs (CA) and Psychological Operations forces (PSYOP); US Navy SEALs; US Air Force special tactics teams, and fixed wing and rotary wing air assets.

Overlap occurs both in the kinds of missions these units train for as well as the means by which they can infiltrate behind enemy lines. For instance, though the term SEAL itself stands for sea-air-land, SEALs are best known for their ability to engage in waterborne operations; all are scuba-qualified. Yet, certain SF soldiers are also scuba-qualified. Likewise, though some SF teams specialize in high altitude low opening (HALO) freefall military parachute techniques, SEALs, too, go through HALO training – which means they also can conduct airborne operations from high altitudes.

A rough division of labor exists within SOF despite such redundancies. Air Force combat controllers, for instance, can be attached to any SOF team in order to call in air strikes. Rangers specialize in seizing airfields. Special mission units train specifically for hostage rescue and anti-terrorism missions, while SF teams train to train others, and work primarily with foreign forces. Depending on the mission, the proximity of the closest available forces, and the desires of the local theater combatant commanders of several different units or teams might be called upon, but also, given their particular expertise clearly only certain SOF units will be assigned given tasks.

At some risk of distortion, we may say that SOF engage in two distinctly different, but complementary kinds of combat mission: those involving direct action, and those in support of unconventional warfare. Direct action missions are short-duration operations directed at specific targets, usually of high strategic or operational value. Direct action missions most commonly involve raids or ambushes, such as that undertaken in October 1993 in Mogadishu, Somalia. There the objective was to capture top lieutenants in General Mohamed Farah Aideed's militia. But the objective for a direct action mission may involve anything from rescuing hostages to eradicating an enemy force, position, or even drug lab.

Closely related to direct action, which can be undertaken in any kind of environment, is special reconnaissance. Soldiers engaging in special reconnaissance must stay well hidden in order to gather intelligence. During the 1991 Gulf War, for example, SF teams dug hide sites behind enemy lines in Iraq in order to monitor road traffic and troop movement. Typically, both direct action and special reconnaissance missions place an absolute premium on stealth. Whenever practicable, too, operators will practice direct action missions over and over again, sometimes even building full-scale mock-ups of the target. Speed and accuracy on the ground are critical

to success. Also, direct action and special reconnaissance missions can (and sometimes must) be undertaken with no local support. This is clearly not the case, however, whenever either mission represents a smaller piece of a larger unconventional warfare effort.

There are various ways to think about unconventional warfare, and numerous different definitions have been offered over the years. According to the current US Department of Defense definition, unconventional warfare is:

A broad spectrum of military and paramilitary operations, normally of long duration, predominantly conducted by indigenous or surrogate forces who are organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by an external source. It includes guerrilla warfare and other direct offensive, low visibility, covert, or clandestine operations, as well as the indirect activities of subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, and evasion and escape. Also called UW.³

Members of SF often boil UW down to any effort in which they work by, through, and with indigenous forces. From an SF perspective, the goal of UW is to help win a war by working with – as opposed to neutralizing or fighting around – local populations. UW represents a classically indirect, and ultimately local, approach to waging warfare. It demands that efforts at all levels – strategic, tactical, and operational – be coordinated. To work with indigenous forces, SOF must win their trust. To do this, they live with them, eat with them, and share the same living conditions. They also take the opportunity to study local practices and learn social preferences. Building trust invariably takes time, but the payoff comes in a better understanding of the operational environment, and the ability to solicit the kind of solid intelligence that enables operations.

