



Smokejumper recruits jog during training at the North Cascades Smokejumper Base located in Winthrop, Washington, in June 2016. Photo by David Ryder/Polaris/Newscom.

As part one of a three-part series on special operations theory, Dr. Richard Rubright articulates what he calls “a unified theory of special operations.” His theory is simply expressed in ten words: “Special Operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect.” This single sentence is a gateway to a rich discussion which will force readers to think critically about special operations and the role that they should serve in the pursuit of strategic objectives. No matter which side of the argument you take up, Dr. Rubright’s monograph is an excellent start towards forming an academic position on special operations theory. These three volumes provide an opportunity for the reader to challenge their own preexisting positions, incorporate fresh perspectives, and perhaps think differently about what is necessary and sufficient for a special operations theory.

JSOU Report 17-1

A Unified Theory for Special Operations

JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNIVERSITY



Volume One of a Three-Part Theory Series

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Rubright



A Unified Theory for Special Operations

Richard W. Rubright, Ph.D.

JSOU Report 17-1



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

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) provides its publications to contribute toward expanding the body of knowledge about joint special operations. JSOU publications advance the insights and recommendations of national security professionals and the Special Operations Forces (SOF) students and leaders for consideration by the SOF community and defense leadership.

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*A Unified Theory
for Special Operations*

Richard W. Rubright, Ph.D.

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On the cover. Frederick Funston was considered a national hero following the Philippine Insurrection after the Spanish American War. He was the recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor, and arguably executed the most successful special operation in U.S. history. Photo by U.S. Army Center Of Military History.

Back cover. Smokejumper recruits jog during training at the North Cascades Smokejumper Base located in Winthrop, Washington, in June 2016. Smokejumpers, considered the most elite group of wildland firefighters, parachute into remote areas in order to battle wildfires that are difficult to access by other means. Photo by David Ryder/Polaris/Newscom.

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Foreword

In April 2017, the U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) will celebrate its 30th anniversary as a combatant command. Throughout history, but certainly since USSOCOM's formation, researchers and doctrine writers have argued for and against a specific theory of special operations. Advocates argue that theory can be essential in determining and explaining the appropriate roles and missions for Special Operations Forces (SOF) and for building and sustaining the forces assigned to USSOCOM. They argue that a theory should explain the strategic utility of SOF, bolster the strategic art within SOF, and inform doctrine. Those opposed to a specific theory argue that existing military theories are necessary and sufficient for special operations. They acknowledge that special operations have a strategic value and can generate strategic effects, but insist such characteristics are inadequate for a distinct theory. They also worry that a formalized theory may be coopted to serve an institutional objective or otherwise substitute for deep, critical thinking that is a hallmark of special operations.

The Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) has dedicated three monographs to the discussion of special operations theory and two events intended to bring the discussion to an academic culminating point. JSOU Press monographs by Dr. Robert Spulak and Dr. Rich Yarger supplemented seminal works on the subject by Navy Admiral William McRaven and Dr. James Kiras. In 2011, JSOU hosted a *SOF-Power Workshop: A Way Forward for Special Operations Theory and Strategic Art*. Attendees concluded that a healthy strategic culture and the practice of a special operations strategic art required the development of a suitable, feasible, and acceptable special operations theory. However, the topic languished as overseas operations, cyber power, and countering weapons of mass destruction dominated USSOCOM attention.

Despite these myriad of issues, JSOU chose to engage once more in the discussion in August 2016 when it hosted a symposium titled, *Special Operations Theory*. The symposium addressed the full landscape of opinion for and against formation of a special operations theory. Event organizers from the JSOU Center for Special Operations Studies and Research proposed publication of two studies and a compendium of chapters relevant to the discussion.

JSOU professors Dr. Richard Rubright and Dr. Tom Searle agreed to offer two studies to further stimulate thinking after the symposium and Dr. Pete McCabe, a JSOU resident senior fellow, was designated the lead for a compendium of shorter works to bring the conversation to an academic conclusion.

In this monograph (volume 1 of 3), Dr. Richard Rubright articulates what he calls “a unified theory of special operations.” His theory is simply expressed in ten words: “Special Operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect.” This single sentence is a gateway to a rich discussion which will force readers to think critically about special operations and the role they should serve in the pursuit of strategic objectives. He is intentionally provocative to make readers assess their understanding of existing concepts like special operations power and the human domain. No matter which side of the argument you take up, Dr. Rubright’s monograph is an excellent start towards forming an academic position on special operations theory.

Readers are encouraged to examine all three volumes (Dr. Rubright, Dr. Searle, and the compendium edited by Dr. McCabe) with an open mind. As a former SOF senior leader observed during the August symposium, “one of the beautiful things about SOF is the ability to change our minds, take a different turn, figure out a different approach, [and] solve a problem that arises that we didn’t think about because of an innate cognitive agility.” These three volumes provide an opportunity for the reader to challenge their own pre-existing positions, incorporate fresh perspectives, and perhaps think differently about what is necessary and sufficient for a special operations theory.

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

About the Author

Dr. Richard Rubright served in the 19th and 20th Special Forces Groups prior to separation due to a parachute injury. He joined the Joint Special Operations University in May 2012, is a professor in the College of Special Operations, and a former senior fellow in the department of strategic studies.

Dr. Rubright has worked as a research analyst on alternative force structures, deterrence, national security issues, and force protection through technical means. He has a continued interest in strategic culture, strategic futures and international politics. His research and work has taken him to Yemen where he spent a year working on data collection and analysis, as well as combat patrols in Iraq to conduct primary field research. He is a member of Mensa.



Dr. Rubright holds a bachelor's degree in political science with a certificate in international relations from the University of Utah, a bachelor's in history with a minor in Middle East studies from the University of Utah, a master's in international politics from the University of Glasgow, Scotland, and a doctorate in strategic studies/international relations from the University of Reading, UK. Dr. Rubright's latest book, *The Role and Limitations of Technology in U.S. Counterinsurgency Warfare*, is available from the University of Nebraska Press.

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I would like to thank Professor Emeritus Colin Gray for his challenging of my logic, my tolerant wife who let me talk at her, and JSOU-P for providing me the time and funds to complete this work.

Introduction

Without hoopla or fanfare, a patent clerk from Bern, Switzerland, had completely overturned the traditional notions of space and time and replaced them with a new conception whose properties fly in the face of everything we are familiar with from common experience.¹

This monograph proposes a unified theory of special operations. This is to say a theory that is holistic in nature, timeless, focused solely upon special operations, and serves as an umbrella framework for other theories about special operations and Special Operations Forces (SOF). The work serves to provide U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and the special operations community an explanation of the phenomena of special operations, which may serve as a tool for policymakers and special operations professionals. This theory is complementary to most other writings on special operations theory, seeking to provide a meta-narrative in the macro and a supporting framework to said theorists in the micro. To date there has been no single theory of special operations, which is a fundamental gap in military theory that this monograph seeks to rectify. The methodology of this work relies heavily on the definitions of words (lexical semantics). When the work is read in its entirety, the word choices and the implications should be apparent and offer an understanding of the theory through its rigor. However, it is not meant to simply be a detached theory without relevance. To that end, it is broken up into two sections: the first section explains the theory and the semantic implications; the second part of this work addresses the ‘so what’ of the theory.

Part I: A Unified Theory of Special Operations

What follows is a lexically semantic argument and framework for a unified theory of special operations. While most of the work is in reference to U.S. military special operations, given the audience of this publication, this is simply out of convenience for most readers. The theory rests upon the foundation of words and their meanings. To some readers this may seem academically pedantic and perhaps difficult to translate into a meaningful, consequential topic for themselves. The theory is broad by intention so that it covers all of special operations and is applicable through time; in essence, unbound and serving solely as an explanatory tool for the phenomenon of special operations. The unified theory also serves as an umbrella framework under which other theories can exist and be linked. Specifically, it does not contravene previous work done on a more micro scale, such as retired Navy Admiral William McRaven's theory dealing with direct action in special operations² or Robert Spulak's theory of SOF.³ Larger scale theories, such as the work of Christopher Marsh, Mike Kenny, and Nathanael Joslyn on the theoretical underpinnings of special warfare and surgical strike, are also compatible.⁴ The theory is by no means the last word on the subject, but in the author's opinion, it is the primer, or umbrella, under which a coherent body of theory can develop that will continually refine the knowledge of special operations, the communities, and their respective tasks.

A logical set of questions should start with why there needs to be a unified theory of special operations, followed closely by what such a theory would provide. The answer to both questions is one of perspective. To quote Carl Von Clausewitz: "Theory must be of the nature of observation, not of doctrine. The second opening for the possibility of a theory lies in the point of view that it does not necessarily require to be a direction for action."⁵ Theory is a foundation that explains a phenomenon to enable a more effective or efficient use of the perspective; not the action that follows the perspective. Ergo, the value of the theory is inherently bound to the perspective of the user. The perspectives may be very different for the practitioner of the military profession and the policymaker responsible for the policy object for which

that military is used. Yet, both can benefit from the better explanation of the phenomenon.

For the special operations professional, the policymakers who wish to employ special operations capabilities and the general public who simply wish to know more about the actions of their military, the first question represents different answers. For the special operations professional, the answer may be to perform their chosen line of work at a higher level of understanding, or perhaps a higher degree of competency. For the policymaker, the question could further comprehension of the best structure and utilization of special operations and the forces used to execute them. It could also illuminate the need for special operations with an appropriate degree and scope for funding which the special operations community needs to be effective. For the interested citizen, it may be nothing more than curiosity or perhaps due diligence in understanding what their military does and for what reason. The second question of what a unified theory of special operations provides is a direct correlation of the concerns and interests just listed. In short, it provides knowledge of a facet and function of an increasingly important part of the U.S. and allied militaries, and addresses a form of conflict that will become the norm rather than the exception.

The purpose of a unified theory of special operations is manifold. The knowledge and understanding should provide contextualization of special operations missions. This work does not seek to use the unified theory to advocate for anything. To again use Clausewitz, theory about tactics is easier than theory about strategy.⁶ While Clausewitz's true contribution is not about strategy, but rather a theory about war, he holds a rightful place as one of the truly great theorists. However, this theory is a step down, subordinated as a function in war, yet also as a unified theory, larger than war as it is unified in nature, crossing beyond just military special operations communities. For simplicity's sake, the author will use the term "special operations community" and sometimes "SOF" for reasons that will become apparent shortly. This is a semantic designation, and one used for a specific purpose; but the two should not be confused as being a single entity. Special operations communities stretch far beyond just the military, but for clarity and distinction, SOF is used in this work to denote military special operations communities.

For those who doubt the importance of lexical semantics, the meaning of words, which the theory rests upon, let the following question be posed:

What then is the difference between special and elite? Arguably nothing if we want to go by informal and general usage of the two rather than utilize rigorous definitions. But, if semantics held no meaning and words did not matter (especially in the rigor of theory), it would be possible to refer to special operations units as special needs units—they have special needs for specific gear, special needs for specific training, and special needs for physical fitness.⁷ For the reader who is asking if the semantics are really important, would the designation of their unit being changed from special operations to special needs hold no meaning?

The theory to be articulated is meant to bring special operations communities and their actions under a single framework of understanding. The goal in doing so is to provide a theory that is elegantly simple rather than convoluted. As a sound theory, it should be universally applicable across time and culture. It must have a degree of rigor in its inception to survive challenges and, if valid, win acceptance through general consensus of the epistemic community concerned with special operations. This is not to say the theory will be universally applauded; it will not be. However, at the end of the work, if the reader can find no flaw in the argument and supporting foundations, a feeling of unease is not only quite understandable, but also is quite inconsequential.

As a sound theory, it should be universally applicable across time and culture.

This author calls the theory a unified theory of special operations because it brings together separate issues with which the special operations community is concerned. Within the U.S. military special operations community, these include the notion of special operations power, the human domain, surgical strike, special warfare, and recognized need for future special operations to include a whole-of-government (special operations conducted with other governmental and nongovernmental organizations) approach to tackling the complex and dynamic challenges of the present and future. This work will address each of these concepts separately as part of the unified theory, but the intent is to bring all of these concepts under one grand umbrella to present a single contextualization of special operations. To date there has never been a unified theory of special operations, although notable writers such as Admiral McRaven, Robert Spulak, Rich Yarger, James Kiras, and Christopher Marsh have all made contributions in their works to the thinking of special operations theory. This work does not seek to supplant

their efforts. Rather, it approaches the issue from a holistic perspective in order to unify the different themes and concerns of the special operations communities. The theory works with the other thinkers because it seeks to unify them in the macro while complementing them in the micro.

Without rehashing the finer points of the works of the above theorists, Admiral McRaven's work focused specifically on direct action through a lens of six principles, but this makes his focus very narrow. Spulak examines special operations through the attributes of SOF as mitigators of Clausewitzian friction. While he wrongly connects special operations to SOF, his contribution as a theorist provides sound, classically informed coherence to what makes SOF elite. Yarger sets a contextual definition of historical American special operations and their attributes, yet does not make the leap to an identifiable theory. Kiras and Marsh have argued that there can be no theory of special operations, and the general categories of surgical strike and special warfare are as close as one can get to a comprehensive theory. All of these authors make valuable contributions to thought on the subject of a special operations theory. Yet, they all fall short of a holistic theory because they have made a fundamentally flawed connection between special operations and SOF. This manuscript parses out special operations from tangential and convoluting distractions to provide the first comprehensive theory of special operations, yet it also accommodates the above theorists in many ways as it provides the umbrella framework under which the aforementioned theoretical contributions fall.