Civic action is closely related to, indeed, an unavoidable part of such efforts. According to the late Major General Edward G. Lansdale, who claimed to have coined the term in the Philippines in 1950, civic action describes soldiers' 'brotherly behavior':

... the soldiers behave as the brothers and protectors of the people in their everyday military operations, replacing the arrogance of the military at highway checkpoints or in village searches with courteous manners and striving to stop the age-old soldier's habit of stealing chickens and pigs from the farmers... The Philippine Army's legal assistance to farmers in land courts, the new start in life given to residents of San Luis, and the care of civilian casualties in military hospitals were all part of civic action.⁴

Certainly, US soldiers sent abroad appear to intuitively understand the value in helping improve living conditions in their immediate vicinity. It earns them gratitude, if not friends. This becomes key to any UW effort because friends will not let friends get hurt. Civic action thus doubles as force protection. It also helps dry up the sea of supporters in which opposing forces swim by providing a more stabilized, improved, and secure local environment. The safer and more secure citizens feel, the more committed they become to staying secure. The exchange relationship is such that the fewer the population's causes for legitimate grievance, the fewer inroads insurgents, guerrillas, or terrorists can make. Or, to rephrase this, by implicitly trading on security for local assistance, civic action can yield militarily useful results, particularly in the realm of intelligence. But here, too, there is a catch. What comprises civic action in a particular locale can usually only be determined once units are on site. To identify the most pressing local needs, and determine what will earn a team the most bang for its buck invariably takes time. Sometimes SF teams have this luxury. Sometimes, Civil Affairs (CA) teams step in instead.

In a certain sense, what CA forces attempt is civic action writ large. CA forces emerged in World War II to administer areas captured or liberated by US forces before civilian administrators were present to take over. Following the war, CA continued to administer Germany, while today CA units typically engage in activities designed to allay civilian fears, address civilian concerns, ameliorate local conditions, and mitigate the effect of military operations. Essentially, CA personnel help stabilize, regularize, or improve civil-military relations in the wake of a US military presence. They accomplish this by engaging in dialogue and what amounts to humanitarian assistance.

Closely linked with CA, Psychological Operations (PSYOP) shape, manage, manipulate, and transmit information. PSYOP's mission is to induce or reinforce attitudes favorable to US objectives, and destroy enemy morale. To do this, PSYOP forces must understand the underlying structure of human communication and the particularities of a given culture. PSYOP's writ is not to deceive, but to selectively present the truth. It does so most famously with leaflet drops and radio or loudspeaker broadcasts. During the 1991 Gulf War, for example, bomb loads dropped from B-52s followed by leaflets warning Iraqi soldiers that they would be next produced over 80,000 surrendered Iraqi troops.

Together, SF, CA, and PSYOP comprise what we might call the UW complex and seem ideally suited to affect those layers of support and potential support that terrorists need. Their skills are particularly useful when we are engaged operationally in a country, as in Afghanistan, but can be equally useful for training and advising indigenous forces to take on

these same tasks themselves, as SOF has done since October 2001 with Filipino forces who are fighting Abu Sayyaf (a terrorist group in the Philippines with links to Al Qaeda). In both cases, SOF involvement has helped generate local knowledge and intelligence, which is not to suggest that other military forces have no role in the war on terrorism. It is only to argue that SOF seem specially well suited for UW, both in its classic sense and as is now required by this broader, global war.

However, there are at least two sets of problems with the use of SOF as they are currently configured. One set involves SOF's relations with other military forces. The second has to do with relations among elements of SOF themselves.

The Conventional–Unconventional Rub

Most definitions of UW, to include the current Department of Defense (DOD) definition, treat it as a method, and as a means to an end, with no end explicated. Worse, they do not even describe UW as a *preferred* method under certain conditions. Here, then, is a chronic source of confusion for anyone outside the SOF community. First, if UW is just one among a series of possible approaches, any of which can be applied regardless of conditions, then why would a conventional commander ever choose UW? Most would not. Second, because it is methods, not goals, that distinguishes UW, it becomes all too easy to conflate unconventional *methods* with unconventional *warfare*.

We see this most vividly, perhaps, in reactions to what has been hailed as the most unconventional aspect of the war in Afghanistan – the triple marriage among SF and combat controllers on the ground, Northern Alliance forces, and air assets. This represents only a fraction of what SOF are capable of, and a full-fledged unconventional warfare should involve. Yet, fascination with such efforts and musings that they could herald a paradigmatic shift in warfare merely reinforce the Pentagon's long-standing preoccupation with rapidly achieved, measurable effects. That this happens to be the antithesis of the attitude necessary for supporting the slow indirect methods of unconventional warfare *should* also give us pause, but is not surprising. Unfortunately, the failure of UW to mesh with the Pentagon's preferences is a recurring phenomenon.