A cautionary point is called for at this stage. The reader may be inclined to be limited in thought to existing statutes and codified restrictions and definitions of special operations under Title 10 U.S. Code (USC) 167. This is theory, not a legal review or a work limited to legal considerations. Restricting thought on theory to existing legal codification represents a lack of depth in thinking and conception of the subject at hand and the role of theory in general. Theory should predate codification in all cases; thought should come before action. Revision of theory provides a foundation for a paradigmatic shift, and recodification may follow. To be restricted in thought to 10 USC 167 on the subject is literally to be stuck insisting the sun revolves around the earth. Before Copernicus, the geocentric (Earth-centric) model was canonical (statutory in essence and context) and his assertions were heretical to the conventional wisdom. To insist that no theory can contradict statute is nonsense at best and dangerous at worst. Another clearer example can be

illustrated with the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC). Just war theory is not the offspring of LOAC. Just war theory evolved from thinkers like Aquinas, Grotius, and paradigm shifts of liberalism and the Enlightenment; one can argue that LOAC, although codified, needs revision. Theory explains phenomena; statutes codify the existing understanding of phenomena as an extension of politics. Confusing theory, or the role of theory, and the purpose of 10 USC 167 is to lack thought on the subject beyond a shallow level.

Good theories should be simple. The thinking, research, and analysis behind the theory should be deep and thoughtful. Yet, for comprehension, the theory should be elegantly simple to convey—parsimonious. Darwin's Theory of Evolution in its simplest form is not complex. Species change over time to adapt to their environment.⁸ Yet, the intellectual process and research to achieve that conclusion was hardly simple. This brevity can also be misconstrued as the theory was hijacked to explain social phenomena through bastardizations such as Social Darwinism, an unfortunate possibility for any theory.⁹ Regardless, the simplicity and elegance of Darwin's theory stands on its own merit. Einstein's Theory of Special Relativity demonstrates the same simple elegance with the expression $E=mc^2$, but the actual proof of the equation and profound genius it required to develop is staggering.¹⁰ The intent of these examples is to provide context to the value of simple and concise expression. A good theory should also be universally applicable through time. Darwin and Einstein may not be perfect explanations of phenomena, but they certainly have a good historical track record. The unified theory of special operations presented below is applicable to all cultures and all special operations communities, and is timeless. While the author is primarily concerned with the U.S. military special operations community, each reader, in other U.S. organizations and around the world, should be able to contextualize the theory appropriately to their own milieu with acceptable applicability. This unified theory of special operations can be simply expressed as: special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect.

The reader will likely feel underwhelmed at this point, and understandably so given the anticlimactic nature of the statement above. What follows is a defense, justification, and context of the unified theory. Just because Darwin's theory can be boiled down to a single sentence does not mean his work did not have merit or answer questions tangential and related to the theory. The reader may notice there is no reference to special operations communities or SOF in the statement above; this is intentional. The human

factor of the human domain is not represented; this, too, is intentional. There is no reference to special operations–specific missions, or missions such as counterinsurgency or counterterrorism. There are no references to the military for a reason. The statement above is the simplest and most concise representation of the theory for brevity, clarity, and applicability. By the end of the work, the reader should have an understanding of why the theory is written as it is. The reader should also have a foundational context in which to think about special operations that makes sense to their community. If the work is correct, then at the end they will not be able to refute the work on grounds of conception and accuracy; of course style is always open to interpretation.

As mentioned, this work comprises two distinct parts: The first part deals with the theory by examining special operations through current thinking on the subject, to include the human domain, special operations power, SOF not being the same thing as special operations, and the concepts of surgical strike coupled with special warfare. The work then moves on to the lexically semantic implications of the theory’s words ‘extraordinary operations’ and ‘specific effect.’ The second part of the work deals with the implications of the unified theory. This section examines the U.S. strategic paradox, which forces adversaries to respond asymmetrically, irregular warfare as the new norm, how authorities should be impacted by the theory, and finally a reality check for the unified theory with real world bureaucratic considerations.

The Foundation of Politics

Special operations are normally conducted by consummate professionals. To achieve the required levels of proficiency at their given jobs within their chosen career fields, they typically spend untold hours learning, practicing, and honing their respective skill sets to reach the profoundly high levels of ability and knowledge which are directly related to the tasks they must perform. These individuals are recognized in the military, the civilian sector, and around the world as being at the pinnacle of their trade. This high level of tradecraft, unfortunately, often comes with a deficiency in other areas. This is not a slight against the men and women of the U.S. military special operations community; the fact of the matter is that there are just so many hours in a day. The end result is the described level of proficiency at the tactical level. As these operators’ careers progress, they become exposed to and

proficient at the operational level of war, and their skill sets and knowledge increase while their tactical acumen starts to diminish. As they get near the end of their careers, they become more focused on the strategic level of war and the end of their tactical longevity. This natural progression provides invaluable experience in leaders who must increasingly see a larger picture and take on different responsibilities as they mature.¹¹

By the time the operators have matured to retirement they understand all three levels of war, but they have also spent a career being apolitical, given historical examples like Douglas MacArthur as cautionary tales.¹² This is not to say they are without affiliations and do not vote; rather, they have spent a career with the assumption that the political, by design, is not a purview of the armed forces. Politicians and civilian leaders engage in politics; the military is not supposed to tread in that realm to ensure a continuity of civilian leadership and oversight of the military. Unfortunately, this can lead to a detriment in political thinking, the level of war above the strategic.¹³

There are, in fact, five levels of war (theory, political, strategic, operational, and tactical), even though we often recognize only three within the military (this is further explained on page 45). All war starts with and is governed by theory at the uppermost level of war (you can call it the first level or the fifth level, depending wholly on one's perspective). It is the theory that drives the political level of war, at which point policy is formulated. In turn, the policy drives the strategic level where the political object is bridged to the available military capability. The operational level is driven by the strategic, and then the tactical. However, it is important not to confuse the theoretical level of war with the theory that is being written here. The theoretical level of war is purely contextual to the entity being examined. For the U.S., the theoretical level is driven by international relations theory like Liberalism and Realism.¹⁴ For the Islamic State, the theoretical level is being driven by fundamental Islam with attendant cascading effects down to the tactical level.¹⁵ This author will delve much deeper into this in a later chapter on the U.S. strategic paradox and the implications for special operations. The concept is brought up only to properly contextualize that politics is a level of war and it is rarely thought about by military professionals.

Politics is the pursuit and practice of power. It is directly defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: "The activities associated with the governance of a country or other area, especially the debate or conflict among individuals or parties having or hoping to achieve power."¹⁶ Politics is, therefore, first and

foremost a human endeavor. Some other species trade food or sex in social situations as part of a social hierarchical process. However, humans have taken the process and purpose of politics to a level not seen in the animal world. In fact, Aristotle described humans as “political animals,” which implies that to be human one engages in some political process because all humans associate in some way in power relationships.¹⁷ This may be employer to employee, parent to child, student to teacher, general to colonel, police officer to criminal, criminal to law abiding citizen, or any other relationship. In all of these circumstances, there is an element of power, and therefore an element of politics. The police officer may be exercising power over a citizen to control a situation which is then followed by the citizen agitating and eventually voting for the restriction of the power of the police. The parent exercises their power over the child, yet in time the child demands a degree of freedom and tries to gain power from the parent. All of these processes are political and they all have an element of power.

The special operations community should appreciate this dynamic because their chosen profession is rooted in power. While not every special operations mission or concern has to do with the exercise of a lethal form of power, even those that merely seek to influence other populations are pursuing political goals, and therefore, are in some way utilizing power. Seeking to insulate the perception of politics from the special operations profession does not help the conception of power or help understand its ubiquitous and ever-present nature. To try to ignore the political and only focus on the power aspect is to limit the understanding of the role of power in whichever endeavor the special operator is engaged at the time. It also makes it very difficult to connect the activities with which the special operator is concerned to a theory of special operations.

So far, the author has referenced the special operations community and sometimes the U.S. military special operations community, or SOF. These are not the same thing. Contrary to many peoples’ perceptions, the special operations community goes beyond the very narrow special operations community found in the U.S. military. It just happens that the U.S. military has the largest and best-funded special operations community in the world. The U.S. military’s special operations community also benefits from the cache of usually good publicity and known heroic deeds even in foreign countries.¹⁸ However, this theory is about special operations, not about SOF, or solely about SOF in the U.S. military, because the theory must be unified and

universal to have validity. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Hostage Rescue Teams (HRT), Department of Energy Nuclear Emergency Support Teams, Bureau of Land Management and Department of Agriculture Smokejumper Teams, and others all represent special operations communities. This theory, to meet the criteria of rigor, must be as applicable to special operations in their realms as much as in the U.S. military's realm. And as will be shown, they are not separate at all. Yes, the specific missions which these communities perform are different, but again, this theory is not about SOF, it is about special operations, and in that distinction, the similarities exist. For the reader with operational experience in the U.S. military who has the qualifications of either a SEAL trident or Special Forces tab, this may be hard to accept.

In returning to the issue of politics and power, every special operation has some element of politics, and therefore power. It is inescapable because every mission in some way incorporates people. Navy SEALs killing Osama bin Laden were performing a special operation, very unusual or remarkable, which resulted in some controversy as it violated the sovereignty of a partner nation.¹⁹ It is equally clear the special operation was politically motivated and as equally clear it had political ramifications, but it is no different from other special operations. An FBI HRT is comprised of and deals with people. A successful rescue involves people and power, and hence has a political dimension. Even Smokejumper teams, who battle forest fires in a man (or woman) vs. nature scenario, are still composed of people performing a special operation;²⁰ whether they fail to contain the blaze or not, missions have political outcomes because people are affected. Homes may burn, lives can be lost, Smokejumpers may die, reviews of performance will happen, new funding and requirements emerge, which involve money, and again it is back to the political. No special operation happens in a vacuum isolated from people, power, or politics.

What is described above is a trinity—an inseparable connection between three entities: politics, power, and people. You cannot affect one of the three without affecting the other two. Without the involvement of people, there is no meaning, context, or existence of power and politics. With the involvement of people, there will always be the involvement of power and politics. Ergo, a special operation is not a special operation if it involves no people and it must therefore have a political and power connection. Some special operations communities will be less interested in this aspect of the theory

than others, especially the U.S. military's special operations community. The focus of the U.S. military's interest in people, power, and politics stems from the concept of the human domain, which will be discussed in depth later. At this point, the trinity serves a foundational principle with which to contextualize special operations.

Special operations, as stated, have a political component to them. But not all politics are created equal. The political sensitivity of a special operation is contextual in nature. A wildfire that threatens the homes of 1,500 residents is different from a wildfire in an uninhabited part of a national forest. The political sensitivity of the situation will create an impetus to act if people's homes, property, and, potentially, family members are at risk. Smokejumpers will more likely be called into action in such a scenario. They may offer no more capability than a hotshot crew—a wildland firefighting crew that has special training and is considered better than most regular crews—but the political need to act, or more aptly put, the need to convey a perception of action (perception is reality in politics)²¹ may call upon them to perform a special operation. Likewise in a military example, a direct action special operation to kill or capture a high value target that is not well known to the American people or policymakers will not have the same political context as a special operation to kill or capture Osama bin Laden.²² These examples are fairly extreme, but illustrate the point that no two situations can ever have the same political calculus involved.

As Yarger has pointed out, the evolving doctrinal definition of SOF is: forces that conduct special operations in politically sensitive environments.²³ At this point, it is important to again delineate between special operations and special operations communities. The theory is not about SOF or communities, yet examples concerning them must be used to make points. While the author will refute the notion that special operations are operations performed by SOF, that particular aspect must come later. More importantly, special operations often have a higher level of political importance than usual operations. After all, something must make them special. This is not to define special operations as having a higher political sensitivity or importance than conventional operations. It simply is recognizing that some operations have a higher political sensitivity and level of importance. As such, the logical choice of the forces to assign to the mission would be the most capable force available to execute the mission. This observation is directly taken from Spulak's theory, which is here described as a theory of SOF rather than a

theory of special operations (this is exactly the trap most thinkers fall into, an inability to separate special operations from SOF).²⁴ In essence, the better trained the force, or the more elite the force, the greater the likelihood that it will be able to adapt to uncertainty (Clausewitz's notion of "friction").²⁵ Yet, the 82nd Airborne could have killed Bin Laden, even though the unit would probably have adjusted and adapted less fluidly.