For instance, the idea to join SOF to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan came from the CIA – not from military.⁵ Then, following the Taliban's defeat, the military failed to capitalize on the UW skills that helped topple the government, and that then could have been directed at building support among other segments of the Afghan population in order to acquire intelligence and limit the resources going to Taliban and Al

Qaeda remnants. As soon as conventional army forces arrived in the country, and the army gained control over SOF, hunting down Taliban and Al Qaeda became the priority, despite the fact that intelligence was so scarce that these operations turned up little. Conventionalization also intensified. One of the most visible, and widely reported, instances of this was that SF soldiers were ordered to shave off their beards, even though they had grown them both to establish rapport with the locals and to avoid being recognized at a distance as outsiders.

It turns out that much of what occurred in Afghanistan as headquarters elements and conventional commanders arrived on scene was a replay of what happened over three decades ago in Vietnam.⁶ There, SOF were able to operate in an innovative or, at least, unconventional fashion when they worked for the CIA. When the army gained control of their operations, it directed them away from working with and protecting the Vietnamese population toward hunting for and engaging the enemy.⁷

There are two ways to explain this penchant to conventionalize, and why it recurs.⁸ First, perspective is everything. From a conventional point of view the order of preference for how to wage any war is via armed force – more is better. From a conventional perspective, armed finesse (UW) and unarmed finesse (CA and PSYOP) may be useful, but only in supporting roles. From an SF perspective, on the other hand, armed finesse is preferable because less can be more. If applied long or skillfully enough armed finesse can even win certain kinds of wars, particularly if armed force and unarmed finesse are used only when needed. Of course, from a CA or PSYOP point of view, when people's minds can be changed or their lives sufficiently improved, finesse trumps force, which may not need to be applied at all.

A second explanation for the tendency to conventionalize is that the less well understood, appreciated, historically proven, or *immediate* a unit's impact, the more skeptical of it most outsiders will be, and the easier it is to rely instead on the tried and true application of force. Nor are such biases completely ungrounded. Waging war by finesse is inherently tricky, in all senses. Or, to return to CA and PSYOP: what they can do represents far more of a gamble than putting steel on target. The catch is, of course, that not all targets are shootable, and where they are not armed finesse can play a role. Nor do all problems have quick, direct action fixes. Indeed, the essence of unconventional warfare is that there is no rapid-fire solution, which is something that SF teams experientially understand. But even so, their knowing this in principle can still be overcome by the seductiveness of direct action, particularly when this is what allies on the ground and commanders at the top clamor for.

SOF's Own Pecking Order

If conventional commanders do not know what to do with SOF, would SOF do better if it were in charge? Interestingly, SOCOM reportedly declined to take the lead in the war on terrorism when it was offered. Perhaps because SOCOM has yet to orchestrate a war, its own leadership felt it could not run one as effectively as a conventional command could. However, something else may also be at work. In theory, as we have argued, it would appear that SOF has unique capabilities not duplicable by other units, and that SOF as a whole should be even stronger than the sum of its stand-alone parts. However, until now, SOF has never had to *act* as a whole, utilizing the full range of its capabilities from quick reaction direct action through years-long UW. Because it has not, the command may be haunted by the fact that not all of its parts work well together, for members of SOF themselves harbor certain prejudices that run counter to a fully unified set of forces.