Finally, concerning politics—this aspect is focused upon the U.S. military special operations—is that Clausewitz's timeless and overly quoted maxim that war is an extension of politics by other means remains true within the theory.²⁶ Normally the delineation between the normal means of politics, namely discourse, implies an element of force (sanctions, embargoes, and influence should not be confused with war or the notion of force). Force can be most succinctly defined as the threat or application of violence and fear. Some will disagree with this definition and may be hesitant to accept or ascribe the use of fear as a tool, and it is tolerably objectionable within the universality of the theory. For example, the use of fear by a Smokejumper to intimidate a fire is nonsensical. This, however, does not detract from the theory. The theory of special operations still applies to the Smokejumper community because it engages in special operations which are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect.

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The fact that the U.S. military must take into account force as an aspect of power and warfare in order to impact people to achieve a desired specific effect is simply an attribute of that specific community, much like the FBI, Special Weapons and

Tactics Team, or other law enforcement entities. The unified theory of special operations being extraordinary operations to achieve specific effects still applies in all cases and should also further illustrate why the concise form of the theory is required.

As Clausewitz's writings still, and always will, apply to the U.S. military special operations community, the people dimension of the trinity (politics, power, and people, not the traditional Clausewitz Trinity of reason, passion, and genius) is of paramount importance. For clarity, other special operations communities must account for people as well; however, their degree of involvement will be relative, and the U.S. military special operations

community will be at the far end of such a spectrum. Therefore, as growing awareness of the importance of people has recently increased in the U.S. military special operations community, the unified theory needs to address this issue, especially if it can claim to represent a unified theory. The term for this human consideration in the special operations community is the human domain.²⁷

The Human Domain

The human domain (used hereafter for continuity and ease, even though this author has reservations about its authenticity) has had several definitions. It is currently advocated as the sixth domain in warfighting.²⁸ The other five domains are: land, sea, air, space, and cyber.²⁹ In essence, these domains are environments in which entities conduct warfare. They are helpful for differentiating the ways power is used to best take advantage of the environment with each environment's idiosyncrasy taken into account. Obviously four of the five domains are geographical physical environments, with cyber existing virtually, yet capable of reaching into the physical environments of each of the other four. As the proposed sixth domain, Celeski gives this definition: "The human domain is comprised of humans, including humans as physical beings, human thought, emotions, human action, human collectives (such as groups), and what they create."³⁰ It is the sum total of human activity both external to the human and internally within the human mind.

In the previous section, the trinity of people, power, and politics is covered and needs to be understood, not only as a trinity, but also how that trinity relates to special operations. The human domain is obviously connected to people, but also to politics and power, as well. The above definition of the human domain refers to human collectives, which is inevitable as Aristotle's political animal requires a political aspect. In fact, Aristotle was specifically referring to the human nature to form collective groups, from the family to the *Polis*.³¹ Human thought, also in the definition, requires perception, which is the reality of the human political process. Human action is not a random event of chaos but is ordered for effect, which requires a degree of leadership and, therefore, power. In short, there is nothing within the above definition of the human domain or any other definition of the human domain that violates the trinity of people, power, and politics, nor is there anything new

at its core. It is simply a rediscovery of what has been long written about, covered by numerous classics.

The real issue, however, is how does the human domain fit within the unified theory of special operations? If it does not fit, then the theory is by definition not a unified theory. In restating the theory—“Special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect”—there is no contradiction with the concept of the human domain. As the theory has already been linked to the trinity of people, power, and politics, and the above definition of the human domain has been linked with the trinity, it leaves compatibility of the human domain with the trinity, and more importantly, with the unified theory. But, then it begs the question, why is there no reference to people in the theory? There is no reason why the idea of the human domain is excluded from the unified theory, and there is support for the human domain in the supporting trinity of the theory, so why not add it? The human domain is not included because the theory does not require its inclusion, and because the human domain is a redundant concept. Further, inclusion in the theory, being unneeded, simply adds length at the cost of brevity while contributing nothing. The human domain will be revisited later in a section on the U.S. strategic paradox.

The author would agree that the human domain has validity for the propagation of education about war for those unlikely to study the subject in depth. The fact that anyone needs to be told of the central importance of people in war may be a bit damning about the recent depth of thought on the subject. However, as with other concepts, such as hybrid war,³² the concept of the human domain does not bring anything new to the field and has been well covered in the past. Yet, does the educational value of a new catchy name justify the writing, time, and focus on the human aspect of war? Probably is the best answer. The subject is certainly important, and if a new name will provide focus and a context for practitioners and theorists alike, then it is unlikely to cause much harm. The only real danger lies in the self-delusion that may accompany the concept. If USSOCOM views the human domain as a panacea, it could well set itself up for failure as cultures/ideologies and their associated grievances (millennia in the making) may be beyond USSOCOM’s ability to affect, regardless of how much human domain is studied and touted.

The author is troubled by the redundancy of the concept. In essence, as was covered above, the trinity of people, power, and politics is the very

foundation of war, whether it is Thucydides' classification of the cause of war as fear, honor, and interest³³ or whether it is Clausewitz's definition of war being politics by other means. Even Clausewitz's trinity of government (politics and political goals), people (passions and will), and the military (the ultimate manifestation of power)³⁴ only has relevance when it is contextualized by people and pertaining to people. So, why would it now be new, after thousands of years of recorded conflicts, to discover that people matter in war? Unfortunately, the likely answer is that the obvious has been generally unstated by past writers, mainly because it was and is obvious, unless the writers of 'new' ideas have not adequately versed themselves in past writings. And, of course, there are the ever-present parochial considerations.

The fact is the past 14 years of conflict have developed the cachet of the special operations community to a degree not possible before 9/11. There is today a much more robust appreciation for special operations and a heightened awareness and support for those who conduct such missions. Yet, the available defense funding will remain the same and/or decrease.³⁵ As USSOCOM is a service-like entity, it does compete for funds under Major Force Program 11 (MFP-11). Big Army, Navy, and Air Force have seen, and often still do see, the special operations community as comprising arrogant, overfunded people who have a self-conception of being special.³⁶ Ultimately, there is a fear amongst the SOF community that the services will cause a sharp drop in funding to the special operations community. This fear is not just paranoia; it is the historical norm and has potentially devastating consequences for the special operations community and the skill sets they provide.³⁷ One of the SOF Truths is that SOF cannot be mass produced. If the community is again gutted post-conflict (as after WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and to a lesser extent, the Cold War), it will take tremendous effort and time to reconstitute the skills and abilities once they are again needed.

The best way to remove the threat of appropriation reduction is to establish in both theory and doctrine the rationale and requirements for the special operations community. One way to accomplish this is to take ownership of a domain. The Navy is important because the nation needs them to project sea power in the sea domain. Whether the reader is inclined to be a fan of Corbet or Mahan, it is safe to say there is no coherent debate about the existence of a sea domain (maritime) or the need for a strong Navy.³⁸ The Army is important because the nation needs them to project land power in the land domain.³⁹ Likewise, the Air Force is needed in the air and space

domains (Note: the Air Force wisely grabbed two domains). Cyber Command is more neutral ground, as the commander is subordinate to the U.S. Strategic Command and therefore not the purview of a service.⁴⁰ So, where do USSOCOM and the special operations community fit into this domain and power structure? Here is the crux of the problem with past efforts to define a special operations theory: it depends on whether one is talking about special operations or if one is talking about the U.S military special operations community. To further the interests of the special operations community, it would be bureaucratically helpful to have a domain and power like the services; the argument may be that SOF are needed because the nation needs USSOCOM to project special operations power in the human domain. This makes SOF bureaucratically indispensable, but, in fact, has nothing to do with special operations.

Not only do the existing domain and power structures already provide the nation with domains that make sense, they all include the human domain because they have no context without humans involved and affected (back to the nature of war and politics). United States Army Special Operations Command specifically recognizes that the human domain crosses other domains.⁴¹ More importantly, special operations do not need a domain to be defined, and are, in fact, involved in all domains. By going back to the unified theory, special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect; you will find no need to limit special operations within any domain. Extraordinary operations can take place in every domain on an as-needed basis. One may be wondering, at this point, if the author is so negative about the human domain, and if the concept is redundant and well covered by other works, why even attempt to address it and ensure it fits within the unified theory.

By going back to the unified theory, special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect; you will find no need to limit special operations within any domain.

While the human domain has been covered and is redundant, it does, in the author's opinion, have value beyond the bureaucratic. The level of knowledge of the human domain is not as developed as it could be. Technology, network analysis, behavioral science, psychology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, and many other fields impacting or developing greater understanding of humans and their influences in war should be studied

further. The human domain advocates are tolerably correct by focusing on the concept. And, arguably, some special operations are more dependent on the human element in warfare than are their conventional counterparts.⁴² In essence, it is worthwhile, and there are certainly positive aspects of the human domain that are deeper than a bureaucratic ploy for funding. However, as stated above, the human domain is included here out of a desire for rigor in the unified theory, which it does not contradict, rather than because the notion of the human domain has merit above and beyond past writings and concepts.

Special Operations Power

A contention that Army SOF operate in and between the human domain and the diplomatic, intelligence, military, economic, financial, information, and law enforcement (DIMEFIL) aspect of the interagency, utilizing instruments of national power, has been made.⁴³ In essence, DIMEFIL offers strategic options to policymakers beyond simple military means. As the human domain crosses and is a part of every other domain, it also, theoretically, provides individuals in the special operations community the ability to impact the full spectrum of DIMEFIL, again making the special operations community of high value in both times of peace, as well as in times of actual conflict. This has been attempted to be defined as “Special Operations Forces Power.”⁴⁴ This is perhaps the second most nonsensical term next to ‘political warfare.’

Before moving on to deal with special operations (or SOF) power more deeply, the issue of political warfare should be addressed. It is a completely nonsensical term. It actually is a redundancy akin to describing a round wheel. The term came into vogue to delineate the difference between kinetic operations and operations of subtle means meant to exert political pressure to achieve political ends. This is simply an amalgamation of Sun Tzu, Aristotle, and Clausewitz. Consider the following definition:

Political war is the use of political means to compel an opponent to do one’s will, *political* being understood to describe purposeful intercourse between peoples and government affecting national survival and relative advantage. Political war may be combined with violence, economic pressure, subversion, and diplomacy, but its chief

aspect is the use of words, images, and ideas, commonly known, according to context, as propaganda and psychological warfare.⁴⁵

Within Sun Tzu's concept of war, there is a never-ending process by which a political entity attempts to defeat their opponent's (there will always be opponents) strategy for victory. Often, this entails attacking the alliance base of the adversary.⁴⁶ As previously covered, Aristotle recognized the inherent nature of the political condition of all human existence. Clausewitz has more than made the case that all war is political in nature; it is simply the means that differ between a condition of war and a condition of peace. When combined, these authors explain, without exception, any notion of political warfare. It is certainly easier to invent a new concept that a person has, in essence, been exposed to throughout their professional life than it is to read, digest, and synthesize the classical works on the subject of war and politics. Yet that is exactly what professional soldiers and politicians should be doing, not reinventing what is already apparent, as is the case for 'political warfare.'

This brings the subject back to special operations power. With political warfare removed, and the human domain equally redundant, one must ask: What could special operations power actually mean? According to retired Army Colonel Joseph Celeski, "Power is the ability to do something; a special operation, as a form of military power, has the ability to do the following operational functions in the Human Domain."⁴⁷ This again demonstrates foundational flaws in the concept of special operations/SOF power and links the flaw to the unneeded, represented by the human domain. If one is talking about physics and engineering, then yes, power is the 'ability to do something,' much as the measurement of horsepower is a quantification of work. However, in war, as an extension of politics, power is about getting other people to conform to one's will, not a positive motive action. In this context, the self-proclaimed ability of SOF-designated units to 'influence' a population is not power; it is a plan, perhaps not even a strategy, and quite optimistic.

If special operations/SOF power is indeed the ability to affect the full DIMEFIL spectrum through the other five domains listed, through people, then it almost makes itself directly irrelevant. Put another way, there are individual agencies that specifically conduct activities within each of the DIMEFIL areas. For example, the State Department conducts diplomacy, the Drug Enforcement Agency conducts law enforcement, and the intelligence

community conducts intelligence. If special operations power is the ability to affect each of the DIMEFIL spectrum, then in essence, it defines every agency engaged in the DIMEFIL spectrum as utilizing special operations power. But, this is clearly not what is meant by special operations power. What special operations power really means is forces designated as SOF conducting operations within the DIMEFIL spectrum. This then brings us back to the original problem people have had in developing a special operations theory: the inability to separate the concept of special operations from the concept and unit designation of SOF. It should also highlight why the unified theory of special operations, as stated upfront, is worded carefully to be as concise as possible without any mention of SOF.

SOF ≠ Special Operations

One of the problems with developing a theory of special operations is the intrinsic perceived value and designation of SOF. Often it is easier to contextualize SOF than it is special operations. The SOF community of the U.S. military is finite, and like all military units it is delineated in several logical ways. Each of the services, and the Coast Guard under the Department of Homeland Security, has or had a SOF element that is responsible for carrying out special operations.⁴⁸ There is funding for SOF formations, MFP-11 dollars for USSOCOM and SOF-unique gear offering photogenic reminders of these distinct organizations.⁴⁹ The men (and likely in the future, women)⁵⁰ who kill or capture targets like Osama bin Laden are the modern heroes performing dangerous, daring missions. The aura that has developed around the Army Green Beret and the Navy SEAL makes the heroes synonymous with special operations, at least in the eyes of the public. Anyone interested in these organizations can browse Netflix to vicariously experience the grueling selection processes which these warriors must pass—all of which brings more attention to the members of the SOF community rather than on special operations themselves, a further confusing and unhelpful factor.

The confusion, and perhaps intrinsic assumptions of commonality, between special operations and designated SOF can actually be witnessed in conversations within the community. It is not unusual for the two terms to be used interchangeably. It would be hard to count the number of times people (including this author) have referred to their work as a “SOF theory” when they meant a “special operations theory.” The tautology is accepted

without much thought at all. “What are special operations?” “Oh, those are what SOF do.” “What are SOF?” “Oh, they conduct special operations.” In the common interchange and vernacular of the community that is not a particular problem. When constructing a theory of special operations, the tautology makes the job impossible while the semantic designation remains.

The real crux of the issue with elevating SOF to such lofty heights is that, in terms of a unified theory of special operations, they have absolutely nothing to do with special operations. This statement may seem a bit counterintuitive, and for the special operator a bit blasphemous. Yet, defining SOF as a part of a unified theory of special operations makes the theory untenable, and this has been the general downfall of previous attempts to formulate a theory of special operations. Normally, most people could not be bothered by whether or not there existed a special operations theory, which is why this work started with a justification of why and what a theory of special operations offers to the readers. However, most people who have been concerned with a theory of special operations have been the practitioners and those who must oversee the practitioners. Without buy-in from practitioners, until recently, there probably has not been enough need to step outside the practitioners’ comfort zone. Defining special operations to be wholly independent of and unconcerned with SOF has likely not been the best manner for obtaining buy-in from the SOF community.

A running joke is that SOF are special, and if this is in doubt, then all you have to do is ask and they will make it clear they are special. While this joke is meant to be a dig against the perceived narcissism and myopic tendencies of the special operations community, the special operations community is actually quite correct when it says it is elite—it is—but special is a step too far because semantics have profound effects; words really do matter. The professionalism of the special operations community is without question and the recognition they receive for their high levels of skill, tradecraft, and toughness is quite well deserved. The selection and qualification of select communities, such as the Air Force pararescuemen, Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces, and Marine Raiders, are all testaments to the incredible mental and physical toughness of the airmen, sailors, soldiers, and Marines who make up these formations. They are not only tougher mentally and physically than the average airman, sailor, soldier, and Marine, but they are also generally smarter and more educated (education defined by knowledge acquisition and experience rather than who has checked the college degree box) than the

vast majority of the U.S. military (which on average is more educated than the general public).⁵¹ However, this does not make them integral to special operations, it makes them elite.

In restating the theory, you will notice that there is no mention of people or SOF communities; special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect. The lack of reference to SOF will undoubtedly strike many readers as wrong. Beyond the need to make the theory unifying and rigorous enough to be defended, the inclusion of SOF is not only unneeded, it would, in fact, be quite wrong. This work is not a call for action or a justification of funding. The parochial interests of the services and various special operations tribes, in this case, cannot be served while remaining intellectually honest. And, at the risk of incurring the wrath of the community, the ego and identity of the special operations community does not interest the author as it fails to inform the work at hand. Pride of achievement in being part of the special operations community is understandable and admirable—but only as long as it does not become myopic narcissism, which anyone involved with the special operations community knows it can, even though it is by far the exception not the rule. Most importantly, parochial service interests and myopic ego are all transient in nature. Definitions and conceptions will inevitably change over the course of time. A unified theory of special operations must transcend this contextual and time-specific aspect if it is to be truly applicable. It must be timeless, and therefore, must be and is defined with only the trinity of people, politics, and power to constrain it; it certainly cannot be based upon current definitions of SOF, or bureaucratic definitions of specific activities, or even U.S. statutes. Just because USSOCOM defines a USSOCOM core activity does not, in fact, make it ‘special’ nor solely conducted by officially designated SOF.⁵²

Historical examples of SOF will be explored later as the unified theory is tested to ensure it is historically sound. However, at this point, a historical contextualization is called for to properly place the theory relative to SOF. Just as one man’s freedom fighter is another man’s terrorist, the relativity of perspective applies equally to SOF through time. One era’s SOF is another era’s conventional forces. Simply being an airborne infantryman today is not considered to be a great achievement in the special operations community. In fact, while recently attending a conference, the author was asked by another attendee why he would wear something as mundane as miniature jump wings as a tie tack. The comment was both wryly amusing and somewhat

disappointing. The implication was that the author should surely wear a tie tack with more prestige than a simple airborne insignia. Yet, there was a deeper, and perhaps unintended, aspect of the comment. The individual who made the comment had to, at least to some degree, have the opinion that airborne troops and the achievement of being an airborne soldier was not to be celebrated. Such an insignia and distinction was below an accepted level of professionalism. At the time, the author ignored the comment, laughed and moved on, but the incident has remained a reminder of the perceptual limits of some, hopefully few, in the SOF community. During World War II, being an airborne infantryman was to be elite; as was being in the Office of Strategic Services and the Rangers. The reader may notice that the author chose to use the word elite rather than to call that era's elite SOF; the point being to illustrate the difference in terms as well as historic relativity of how elite forces are defined. As the reader will see later, there is a vast difference in the elite forces through time within a military context, and the definition is always relative.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines elite as: "A select part of a group that is superior to the rest in terms of ability or qualities."⁵³ Special is defined as: "better, greater or different from the usual."⁵⁴ Many readers will prefer and argue that special is a better designation for SOF units for a myriad of reasons. However, throwing ego aside, SOF are a part of the U.S. military, and every USSOCOM core activity is also conducted by non-SOF designated units. Like it or not, elite is the more accurate of the two terms. Using this definition is helpful when examining SOF, but is only tangentially related to special operations. Special operations communities are composed of highly motivated and skilled individuals that generally have advanced through lower tier levels of their organizations. Take, for example, the Smokejumper community within the United States Forest Service⁵⁵ and the Bureau of Land Management.⁵⁶ These are two different organizations, as the United States Forest Service is controlled by the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Land Management is controlled by the Department of the Interior; both are cabinet level organizations. Yet, the Smokejumpers of both organizations are considered elite members of the wildland firefighting community. Their standards differ to a degree, but not so significantly that they are substantially different. Smokejumpers in both organizations will typically start their firefighting careers in a district firefighting crew. These crews have the least experience of all wildland firefighters. As they gain experience and expand

their skill sets they may move on to become a member of a Hotshot crew. At the Hotshot level, the skill level is higher and the physical demands are increased given their extremely high operational tempo throughout the fire season. Rather than fighting fires in one specific district, a Hotshot crew will likely move around whole regions to continuously engage fires. After more time and experience, a wildland firefighter can attempt to become one of the approximately 400 Smokejumpers operating in the United States.⁵⁷ Competition for these spots is fierce, and physical and mental standards and skill sets are unforgiving.⁵⁸

The above example of the Smokejumpers relative to the rest of the wildland firefighting community fits well into the Oxford definition as being a select group of superior ability and quality. They are undoubtedly the elite formation of wildland firefighters. This, however, does not give them any relation to special operations within wildland firefighting; it only means they are the elite professionals within the wildland firefighting community. Yet Smokejumpers have their name because they parachute into rugged terrain to fight forest fires. Smokejumpers also perform many other missions including surveillance and reconnaissance of fires, medical augmentation during disaster response, advising other less experienced fire crews, and even establishing logistic bases. It is the parachuting into burning forests that captures the attention of most given the seriousness of any such endeavor.

The parachuting aspect makes the Smokejumpers unique in their profession and it could be argued, therefore, that only Smokejumpers can perform this task, which means by definition there can be no wildland special operations without Smokejumpers. This is the equivalent of saying there can be no U.S. military special operations without high altitude-low opening (HALO)

It is not the people conducting the mission that are special; they are elite.

qualified teams to bypass anti-access/area denial challenges and therefore, by definition, there can be no U.S. military special operations without HALO-qualified special operators. This is inaccurate in both cases and again leads to the mistake of attempting to define special operations

as something that only SOF do, again the tautology trap discussed earlier. In both cases, the HALO teams and the Smokejumpers are performing roles within their respective mission sets (wildland firefighting and U.S. military special operations) as elite members of their respective communities, not because they are SOF. It is the mission that is special because, as stated in

the unified theory, the special operation is an extraordinary operation. It is not the people conducting the mission that are special; they are elite.

The above distinction may seem pedantic and will likely leave most operators wondering why the distinction is needed. After all, if a career is spent doing almost nothing other than special operations, than why is it important to make such a distinction? The point here is that special operations, because they are extraordinary operations, may be more difficult to accomplish, have a greater political risk attached to them, require specialized skills which are rarer in the conventional forces, or a myriad of other reasons, and prefer, not require, elites. Take the example of the Smokejumpers above; they are not the only people capable of jumping into fires to combat blazes. In fact, the U.S. Army has a historical connection to the Smokejumpers. The 555th Parachute Infantry Battalion was activated as a result of a recommendation made in December 1942 by the Advisory Committee on Negro Troop Policies, chaired by Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy. In approving the committee's recommendation for a black parachute battalion, Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall decided to start with a company, and on 25 February 1943 the 555th Parachute Infantry Company was constituted.⁵⁹ The battalion did not serve overseas during World War II. However, in May 1945, it was sent to the West Coast to combat forest fires ignited by Japanese balloons carrying incendiary bombs.⁶⁰ Although this potentially serious threat did not materialize to any significant degree, the 555th fought numerous other forest fires. Stationed at Pendleton Field, Oregon, with a detachment in Chico, California, unit members courageously participated in dangerous firefighting missions throughout the Pacific Northwest during the summer and fall of 1945, earning the nickname "Smoke Jumpers" in addition to "Triple Nickles."⁶¹ So, in essence, while the special operation to jump into a fire and the Smokejumper community itself would prefer that an elite unit accomplish the mission, it does not mean only an elite Smokejumper unit is capable of doing such.

As this is a unified theory of special operations, it is worth pointing out that when a special operation, like the need to jump into a fire, is presented, calling upon an elite unit like the Missoula Smokejumpers is the preferred choice of force. A non-elite unit (within this relative context) like a Navy SEAL platoon would likely be worse than letting the fire burn itself out or having a Hotshot crew come in by helicopter. In this case, the Navy SEALs are not elite, in fact they would be so substandard it could be detrimental to

employ them in such a role. In truth, no Navy SEAL platoon, Special Forces Operational Detachment - Alpha (ODA), or any other airborne military unit should be employed in such a fashion when Smokejumpers are available. Likewise, it would be equally ridiculous to employ a Smokejumper team to jump and secure an airfield in a kinetic environment; it is simply not what they do best. But again, the point is that the operation is special, and while elites are preferred, in no way does the definition or context of the mission rest upon a linkage to units designated as SOF. More mundane but perhaps more illustrative examples of elites and non-elites that can do the same thing at different levels of competency yet still accomplish the special operations mission include: a special operations navigator vs. an artificial intelligence-enhanced global positioning system, pilots vs. a drone operator or artificial intelligence unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) control system, national mission force vs. airborne or air assault infantry, SEAL and Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command operators vs. regular Marines, etc. This is not to say units designated as SOF have no value; the author is at pains to ensure their credit as elite members of their respective communities is acknowledged. But to move forward, SOF cannot have any meaningful relation as part of a definition of a unified theory of special operations. It is the semantic equivalent of insisting that only supercomputers can solve math problems, even extraordinary ones. As it will be made clear later, the U.S. military, as the largest special operations community and the primary focus of this work, has a very specific role within a unified theory of special operations.

Surgical Strike and Special Warfare

There is no foundational contradiction between the concepts of surgical strike and special warfare with the unified theory of special operations. As long as the activities of surgical strike and special warfare are unusual/extraordinary, and seek a specific effect, they are not at odds. Yet, that does not mean there is harmony as the surgical strike and special warfare are currently conceived. Marsh, Kenney, and Joslyn argue persuasively that special operations can be broken down into these two categories.⁶² Unfortunately, they conclude, “The category of special operations, therefore, from a social science perspective, is too broad perhaps to develop a single theory, certainly for the construction of a parsimonious theory.”⁶³ The unified theory

of special operations is exactly that parsimonious theory that provides a framework.

The problem with the theoretical designation of special operations theory being categorized as surgical strike and special warfare is that it once again falls into the SOF equals special operations tautological trap. Special warfare is defined to include, “activities that involve a combination of ... actions taken by specially trained and educated force that has a deep understanding of cultures, foreign language, proficiency in small unit tactics and the ability to fight alongside indigenous combat formations.”⁶⁴ While this could describe an infantry soldier who is a first generation immigrant from the conflict area in question, the authors above come to the conclusion that, “There is also an undeniable parsimony in this definition, as it firmly anchors the ‘specialness’ of special warfare to the selected, trained, educated, and culturally and linguistically astute men and women that comprise SOF.”⁶⁵ This tautological connection is not required for a theory of special operations; it is another example of SOF defining the parameters of a theory of special operations. In essence, the above authors are correct; no parsimonious overarching theory can be achieved, but only because, like previous writers, the tautological trap is so firmly entrenched in the paradigms of theorists on the topic.