The tensions are clearest between CA and PSYOP forces, on the one hand, and SF in addition to all direct action-oriented units on the other. Although both CA and PSYOP are critical to winning hearts and minds in a UW environment, neither is considered a first choice assignment by many special operators given the overwhelmingly non-combatant nature of such work. Also helping to further marginalize CA is the fact that most members are reservists. Although CA units are among the most frequently deployed, only one of five is an active duty unit. Typically, members of active duty forces do not regard reservists as their equals. Also, civic action is rarely a unit's first priority. Nor can it be in a conflict zone. Consequently, no matter how pressing civic action can feel once a unit is on the ground, it is often treated as incidental or an afterthought in the planning process. Even in the one simulated UW exercise all SF soldiers attend ('Robin Sage'), civic action occurs last, only after all other phases of the exercise have been completed. Unfortunately, this, along with other factors, would appear to affect attitudes in SF toward CA.

PSYOP also carries a stigma of being second-class. If CA is too touchy-feely, PSYOPers, who pride themselves on their ability to influence and manipulate, are not to be trusted. It does not help that there is a strong preference in SOF for common sense over book smarts, or that PSYOPers are often regarded as nerds who do little more than cook up hair-brained schemes. Skepticism about PSYOP actually has deep roots. Tensions existed during World War II between those responsible for collecting information and generating propaganda on the one hand, and field operatives, on the other. These splits later resurfaced in both the CIA and in SF as SF was being formed. Some argued that UW *was* a psychological operation, therefore PSYOP should be SF's primary focus, and not just a supporting element.⁹

One result of these prejudices is that although their headquarters are co-located, their areas of expertise mutually supporting, and their division of labor completely complementary, SF, CA and PSYOP are informally divided by a pecking order: SF predominates. This is not just a consequence of SF's heft in terms of sheer numbers. It is, as we have just noted, also attitudinal. Indeed, SF's relationship with CA and PSYOP is much more akin to that between the conventional army and SF than SF itself might like to admit, and for many of the same reasons.

Perhaps the best way to sum these up is that the less conventionally military a unit's area of expertise appears to be – if it wages war by pamphlet rather than by applying force – the less the regard in which it tends to be held. Because an independently operating SF team would not and cannot apply overwhelming force, but acts as a 'force multiplier', conventional commanders rarely regard its impact as comparable to that of one of their own units. From an SF perspective, this is just the big Army preferring big over small.

Yet, SF soldiers themselves cannot seem to escape preferring *armed* to *unarmed* finesse. For instance, SF soldiers always make fun of Rangers, who are hyper-conventional and train for direct action missions. They operate at the opposite end of the spectrum from CA or PSYOP. From an SF perspective, Rangers clearly lack finesse – the joke is they also do not think. But when called on, Rangers will bring overwhelming firepower to bear. SF can thus afford to be in a kidding relationship with Rangers in the classic anthropological sense: Rangers are more junior, but no less worthy, and extremely useful in a firefight. This is not the kind of relationship that exists between SF and CA or PSYOP units.

Equally revealing is the relationship between SF and the Navy SEALs, who are more direct action-oriented but also operate in small teams. Here there is clear rivalry when it comes to what both units pride themselves on – armed finesse – and there is considerable chest-pounding, but again, there is mutual respect. Significantly, SEALs too share SF's skepticism toward PSYOP and they tolerate, but probably do not sufficiently appreciate, the value of CA.

SOF and the War on Terrorism

The attitudes that mark SOF's relations with the rest of the military, as well as SOF's internal relations, reveal a status hierarchy that exists in practice, but not on paper or in doctrine. In the same way conventional forces tend to misunderstand and insufficiently appreciate what SOF can do, within SOF, those who practice direct action tend to misunderstand and appreciate insufficiently what UW can do, just as those who practice UW fail to fully understand and appreciate CA and PSYOP.

Identifying the tenaciousness and pervasiveness of this hierarchy is important for understanding the problem the military, including SOF, will have in conducting the war on terrorism because what the war on terrorism, as opposed to wars on nation-states, requires is the opposite of what the hierarchy prefers. The hierarchy prefers conventionalization, direct action, and armed force over armed and then unarmed finesse. The war on terrorism requires the use of CA, PSYOP, their civilian equivalents, and SF teams tasked to do UW. Success in this war will require an emphasis on winning local cooperation. Conventional and direct action forces are least likely to elicit this, while CA, PSYOP and UW forces are most likely to. Meanwhile, the intelligence they gather will make direct action more effective and ideally, over time – and as we succeed – less necessary.

The prejudices that favor force over finesse are so entrenched, however, that it will be difficult if not impossible to overcome them in the near term. Whether we should try at all, of course, depends on our assessment of the historical significance of the current war on terrorism. If it is an aberration and if, in 20 years, confronting China will be Washington's biggest national security challenge, then we should probably encourage efforts to transform the military to make it a faster, more powerful, more flexible version of its current self. If, on the other hand, the war on terrorism signals an epochal change in the way humans use violence against each other, then that transformation of the military should include an effort to ensure that both armed and unarmed finesse are accorded equal status with armed force, and that it is well understood how and why each should be used. An interdependent division of labor such as this would truly represent a revolution in military affairs.

Over the long term, we will likely develop something that approximates a range of reactive and preemptive capabilities, since conventional and unconventional threats are guaranteed to persist. For the present, in the immediate context of the war on terrorism, it will likely take the civilian leadership to intervene in order to shake up the military's attitudinal hierarchy. To the extent that it is being reported in the media, intervention already appears to be underway, although most of the friction between the civilian leadership in the Pentagon and the military seems to center on how to streamline, speed up, and resize the conventional forces, and not on better integrating unconventional capabilities into the military.¹⁰

Perhaps this is because such a change would require a greater understanding of the nature of terrorism and the capabilities of SOF than currently reside in the civilian leadership, whose background is in conventional military issues. Yet, given the destructive power that is increasingly available to small groups of people willing to use it, nothing

may be more important to the future of the country, never mind just the military, than attention to unconventional capabilities.

Whether or not the civilians choose to continue to meddle at the margins rather than in the main, there are a few things they should note. First, thanks to superior radio communications, SOF in Afghanistan were able to coordinate among themselves, and then orchestrate among the various Northern Alliance factions, between Northern Alliance and Pashtun groups, and between military elements and civilians to a greater extent than in any previous marriage of SOF and irregular forces. This is significant because, by achieving more coordination than locals could manage among themselves, SOF was able to subtly direct the war in ways that might not otherwise have been possible. Whether this was done intentionally from the outset, or by pure expedience and happenstance almost does not matter. The fact that it was done at all is consistent with a hallmark trait of indirect or unconventional warfare, which is to turn a constraint – in this case, local infighting – into an opportunity, by uniting factions in such a way that they did not actually have to be united, which (given the situation in Afghanistan) would have been time-consuming and potentially impossible.

What SOF achieved in this case is truly noteworthy, though it does not come without a postscript. SOF's unparalleled success in this feat of coordination may have inadvertently helped convince commanders that SOF operators on the ground could trust those they were advising – and their own abilities to direct their advisees – more than was prudent. This is because, once soldiers develop empathy for those they are advising, they begin to see the world as their advisees see it. In combat, too, their perspective cannot help but narrow, since the longer they spend with fellow-fighters in dangerous (or miserable) conditions, the more they will come to advocate the position of those to whom they are already entrusting their lives.

Whether this explains why various militia leaders were trusted with tasks they then did not perform during Operation 'Anaconda', or whether commanders at higher levels misread or overrode reports from the field remains unclear. Nonetheless, mistakes were made that appear to have cost the US the capture of numerous Al Qaeda members, if not its leaders. Here, the hidden lesson is: Everyone may have been far too precipitate. Although speed was what was most needed, so was accurate intelligence, as well as reliable surrogates on the ground – and the knowledge needed to gauge their reliability.

The civilian leadership should keep two other points in mind. Precisely because SOF seem so well-suited for the war on terrorism, the urge may exist to increase their numbers. If this is done precipitously, it can ruin SOF, much as a sudden ramp-up in numbers almost destroyed SF during the war

in Vietnam. SOF succeed because they carefully select their forces. The selection process alone takes months. Then, soldiers must be trained. Experienced, mature, adaptable soldiers who can make it through this training exist in limited numbers. These numbers may not correspond to needs, but this should not alter the rigor with which SOF units are allowed to fill their ranks.