Surgical strike suffers the same fate as special warfare in its inability to divide and address special operations and SOF as distinct entities. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-05 defines surgical strike as: “the execution of activities in a precise manner that employ special operations in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence adversaries and threats.”⁶⁶ This definition is incredibly broad while providing almost no clarity and many facets could be conducted by a whole range of non-SOF elements. The following example will demonstrate that conventional forces have done this on a regular basis over the last decade. Yet, again the tautological connection is made when the authors conclude “This ability [U.S. surgical strike capability], we believe, significantly alters the nature of power in the international system, as other states seek to gain the status and capabilities that come from possession of such elite units and their ability to conduct missions such as surgical strike. This has led to the proliferation of SOF across the globe over the past 20 years and is a trend likely to continue.”⁶⁷ The reader should notice the authors almost broke out of the tautological

trap by recognizing that the ‘elite units,’ as argued earlier, have the ability to conduct surgical strike. This would be in line with the historical record that special operations predate SOF. Yet the authors then slip back into the trap as they connect the ‘proliferation of SOF across the globe’ in pursuit of surgical strike capabilities.

Ultimately, while theories of surgical strike and special warfare are not at odds with the unified theory of special operations, they do limit their utility by continuing to insist that special operations theories must somehow be grounded or connected with current force structure designations at the minimum, and allow the force structure to define the theory at the maximum.

Extraordinary Operations

A lexically semantic problem arises when trying to define special operations. With the definition above of special being different from something else while elite is of the same group but of higher quality, one needs to ask whether special operations should actually be defined as ‘elite operations.’ After all, they are operations like other operations within a community. In other words, if the national mission force assaults an objective to kill or capture a high value target (HVT) or a line infantry platoon assaults an objective to kill or capture a HVT, is the operation really different? This leads back into the tautology trap of linking special operations with SOF. It could lead the reader to conclude it is the force that makes the mission special, but they would be inaccurate in the appraisal. Foremost, ‘special operations’ is the subject of the theory. To try to redefine the subject would be to redefine the entire scope of the work as well as the validity of the logic. In essence, we have to start somewhere with an accepted topic, and there is no way to get around the semantic designation of the subject. While the designation may be awkward or semantically cumbersome, the subject’s definition cannot be altered to fit a proposed theory while intellectual honesty and rigor remain. This would be akin to developing a theory of gravity based upon an understanding of magnetism and then redefining gravity as a magnetic force. It may explain how magnets work, but it certainly would not be a theory of gravity.

Thus, special operations need some contextualization for coherence in the theory as an explanatory tool without a redefinition. In strategy terms, special operations, while unusual, are a bridge (the ways) between a desired

effect (the ends) and the capabilities at hand to achieve the desired effect (the means). This contextualization should make clear the absurdity of the special operations/SOF tautology, but to make it clearer, a metaphor can be helpful. If an architect (policymaker) designs a house, it is the house that is the ends or object. The builder—a geographic combatant commander (GCC)—will figure out the best way to build the house. He will choose which tools to use (force of choice) and when to accomplish the construction. He may use a hammer (conventional forces), or a nail gun (SOF), or a subcontractor (local militias). The builder will use the best tool for the job at hand, but the hammer or the nail gun does not determine the design of the house, nor does it determine how the builder builds the house. It is only a tool to be used when the builder decides it is the most useful tool. So, too, with a special operation; it determines the tool to be used, and prefers (like the builder) to use the best tool available for the job, especially because the missions are unusual, but it does not have to be the case. Conventional forces have been doing unusual missions throughout history just as houses were built well before the nail gun was invented.

Within the theory, ‘special operations’ is identified as extraordinary operations. The definition of extraordinary is “very unusual or remarkable,” with unusual being the most apt for the purposes of this monograph.⁶⁸ For anything to be unusual, it must, in any context, exist in relation to another category representing the usual. Extraordinary has been chosen for a specific reason; special operations are simply unusual when compared to conventional operations. Underwhelming, perhaps, but as this theory is universal for special operations, unusual provides the leeway for all communities with unusual operations to benefit from the theory, not just in a military context. Rescuing hostages and jumping into and fighting wildland forest fires are unusual acts within the law enforcement and firefighting communities, but the theory is equally applicable. Importantly, in both examples, the mission to rescue the hostages and put out small remote fires before either situation escalates to a worse condition; the missions prefer the use of the best tools around (FBI, HRT, and Smokejumpers), but none of the groups define the mission and, if required, other less elite groups can be used to accomplish the mission albeit likely with more friction.⁶⁹ You will notice the author has personified the word mission and allowed it to be possessive. This distinction may seem awkward, but it facilitates the thinking of the mission as special and distinct.

So if the mission is separate in definition from the force used to accomplish the mission, and the designation of special operations are extraordinary (unusual) operations, what limits the boundaries of the theory? Where does the definition of unusual start and stop in practical terms? The answer to both questions is that there exists no limits other than those policymakers and the community choose to place upon the community in question. The theory rests upon the fundamental basic principle that the unusual, the extraordinary operation, is defined by the usual or the ordinary. This relationship is relative in context and therefore constantly in flux. The limiting factor, or the bounds which govern the unusual, is not defined by the unusual, it is fundamentally defined by the usual with the unusual as the outlying exception. Therefore the unusual is contextual in nature. At face value this creates a logical paradox. Within a single community an operation could be defined as both unusual and usual. An example would be the use of a B-2 Spirit bomber to fly a resupply mission to an elite unit in an area with limited access by air due to air defense capabilities. While the Air Force would probably balk at such a mission for such a platform at the inception phase, the penetration of enemy air space by such an aircraft is exactly what it was designed for and therefore it could be argued that it does not represent a departure from the usual. However, using such a platform for resupply of troops on the ground, far behind enemy lines would be unusual. This paradox, however, is only skin deep. It again leads the reader back toward the tautology trap. The B-2 is the tool, while the mission of deep resupply is the extraordinary mission. This is much like the absurdity of the SOF tool defining what a special operation is; the same absurdity applies to any attempt to define the mission based upon the widgets employed.

Extraordinary operations are not only contextual relative to what is usual, for the theory to be a relevant explanatory tool, they must also be contextual through time. This again leads back to the tautological trap when misinterpreted. When looking at the historical record of special operations, it is tempting to start in World War II. In fact, the first record of military usage of “special” is with the creation of the Special Operations Executive directed by Churchill to “set Europe ablaze.”⁷⁰ In this context, small teams were to infiltrate into continental Europe to wage a campaign of the most ungentlemanly style of war to include assassination and sabotage.⁷¹ This historical event is seen as the genesis, quite incorrectly, of special operations. It links specific units with specific types of action leading to the tautological trap

that exists to the present day. The events and history of SOF since World War II fit neatly within a comforting paradigm which sees the linkage between SOF and special operations. In essence, the tautology has created a self-reinforcing conception of special operations and the role of SOF in conducting such missions. Unfortunately, the rest of the military has gone along with the delineation of such roles and mission sets as it allows the conventional forces to focus on what it perceives to be its proper role—fighting World War II conventional style conflicts even while gutting SOF designated units post conflict.⁷²

Ironically, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps for much of their history have been engaged in unconventional combat missions. The norm through time has been to fight small wars or conflicts that do not resemble large-scale conventional fights.⁷³ Whether it is fighting the American Indians, Confederate rebels, Filipino insurgents (three times), pirates, the Viet Cong or other irregular forces, it has and is continuing to do itself a disservice by longing for the good old days of conventional fights; those good old days never really existed except in spurts of relatively short, intense interstate conflicts. Much more time has been spent dealing with far more complex conflicts.

The question then arises: If the theory is to be credible and timeless, when did special operations start? When did the unusual become the other in military operations or nonmilitary operations? If we trace the semantic designation of ‘special,’ it is a very difficult subject. For example, as far back as 1408 there is reference to “Our generals and specials attournes and deputes,”⁷⁴ and in 1733 in law enforcement, “There was a Necessity for the Number of Special Constables that were appointed.”⁷⁵ The designation of special certainly did not start with World War II. Yet, the precursors to modern military special operation units can be traced back to World War II.⁷⁶ If we follow Spulak’s assertion that there can be no special operations theory without and linked to a theory of SOF, then there should be neither identifiable special operations, nor applicable theory prior to World War II.⁷⁷ Clearly the etymology of the word special, as demonstrated above, shows its usage prior to the 1940s. And, history has recorded special operations prior to World War II, long before Special Forces tabs and SEAL tridents adorned the uniforms of units. This, again, is another example of the faulty tautology of SOF equals special operations.

With the theory in mind and restated, special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific effect, and extraordinary defined

as the unusual which prefers elites, the theory requires specific historical examples to prove its relevance. A comprehensive listing of such operations is far beyond the scope of this work. However, two instances, one ancient in origin and the other more modern but predating World War II, are helpful examples of special operations conducted within the bounds of the theory but free of the post-World War II historical tautological trap.

The first example is also one of the oldest recorded histories of war. After 10 years of siege, the Greek armies of Agamemnon were unable to bring the city-state of Troy under his control due to the impregnable defensive walls. To overcome this obstacle, an unusual operation was undertaken with the well-known ruse of the Trojan horse. Elite soldiers hid inside the wooden horse until it was moved into the city and the Trojans relaxed their guard.⁷⁸ The soldiers then slipped out of the horse, opened the city gates allowing Agamemnon's army to enter the city and bypass the walls. This unusual operation fits every criteria of the unified theory of special operations. It was extraordinary (unusual) and conducted for a specific effect: the opening of the gates. The next section will go into the implications of specific effect, but it can also be classified in military terms as a strategic effect; the difference addressed later. In this example, the soldiers who took part in the operation were the elite among the Greeks.⁷⁹ They were not designated as a special operations force, nor in any way did they define what the nature of the operation would be. It was the mission, unusual in nature, designed to achieve a specific effect that had a preference for the most capable soldiers to increase the likelihood of success. The soldiers themselves did not define the mission; that would lead back to Clausewitz's absurdity and the tautological trap.

There is, of course, some question about the truth of the Trojan horse story. Archeological evidence does suggest that Troy was destroyed in a fire around the time indicated.⁸⁰ Whether or not we will ever know the truth behind the story is, however, irrelevant. No historical event is captured with 100 percent accuracy, especially one so far back in antiquity. The importance here is that the historical account, ancient in origin, fits within the parameter of the theory, and is a tolerably compatible analogy to our current conception of a special operation. A remarkable continuity given the number of years since it took place and the intervening advances in the conduct of warfare. It, however, is not remarkable in that it lends credence to the theory and provides historical evidence that the theory rests upon a sound foundation. It further demonstrates that there need be no linkage between the unified

theory of special operations and a theory of SOF, only supporting evidence that extraordinary operations prefer elites to reduce uncertainty.⁸¹

The second example is arguably the most successful special operation ever conducted by the U.S. military and a relatively forgotten figure in the annals of Army special operations. Fred Funston was a Brigadier General of Volunteers when he learned the whereabouts of Emilio Aguinaldo, the Filipino rebel leader of the insurgents in the Philippine-American War (following the Spanish-American War).⁸² He was made aware of not only Aguinaldo's location, but that he was expecting reinforcements to arrive to help the insurgency. Armed with this knowledge, Funston chose four of his most trusted officers along with 85 indigenous forces (Macabebe Filipinos) who posed as the reinforcements (with Funston and his officers acting the parts of prisoners of war) who then ingressed by boat and moved to Aguinaldo's location. The force was able to successfully infiltrate Aguinaldo's headquarters, capture the insurgent leader, and then egress to Manila with Aguinaldo in tow. This single operation successfully captured the head of an insurgent organization that led to the insurgency's collapse and the effective end of three years of counterinsurgency warfare in the Philippines (a few other leaders held out for a time, but the insurgency was effectively over). Importantly, Aguinaldo was not executed or even imprisoned but used for political ends, which will be discussed in the next section of the theory on specific results.⁸³

This operation was conducted prior to the advent of designated SOF units and again should illustrate that special operations have been around for much longer than such units. While the majority of Funston's force was made up of indigenous personnel, he chose four of his best men, people he considered elite by his standards and able to accomplish the mission. The context of the mission dictated the forces used—Americans could not pose as the relief force. Even a Spanish mercenary, Lazaro Segovia, was in

While the majority of Funston's force was made up of indigenous personnel, he chose four of his best men, people he considered elite by his standards and able to accomplish the mission.

on the operation, from the interrogation of the prisoner who gave up Aguinaldo's location (through torture) to the actual apprehension of the leader.⁸⁴ This was very much an unusual operation, both in terms of

audacity, force structure, and in the end result. It was undertaken by a Volunteer Brigadier General (Funston was commissioned a Brigadier General

in the regular Army as a reward), four guys he trusted, a mercenary and a bunch of loyal locals, and effectively ended the formalized period of the war.⁸⁵ Consider how far removed we have become as a community (USSOCOM) from this level of risk taking and reward. Could anyone today envision a National Guard brigadier general and four of his staff he trusted teaming up with a mercenary to torture an enemy courier, and then going off, few and unafraid, with 85 local tribal fighters to bring down an insurgent leader and end a war? Today this kind of unusual operation would lead to a jail sentence rather than a promotion, but even in its day it was quite unusual.

As revealing as this is about the nature of USSOCOM, we will explore it further in the second half of this work. More importantly, Funston's mission fits the criteria of the theory. It was a special operation defined as unusual and to achieve a specific effect. The mission chose the make-up of the force through preference of the tools that could best accomplish the mission. None of the participants were designated operators, and in no way did the conception of special operations even exist at the time. It was simply the act of courage and creativity by a figure who would later be surrounded by controversy, given his actions in the Philippines as part of our counterinsurgency effort (what would today be considered war crimes), as well as later remarks out of step with the political correctness of his time.⁸⁶

The above examples show clearly that unusual operations have a long history predating the designation of units within the military as SOF. Other special operations communities within law enforcement have similar lineages and histories, and the theory applies equally. Further, while the scope of extraordinary operation may feel terribly broad, with unusual being the only benchmark, it is purposely done and offers benefits, as will be seen later.

Lastly, extraordinary operations need to be given another contextualization through time. While the examples above provide a historical relevance to the unusual, the term, as previously stated, is defined by the usual and is always in flux. The same mission can be both unusual and usual depending on perspective, as the B-2 example showed. But the same operation can go back and forth between usual and unusual through time. An example of this phenomenon is a direct action mission to kill or capture a HVT. By the late 1990s, the ability to gather intelligence in real time to conduct a direct action mission to get a HVT was probably restricted to the national mission force level of operators. By 2004–2005, the ability to conduct these missions was routinely used by SOF as the technical tools had become more

widespread.⁸⁷ While both of these groups are within the U.S. military special operations community, it was the mission, or more accurately the number of missions combined with the dissemination of technical capability, that drove this participatory shift. In 2008, the author was in Iraq doing research and experienced the following:⁸⁸

An illustration of the technical capabilities of an unmanned aerial vehicle and the opportunities it can provide within a counterinsurgency effort was very clearly revealed on a night air assault mission in early April 2008. Twenty-two U.S. soldiers were standing by at the heliport in Forward Operating Base Warhorse outside Baquba for a mission of opportunity that night. At the same time a UAV flying just east of the town of Khalis spotted three insurgents placing an improvised explosive device in a culvert by a road. The controllers of the UAV, a Shadow, relayed the coordinates of the three individuals to an air weapons team standing by; in this case, an Apache attack helicopter. While the helicopter was in route, two of the insurgents left the third behind as they drove towards Khalis on a motorcycle. The air weapons team eliminated the third insurgent,⁸⁹ who was left behind walking down the road, while the Shadow UAV continued to follow the motorcycle and watched it as it weaved through the streets of Khalis. At the same time, the position of the IED was relayed back to the battalion tactical operations center for subsequent disarming or destruction by combat engineers the next day.⁹⁰ The two insurgents on the motorcycle eventually parked it and mingled with the crowds in the town of Khalis. It was decided that the destruction of the motorcycle or the attempted targeting of the insurgents would be counterproductive as all three were now situated within a densely populated residential area. The Shadow UAV maintained surveillance for over two hours until the insurgents returned to the motorcycle and drove out of Khalis to the east. It then followed the insurgents to a chicken coop roughly 10 miles east of Khalis and relayed the coordinates to the battalion tactical operations center. Within minutes the 22 U.S. soldiers and one civilian observer loaded up on two Black Hawk helicopters and proceeded with a 10 minute flight to the chicken coop at which the insurgents had stopped. While in flight the Shadow UAV continued to keep constant surveillance of

the chicken coop and was prepared to follow any individuals leaving. Within 10 minutes of the helicopter landing, the chicken coop was under U.S. control and four insurgents captured.⁹¹ One of the insurgents captured was a corrupt police officer wanted in another province of Iraq;⁹² two of the insurgents captured admitted to being two of the three individuals placing IEDs that night as had been observed by the unmanned aerial vehicle and were subsequently turned over to the Iraqi authorities for prosecution and imprisonment; the fourth insurgent was the most wanted target in Diyala Province; he commanded extremist Shia militias who were involved in sectarian violence against Sunnis and attacks on U.S. forces.⁹³

By 2008, what had traditionally been a mission set conducted by units designated as special operations units was then being conducted by line mechanized forces. The missions were no longer unusual and were routinely being conducted by all of the battalions in the 4th Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division (4/2) on a rotating basis. Would the commander of 4/2 have preferred to have the National Mission Force dedicated to his brigade for HVT missions? Of course. No commander is going to turn down more forces when confronted with real world challenges. However, the point is that the mission had become a usual mission rotating between the battalions to spread casualties. It was no longer in the realm of unusual and therefore no longer a special operation, regardless of who conducted the mission. Of course, when it first started to be conducted by the 4/2, it was unusual. It was a special operation being conducted by the line units. As the mission became routine, and the capacity for the intelligence collection became imbedded at the brigade level, it transitioned into the usual.

Is that trend likely to continue? Probably not. Even the 2/12 Field Artillery was among the rotation for the missions. Are they likely to keep their artillery in storage as they transition back to a barracks force? Not likely. They will once again establish the skill sets that have traditionally been the bread and butter of line units; they will return to their comfort zone, and the type of mission above will once again revert back to the category of unusual. The mission will again become extraordinary, at least until the next conflict requires it to again transition to the usual.

Specific Effect

There are two overarching reasons to use the term ‘specific effect’ in the unified theory of special operations. Foremost, it is a theory of broad scale intended for all special operations communities. As such, the term ‘strategic effect’ may not have adequate meaning for all communities. The term strategic (and strategy) has been widely abused. Technically, strategy, while defined as a plan, comes from the Greek *strategos*, which is the title of general. It is an inherently military term in which the way (strategy) military capability (means) is used to achieve a political objective (ends). While strategy as a word has been usurped by other communities, such as one may now have a business strategy or marketing strategy, within the context of this theory, strategy, and the military nature of this publication, strategic effect, while possibly accurate, obfuscates the matter. Specific effect allows the theory to make sense on a broader scale to special operations communities that may not have inherent military ties.

The second reason, and most pertinent to this monograph, is that many special operations have no strategic effect. The conventional wisdom is that special operations provide an option to conduct tactical operations using direct or indirect methods to achieve strategic and operational level objectives.⁹⁴ This type of vagueness is unfortunate and leads to no better understanding of special operations. In effect, all military actions take place at the tactical level, which is guided by and supports the operational objectives, which in turn is guided by and supports the strategic objectives, which in turn is guided by and supports the political objectives. The figure later in the section on the U.S. strategic paradox demonstrates this cascading and supporting effect of all military operations without any regard to whether they are special operations or not. Every military effort by every military unit should have some strategic effect, even if cumulative in nature, and the notion that special operations are somehow unique in this attribute is nonsense.

However, the unusual operation, the extraordinary, has a specific effect. If it was general and usual tactical engagements and efforts in support of the operational objectives, it by definition is not unusual. The unusual operation is differentiated because it is not usual; again the usual defines the unusual in context. Therefore, there must be a specific reason the unusual operation is being undertaken; otherwise, by definition, it would be usual. In truth

there are very few special operations that have remarkable strategic effect. Rather, their cumulative effect creates strategic effect, just like every other tactical military effort. Few have ever risen to the level of Funston's raid discussed above. That was a special operation that had not only a strategic effect but a political effect (even a theoretical effect on the Filipino conception of self-determination), which helped bring the war to a close. No other special operation in the last century can claim to have had that level of impact.

To a certain degree, when the special operations community asserts that it conducts tactical operations for operational or strategic effect, it is in effect saying they are different from the conventional forces. In the sense they are special by having this effect, they are wrong for the reason stated above. However, they are correct in that they are called upon to do the unusual operation due to the elite status of some of their units. To illustrate this point, the bin Laden raid did not actually accomplish a strategic objective at or even remotely close to that of Funston's raid. It did not spell the end of al-Qaeda, nor did it end the threat posed by al-Qaeda. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS) savvy marketing has done more damage to al-Qaeda's recruiting base than a military operation could have hoped to accomplish. And conventional forces could have performed the same mission, albeit at a higher risk with regards to Clausewitzian friction and likelihood of friendly casualties. The mission should not be classified as having a strategic effect. The mission, however, had a very specific effect. It demonstrated American resolve to find our enemies, anywhere in the world, and exact retribution when we are so inclined to put forth the effort. Does that translate into strategic deterrence? Are there ancillary political benefits? Maybe on both counts, but time will be the determining factor in the end. It still remains ironic that arguably the most strategically successful special operation ever conducted by the U.S. military (Funston's raid) was successfully undertaken before the first SOF designation happened.

While 'specific effect' may, like unusual operation, feel too broad and nebulous, it serves to rectify the misconception of special operations and strategic effect. It also allows inclusion under the theory of a whole range of options for operations. Remember, this theory is meant to be an umbrella, not an exacting definition to cover precise facets of special operation in minute detail. Ultimately, it allows the conception of special operations beyond the bounds of the operational and strategic.

Part II: Implications of a Unified Theory of Special Operations

States maintain military forces and adopt policies to use them for many reasons. For those forces to have value, they must be capable of being used effectively. Obsolescent or obsolete forces have low credibility and low operational serviceability.⁹⁵

While the first part of this monograph has presented a unified theory of special operations, a pertinent question then becomes ‘so what?’ From here this author diverges from the umbrella which covers all special operations communities to focus solely on the implication for USSOCOM as that is the community for which this work is intended. It is up to professionals in the other special operations communities to best figure how the overarching unified theory is applicable and helpful within their specific contexts. This theory is not a call to action for parochial interests within the U.S. military special operations community. As such, the discussion will remain broad and not delve into the actions or roles of the specific components of USSOCOM. The cascading effect of this theory at that level can be left for follow-on research and reflection to better tune a complimentary theory to explain the roles of each component’s constituent forces.

Foremost, it becomes important to contextualize current conflicts and the likely trajectory of future conflicts. This contextualization lays the foundation for exploring how USSOCOM and the civilian oversight of the organization can benefit from the theory. Fundamentally, there is a shift in the complexity of conflict in comparison to the historical norm of the 20th century.⁹⁶ This shift is more in line with the historical norm of continuous low-level conflict.⁹⁷ Yet this return to the overall historic norm creates a paradox for U.S. strategic engagement. It will challenge our paradigms and the popular conception of how and to what ends wars are fought. This shift is extremely important for the theory in that the usual, which defines the unusual, is in flux, and therefore what is extraordinary is going to be redefined in the coming decades. The implications for USSOCOM will be profound because, while the unusual will become the usual or norm in conflict, the perception of what is usual or unusual will define the reality.

In short, USSOCOM will be overburdened by future commitments because the mission sets that have been deemed as special operations (often wrongly) will continue to increase in importance, and the perception of the appropriate tool will cause policymakers to look toward USSOCOM to solve the complex challenges of the present and future—SOF in Syria being just the most recent example. This could be a boon for USSOCOM if it uses the unified theory to start understanding and accepting the true nature of special operations as the unusual/extraordinary rather than a set of core missions defined by the tools in the toolbox.

The U.S. Strategic Paradox

While ostensibly the topic of this second section is about the future of special operations within the framework of the unified theory of special operations, it is in fact about the future of warfare—the actual conduct of war, not the nature of war. War, much like strategy, may be conducted differently, but the nature of both is unchanging and ubiquitous.⁹⁸ Yet the unchanging nature of war provides only general terms of reference, usually historical and with misleading clarity. The conduct of war is quite the opposite. Pondering warfare is adequate for providing fleeting glimpses of the current juxtaposition of history and quite often profoundly inaccurate predictions of an unknowable future. Yet, there are trends, general in scope, certainly fuzzy in fidelity, and subject to change that may help guide our understanding of future challenges in the conduct of war—the certainty of crystal balls and tarot cards belong solely at the carnival.

Future uncertainty is compounded by the tendency of military professionals, civil servants, and the outlying academics interested in martial subjects to focus upon the tactical and operational challenges du jour. Interesting technologies, photogenic weapon systems, and all manner of rediscovery of subjects previously examined (with obligatory new names attached) provide endless subject matter for debate and publishing opportunities. The general process of find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate (F3EAD) would be wholly new and exciting had it not been conducted by the French in the Battle of Algiers half a century ago.⁹⁹ The discovery of the human domain could be revolutionary, unless of course you buy into Aristotle's idea that humans are political animals,¹⁰⁰ and Clausewitz's notion that war is politics by other means.¹⁰¹ Apparently humans have always been the primary focus of

war. The point here is not to ridicule or lessen the value of current thinking about the subject of warfare (or the profession of the author and readers), but to point out that questions of the day are often distracting from the strategic problems of a much longer period. This is to say that current operational and tactical problems are important, but in a strategic vacuum, or at least a strategic paradox, they may not matter in the long run.