The issue of time also affects another apparently minor, but actually significant issue: that of rotations. Building successful local relationships and establishing rapport as is required in UW takes time. If we employ a rotation system that shuffles SOF units – never mind individuals – in and out of places like Afghanistan and other operational areas too quickly or too often, we will lose everything we are sending them there to do: cultivate connections, gather intelligence, and peel back the layers of the onion. The aim should be to inspire locals to want us to help *them* eliminate the terrorist hardcore. Again, rapport is key; so is making locals feel secure. Meanwhile, units themselves cannot build institutional knowledge, let alone awareness, without putting down local roots. Plus, there is always a psychic cost to SOF operators when they accept a challenge but then feel they have not been allowed to finish their job.

Finally, having dispensed advice freely to the civilian leadership, let us close by offering some to SOCOM. The Command needs to make SOF – and all its capabilities – better understood. SOCOM should spell out the advantages inherent in a holistic, localized approach to rooting out terrorists. It should explain why teams of mature, experienced soldiers who train to remain self-sufficient and self-reliant in hostile environments over long periods of time should be entrusted with shaping the direction of operations from the field, without interference from but always coordinating with conventional commanders. SOCOM should also fight for them to be able to be different – even if this means fighting for beards. Then it should take all of these messages to the big Army, the Joint Chiefs, the civilian leadership in the Pentagon, and to leaders, operators, and planners in other government agencies. At the same time, SOCOM must look within. It must ensure that its own components understand, and respect, the indispensability of each other's roles. Perhaps then – with the civilians pulling and SOCOM pushing – the war might yet go well.

NOTES

1. *DoD News Briefing*, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (20 Sept. 2001), <www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep2001/t09202001_t920ruma.html>; George W. Bush, 'Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People' (20 Sept. 2001), <www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>; "DoD News Briefing,"

- Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (25 Sept. 2001) <www.defenselink.mil/news/Sep2001/n09252001_200109254.html>.
2. For the use of military force to counter-terrorism and a general review of counter-terrorism measures, see David Tucker, *Skirmishes at the Edge of Empire, the United States and International Terrorism* (Westport, CT: Praeger 1997).
 3. <www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/data/u/05488.html>.
 4. Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (NY: Fordham UP 1991) pp.70–71.
 5. Bob Woodward and Dan Balz, '10 Days in September: Inside the War Cabinet: At Camp David, Advise and Dissent', *Washington Post* (31 Jan. 2002), <<http://ebird.dtic.mil/Jan2002/e20020131camp.htm>>, accessed 1 Feb. 2002.
 6. Interestingly enough, this includes SF headquarters, according to SF members who were in Afghanistan from the start of the war. At the outset, it was both circumstances and their ability to operate independently – without oversight or scrutiny by their own layers of command – that enabled teams to practice unconventional warfare (UW).
 7. Vietnam was an instance in which SF and the CIA appear to have worked well together. In other instances the relationship has not been so smooth.
 8. For more on conventionalization of SOF, and SF in particular, see Anna Simons, *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces* (NY: The Free Press 1997) and Thomas K. Adams, *US Special Operations Forces in Action: The Challenge of Unconventional Warfare* (London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass 1998) pp.10–11, 138, 294.
 9. Alfred H. Paddock, *U.S. Army Special Warfare, Its Origins*, rev. edn (Lawrence: Kansas UP 2002) pp.119–128.
 10. Vernon Loeb and Thomas Ricks, 'Rumsfeld's Style, Goals Strain Ties in Pentagon', *Washington Post*, <<http://ebird.dtic.mil/Oct2002/e20021016rumsfelds.htm>>, accessed 18 Oct. 2002; Anne Marie Squeo and Gref Jaffe, 'Pentagon Weighs Big Cuts in Major Arms Programs', *Wall Street Journal*, <<http://ebird.dtic.mil/Oct2002/e20021015weighs.htm>>, accessed 18 Oct. 2002.