The United States faces a fundamental strategic paradox which will become more pronounced the longer it is ignored. The paradox is not static and has been slowly evolving; the roots are centuries in the making as Liberalism has continued to influence warfare. In the simplest terms, the paradox resides in the inability of U.S. strategic culture to permit the achievement of desired political outcomes because warfare has become ritualized through constraints which are diametrically opposed to the timeless nature of war. More importantly, the paradox is confronted by a world in which change will be the norm and populations will be less tolerant of U.S. military intervention that is overtly visible rather than lesser known special operations. The good news is that nothing in the future is assured and the United States has a history of adaptation when confronted by challenges. If the will emerges, the paradox can be broken, but the paradox is also likely to be the single greatest challenge the U.S. military, and USSOCOM in particular, will face in the conduct of war in the coming century. In essence, the U.S. strategic paradox then is that through our ritualization of war, based upon a theory of Liberalism, combined with our technical superiority driving adversaries to irregular means, the U.S. military is left unable to impose its will on the population-centric enemy.

An Irregular Future

The technologic advantage of the U.S. military is unrivaled and will likely remain so until China reaches parity within a few decades at most.¹⁰² While the technical advantages of the U.S. military are profound, they also represent a second order effect of self-neutralization. Particularly after Operation Desert Storm, it became apparent that attempts to meet U.S. forces in a classic conventional confrontation were an unproductive activity for other states. China specifically recognized the extreme lethality of the technically oriented conventional forces which the United States developed in the later stages of the Cold War.¹⁰³ Yet, while the U.S. Army may have relegated

Vietnam and irregular warfare to a second-class military standing, other countries realized that an asymmetrical response had become the only viable counter to U.S. hard power. In many ways the investment in conventional capability had reached a culminating strategic point in which further investment will not provide the same return. This is not to imply that the culminating point has taken on a degree of finality. Rather, for a time, and for the foreseeable future, U.S. conventional forces are unlikely to meet opponents within a conventional context or framework, yet, special operations will remain. As noted previously, China is clearly trying to close the technical gap and may well once again make the U.S. conventional force as important as it has been historically. In the meantime, the future is far more likely to see irregular threats to U.S. national interests rather than state-backed conventional threats.¹⁰⁴

Before delving further into the implications of irregular war in the U.S. strategic paradox, it is most helpful to contextualize war itself. Fundamentally, war is about achieving political objectives through the imposition of our will, as Clausewitz elegantly and perhaps obtusely (in his writing) observed; this means the use of violence and fear, as politically incorrect as some may find such a proposition. The other timeless strategic thinker, Sun Tzu, would agree in principle if not within the method or context. Importantly, war is not about winning. In fact, the idea of winning wars is a truly unfortunate semantic designation. To win falls somewhere between a sporting outcome and a lucky string of lottery numbers without any true meaning in modern or irregular conflict. While we may want to “Win the Current Fight” as a line of effort at USSOCOM, one must ask what that actually means.¹⁰⁵ What does a ‘win’ look like? Does the phrase make any sense within a strategic framework, or does it simply supply a placeholder as a slogan, easily identifiable within a culture that prefers rather neat constructs with a certainty of some sort of finality? The future therefore will be, generally, unusual in outcomes vis-à-vis the traditional 20th century expectations of finality as the end state of conflicts.

Tactically, you may ‘win’ an engagement with clear domination of the enemy force and the objective taken; to some degree this makes sense. However, the United States is not going to ‘win’ against ISIS because it is as much an ideology as it is an entity. The U.S. may be successful in achieving certain political objectives—perhaps degrading the organization—but the underlying ideology is not something the United States can ‘win’ against;

the ultimate fate of the ideology is in the hands of Muslims in the Middle East. Politicians get it very wrong when making claims such as promises to ‘destroy’ ISIS; after all, that would entail the destruction of the people who support the ideology behind the movement which is not something Western democratic leaders will support.¹⁰⁶

The fact that our future conflicts are likely to be irregular in nature against opponents like ISIS, al-Qaeda, or other violent extremist organizations of the month, means we will be combating an underlying ideology that is supported by a segment of a given population. This population is sometimes recognized as up to 10–15 percent of a population, but the exact number is unknowable and will vary given the specific context.¹⁰⁷ Mistakenly in the past, such populations and the insurgents they support have been underestimated. ISIS was classified as a “JV squad” in comparison to al-Qaeda,¹⁰⁸ and Iraqi insurgents were referred to as dead-enders by individuals who preferred or perhaps could not grasp the significance of either emerging threat.¹⁰⁹ The fact is that all war is

political in nature, and by definition, insurgents seek political objectives. While some groups may start as terrorist organizations to rally support and awareness of a political cause, terrorism alone will almost never accomplish a political objective. At

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some point, the terrorist group must transform itself to leverage the political awareness it has garnered. Whether an insurgency starts as a terrorist organization or not, it must have political support of some percentage of a population in order to exist.

The fact that there is popular support for an adversary certainly does not mean the adversary cannot be targeted. There should be no distinction here between a conventional and irregular adversary. In essence, the nature of war, not the peculiarities of warfare, provide for the application of violence and fear, which is equally applicable to both categories. Breaking networks through F3EAD and defeating maneuver battalions is at the theoretical level no different. However, as the ever sage Yogi Berra once may have said, “In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is.”¹¹⁰ The method of dealing with either a conventional or an irregular threat will be quite different, but is highly dependent upon the strategic context of

the adversary. If it is a conventional force representing a government resented by the people, and based upon questionable loyalty of the societal elites, popular support will not necessarily be an issue. Conversely, an irregular adversary must have popular support (more so with insurgencies than terrorist organizations), which should be central and a paramount concern in any theory of victory. In either case, most responses, due to the paradox, will require unusual solutions and lines of effort compared to the historical norm. These will be special operations by definition.

The Context of War

Naturally, the last 15 years of conflict have provided ample lessons in the importance of the human terrain, social networks, actors and agents of influence, tribal affiliations, and other human-to-human connections within the strategic contexts of the conflicts. As each context is unique, so too should be each effort. Counterinsurgency (COIN) in Afghanistan is not COIN in Iraq, just as COIN in Anbar Province, Iraq, is not COIN in Diyala Province, Iraq. The U.S. military's recognition of the value and importance of the interagency community to obtain success in these varied conflicts speaks volumes on the adaptability of the military as a learning institution and the ability to move beyond a theory of victory defined by warheads on foreheads alone.¹¹¹ In essence, the U.S. military has come to understand that all war is conducted in a strategic context in which people matter. People will have a vote on whether our political objective may be achieved. This may seem like an uninspiring and banal observation of evident facts, but it is in fact not a historical norm and is partially one of the foundational issues of the U.S. strategic paradox.

Populations have been, are, and will continue to be targets in war. The examples are legion from the historical record of Mongols, Romans, and a plethora of other cultures and peoples. More modern examples can be found in the Russian efforts in Chechnya and Sri Lankan campaign to bring finality to the Tamil Tigers.¹¹² Western democratic nations practiced similar warfare during the colonial period with U.S. treatment of American Indian and Filipino insurgents standing as poignant examples of U.S. military participation in campaigns that would now be classified as morally dubious at best and war crimes at worst.¹¹³ This is not an attempt to engage in moral judgment of past military practice through a modern lens. The historical

period treated these activities and those who participated as normative and should be considered in that light. Such conduct of warfare will remain an option for the future and will be judged harshly by contemporary standards, while potentially ignoring the efficacy of such methods. The Western world is different, but only when viewed through the context of time and our ideological/theoretical paradigms of the present, which in turn help define the usual, and thereby the extraordinary.

Figure 1 should be familiar to most military professionals with the three overlapping rings of levels of war at the bottom. This model is taught in many of the professional military education institutions of the U.S. military. The U.S. military performs brilliantly at the tactical level, excels at the operational level, and contemplates the strategic level later in individuals' careers as it intersects with policy directives. In reality, there are five levels of war that all fall under the umbrella of theory. It is theory that drives politics and policy, which in turn drives strategy, operations, and tactics in descending order. By design, the U.S. military actively remains below the political level. Some generals operate well at the political level, such as Eisenhower's ability to help reorganize the Department of Defense because he understood his role was to execute policy rather than attempt to make policy.¹¹⁴ Others like Douglas MacArthur (and his father Arthur MacArthur) fell to ignominy because they strayed into the political level and attempted to make policy.¹¹⁵

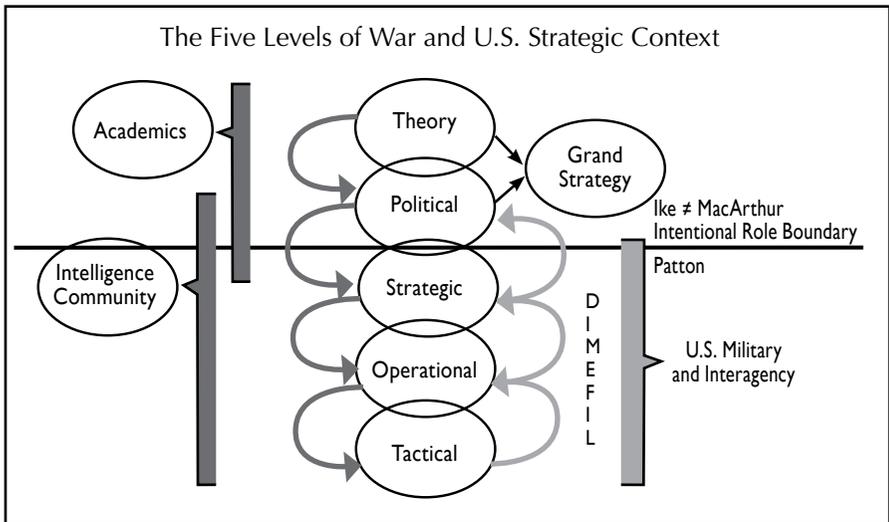


Figure 1: The Five Levels of War and U.S. Strategic Context. Source: Author¹¹⁶

Over time, our conception of appropriate use of forces has morphed because our overarching theory of Liberalism (the political theory) has impacted the political level within the figure. Behaviors that were once acceptable, such as attacking American Indian villages and killing Filipinos over the age of 10 who were capable of bearing arms as a definition of enemy combatants, have become much more restricted.¹¹⁷ This is a natural process of our political system to reflect the ever-evolving nature of the values of the population, or at least those elected to represent them. This is not meant to be a critique on Liberalism (the political theory) and its impact on American society—a debate beyond the scope of this work. The point is to recognize the historical trend of Liberalism acting as a constraint on U.S. military activities and should, again, highlight the ever-evolving definition of the usual.¹¹⁸

Limiting U.S. military activities and the conduct of forces in war has a long historical precedence. Most societies have held some degree of definition as to what constitutes appropriate military behavior. These constraints will be in proportion to the political objectives of the conflict. The closer a conflict comes to being an existential threat, the further it will move toward Clausewitz's idea of total war. However, Liberalism defines the sanctity of noncombatants as absolute. One need only read the continuous droll of international watchdogs like Human Rights Watch who attempt to define war crimes and genocide through an almost absurd abuse of each actual definition. Importantly, the civilian populations that provide tacit or moral ideological support of an adversary cannot be targeted intentionally; after all, they have the freedom of expression, as well. This would be of slight concern if future war resembled conventional wars of Europe's past.

Put another way, we cannot force an adversary (population) to stop supporting organizations as outlandishly beyond any normative bounds as ISIS. It is the historical equivalent of refusing to fight Nazi Germany with every means available because a segment of the German population supported the Nazi Party, and hurting people not in uniform is almost never acceptable. Such a paradigm creates a strategic paradox, again, when at the political level, policy statements about destroying an organization like ISIS are then to guide strategy.

The U.S. military is attempting to address the paradox—not out of awareness, but rather, out of a lack of alternatives, as USSOCOM and special operations are considered more important than ever before. Contrary to popular opinion and public statements made by defense experts of all stripes, there

is, in fact, a military solution to irregular enemies—just ask the Tamils. Given our theoretical basis within our context, however, it is an issue of lack of will and a moral/legal self-restraint. To address the paradox, the whole-of-government or all-of-nation approach is seen as the model with which to move forward. Ironically, this is just a rediscovery of Grand Strategy, but catchy new names always sound better than hard to grasp, ill-defined, and academically dusty terms.¹¹⁹ In theory, through the whole-of-government approach, all facets of national power are deployed throughout the DIMEFIL spectrum to achieve our political objective. The means of strategy becomes more diverse and the ways more complex. The interagency approach should address the shortfalls of purely military efforts in a modern irregular context. The problem, as Peter Drucker is credited for recognizing: culture eats strategy for breakfast.¹²⁰

Figure 1 is applicable to any state or non-state actor with theory representing the meta-narrative of a group: ideology, culture, and ethos as examples. When we act against an adversary at the tactical level, it should support the operational and strategic objective in order to effect a political change in the adversary's context. Too often, the military thinks in terms of tactical action for strategic effect as a win; think of killing Bin Laden and then ask, what has been won? How have we affected the theoretical and political levels of Salafist Jihadism? Can we change an adversary's theoretical underpinnings or foundations upon which its entire political paradigm rests? The answer is both yes and no; we have in the past, but the paradox will not allow us to in the future. The historical norm is no longer the current or near-term usual.

The reorganization of Japan and Germany (the American Indians can be used as an irregular example) was a foundational change of our adversary's contexts at the theory level, which in turn cascaded down to the political level, effecting change. However, this was accomplished with a tremendous amount of force, bloodshed, and suffering of the people, as well as the social and political elites. The Allies imposed their political will upon their adversaries in every sense, and it was clear to the populations of Germany and Japan that continued irregular conflict was not in their best interests—in essence, get with the program or get dead. This level of reorganization may work without the attendant violence and wholesale destruction of a country and a large number of its people. However, our success stories, such as Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines, are limited while the continued problems of Iraq and Afghanistan remain very real. Solutions will now be

sought through unusual means, but what exactly will be effective within the realm of the unusual is still very much in question.

This second section returns full circle to the original question regarding the future of special operations in warfare under the umbrella of the unified theory of special operations; what are the implications given the U.S. strategic paradox? Challenges will arise, such as mega cities, force structure optimization, emerging disruptive technologies, the role of cyber warfare, and other unforeseen issues. The history of the U.S. military is one in which adaptation and innovation are the norm and these challenges will be

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addressed with a general level of tolerable success. Confronting challenges by including interagency organizations will provide strategic flexibility in some places, leading to success at the tactical, operational, and often strategic levels. However, USSOCOM will have to be flexible, ready to adapt to the unusual,

challenge its paradigms and assumptions, and most importantly, accept the unusual as perceived by the public and policymakers as a challenge to overcome, not a duty to be avoided.

The good news for USSOCOM is that there will be plenty of business. The big Army and big Air Force attempts over the last 15 years have not yielded effective return on investment when comparing financial and political capital expended for very little in political objectives achieved. It has been recognized, or perceived to have been recognized, that given the constraints the U.S. military faces today, a conventional military force may not provide the solutions to our international challenges.¹²¹ Within the context of the challenges we face, there could and should be an open debate whether these are regular (usual) challenges the nation faces or are still unusual within the context of the last century. The answer to that will depend upon whom you ask. What USSOCOM may be walking into, unbeknownst to them, is a classic problem of overpromising and under-delivering. If USSOCOM and the components make clear that the human domain is where the challenges reside, and they are uniquely prepared to operate effectively in that space, it may be prudent to be careful what they wish for. In truth, there may very well be populations which USSOCOM has zero chance of affecting within the

human domain. To build a perception that USSOCOM can accomplish the impossible strongly suggests an unavoidable future encounter with failure.

Authority

If the unified theory of special operations is accurate, which the author would strongly argue the evidence supports, then the extraordinary operation (special operation) has been wrongly classified as having an impact at the operational and strategic levels of war. In reality, the term 'specific effect' is far more accurate. It may have effects at the operational and strategic levels, but what is truly valuable is to have an effect at the political level within figure 1 on page 45. In essence, this is what makes Funston's special operation in 1901 so utterly brilliant. It effectively ended the insurgency, the most sought after political goal of the conflict, the true ends of the conflict at the political level. This was not just an operational or strategic effect, but a specific effect to cause a specific result. Every special operation should be thought of that way, not only to broaden the possibilities of what can be accomplished, but to also cause USSOCOM and the operators themselves to move beyond a campaign plan when considering what is possible, no matter how unusual it may be. The bounding of the scope of a special operation need not fit any one or two categories. If the mission is unusual, it does not matter if the specific effect is at the tactical, operational, strategic or political level. All are valid, even though a recognition that the higher the level of effect, the likely more valuable the operation is as the ends of any conflict are inexorably linked to the political.

But then what does this mean for USSOCOM? The world is becoming more complex. The force of choice will be the most flexible, professional, and agile. This is not to say that it equates to SOF; they may not fit the bill. The strategic paradox takes big Army, Air Force, and Navy out of the role as primary actor unless large-scale intervention is again required—an ever present possibility, but one that is currently tenuous given the public sentiment of the last 15 years. It means USSOCOM must be prepared to conduct operations through the GCCs and in support of the GCCs, or on its own, which brings the issue to the question of authorities and oversight.¹²²

Since special operations are extraordinary missions to achieve a specific effect, then there is no way to predict the future requirements. The unusual mission is often the byproduct of the unforeseen. Sure, some unusual

missions may be expected: the odd kill capture mention here, or the collaboration with an exotic people of different culture, language and custom there. But the unusual has a habit of popping up in unexpected ways and places. Ten years ago, no one thought Syria would be in its present state. No one foresaw the difficulty of choosing our proxies among the Syrians and how the vetting, training, and equipping would take place, or if they did, there has been a breakdown of sound advice to policymakers and/or willing dismissal of said advice by policymakers. The result has been strategic paralysis.¹²³ No one anticipated an enemy with an outlandishly fundamentalist outlook like IS with such a savvy ability to control the narrative, or an effective response to challenge which we continue to fail at countering.¹²⁴ The unusual has a nasty habit of causing surprise; we could ask Custer if he were still around. So how do we plan for the unusual and the attendant surprise it may entail?

The answer to dealing with the unusual is not to restrict action. The application of tools to conduct the unusual operation is not furthered by a reduction in flexibility. This is especially true when in the modern complex world state and non-state actors have made it blatantly clear they will not play by our rules. The solution is the opposite of clinging to bygone paradigms of the role of special operations. The Leahy Law is just one case in point. The restriction on collaboration with outside entities, from wholly different cultures, with different norms and customs, may be far too restrictive if the goal is to accomplish a political end.¹²⁵ The counter-argument to such a blatant disregard for our normative values is that it lessens our standing in the world and helps promote “democratic development around the world.”¹²⁶ It may be surprising to the domestically focused political leader in America, but we have already lost the moral high ground in the eyes of many peoples around the world; it is also quite condescending to demand other cultures conform to our norms.¹²⁷ Freedom of action and flexibility is what the theory calls for. You will notice in the theory there is no reference to morality, societal norms, laws of armed conflict, or other restrictive measures. This makes the theory applicable universally, but it has also been kept out because such restrictions constitute a detrimental effect on any special operations community trying to recognize and coherently cope with the unusual when it does happen.

Questions then arise as to which specific authorities should USSOCOM have: Title 50, Title 10, Title 22 and 23, or others? The answer, guided by the unified theory of special operations, is that USSOCOM should have full authority across the entire spectrum. It is not a question of which authorities

it should have, because of the nature of the unforeseeable of the unusual, it is an issue that there should be no applicable limitations to the scope of interest, activity, or execution of extraordinary operations. In essence, authority for anything should be *carte blanche* with minimal limitations, otherwise the ability of a special operations community, USSOCOM in particular, will be limited, and therefore, the strategic utility of special operations will be curtailed—the opposite of what should be intended. Such a wide-ranging discretion by a single entity within the U.S. government should be taken into consideration given past abuse by government agencies from Hoover, to the CIA,¹²⁸ to the Internal Revenue Service.¹²⁹ Such extraordinary authority will *de facto* come with extraordinary opportunity for abuse, mismanagement, and potential misuse or ethical missteps. To be clear, unlimited authority does not mean the absence of oversight. Whether an ambassador in a certain country is the appropriate oversight is certainly questionable, but just as the CIA must brief Congress on all operations, the same oversight can, and arguably should, be applied to USSOCOM to prevent historical abuses of authority. It can be argued that the GCC structure is no longer as needed as it once was. This author leaves that open to the interpretations of others. However, the GCCs, the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Office of the President, and Congressional oversight are adequate mechanisms in place to ensure USSOCOM does not behave unacceptably, not by limitations through statutes in U.S. Code that limit flexibility, but rather, through common sense and vigilance.

In such circumstances, USSOCOM and the component commands may find such unlimited authorities to be welcome, and perhaps the theory a little bit more palatable. But they should be careful in that the theory does not call for any specific action to be taken; again, it is broad in nature as are the implications. The theory also implies change within the paradigm of the U.S. special operations community. It does not imply unlimited authority for the purpose of the status quo—just the opposite, in fact. The logic of the theory implies any unusual operation, the extraordinary, is within the realm of special operations, not just the extraordinary which fits current paradigms, comfort zones, and prized military occupational specialties. The fundamental conceptions of what it means to be an operator would be in flux. The missions would no longer be comfortable lists of core activities which can be translated for the force all the way down to a mission essential task list. While there will always be a place for the elite warriors with tridents

and tabs, the implications for USSOCOM are far larger if the unified theory of special operations is to not just explain the phenomenon of special operations, but to also provide more effective use.

Regarding cyber operations, Admiral McRaven stated:

What we do is we provide our demands. So if we're looking for a particular individual, then we will make sure that we are linked with the NSA. They will through their technical means figure out how to identify that person. So instead of us in USSOCOM building an additional capability to conduct cyber operations, we use the experts at Cyber Command and at NSA to do that.¹³⁰

From an organizational and bureaucratic perspective this makes sense. Cyber Command was established in 2009; the intelligence community has likely been involved in cyber operations.¹³¹ The message is fairly clear: USSOCOM is not trying to take or play in other Executive Branch department's rice bowls. USSOCOM will do what USSOCOM does best and leave the emerging, confusing, and quickly changing world of cyber operations to organizations that are designed and specifically designated to handle this aspect of conflict. This is unfortunate and brings the work back to the SOF equals special operations tautology that is so damaging. Again, it is the nail gun designing the house. If SOF do not have the capability to do a particular mission, it will not be considered a special operation and within the purview of USSOCOM. This is exactly the opposite of the implications of the unified theory of special operations. SOF should not be the determining factor of whether a mission is extraordinary; the mission should be determined as extraordinary by its juxtaposition to the ordinary, and it then prefers the elite force to accomplish the mission. Consider a group of very creative and savvy computer and coding specialists who put together a string of ones and zeroes, which they manage to get into the computer control system of the centrifuges, which then cause the centrifuges to spin out of control and tear themselves apart? Is the end result not the same? Is the mission on both accounts extraordinary and designed to cause a specific effect? Of course, there really is no difference between the two ends; the only difference lies in the means and ways. Sure, the computer guys have not passed rigorous physical selection processes like Basic Underwater Demolition School and Special Forces Assessment and Selection to weed out the physically and mentally weak. But does that matter? Does it make the computer guys any less

'operators' conducting a special operation? It does not. The only thing that is different is that within the U.S. military special operations community, it is a foreign concept and paradigm. It challenges the conventional notions of people who, by their nature and through the selection process, are supposed to think in unconventional ways—a touch of irony on many levels.

With the implications of unlimited authorities comes the implication of unlimited potential and a responsibility to realize and act on that unlimited potential. USSOCOM is not bureaucratically nor paradigmatically designed to think that far out of the box, regardless of their designation as creative, flexible thinkers and doers. It would be akin to the builder of the house, in the example earlier, figuring a way to 3D print a home even though there will always be uses for his tools in his toolbox. It fundamentally challenges an implied hierarchy within the U.S. military special operations community that values the qualified special operator above all others. That is fine, for the niche which they fill, and again kudos should be given to those who have risen to meet such high standards of performance within their selected niches. It is detrimental only so far as it has supported the tautology trap that has and will prevent USSOCOM from using a sound unified theory of special operations in the future. The number, and specifics of possible missions, are far too lengthy to list, and are literally only limited by the creativity of the reader. For example, during World War II, art experts were brought into military service in an attempt to salvage art plundered by the Nazis throughout Europe, recently highlighted in the movie *The Monuments Men*.¹³² This was a very unusual mission conducted for a specific effect, in no way connected to tactical, operational, strategic, or even political ends at the time, but rather, a cultural end. Juxtapose that to the looting of Iraqi antiquities and artifacts in 2003.¹³³ Where was the creativity in thinking? Who would be responsible for such an unusual mission? Surely not the Third Infantry Division. This is the complex world of the future, and USSOCOM should be looking for the unusual, not for exclusive missions fit for a SEAL platoon, or ODA. How hard would it be to draft/buy/convince experts in Iraqi antiquities to conduct a similar mission as the World War II model? Not hard if recognized and chosen as an unusual operation, but almost impossible for the tools in the box lacking the expertise. The future is unknowable; only general trends may be inferred until the challenges present themselves. The question is whether USSOCOM can adapt to effectively use a better explanation of the

phenomenon of special operations offered by the unified theory of special operations. More importantly, can anyone else?

The Reality Check

While changing the paradigm of USSOCOM could be an extreme challenge, to change the perspectives of other interagency players and the legislative branch, to put it lightly, would be herculean. Bureaucracies are specifically designed to resist change. It is human nature to be comfortable and protect what you have. The State Department would blanch at the suggestion of an unfettered USSOCOM actively conducting any operation they deemed unusual on a global scale, and would likely become apoplectic at the notion that a country ambassador was not able to provide the final word on operations within ‘their’ country. But the world is changing. Challenges of non-state actors are not confined to a single country, a single GCC, or even a single continent.¹³⁴ Regardless, the prospects of the State Department giving any ground to USSOCOM are highly problematic. The same would go for many interagency partners who may deem an unbound and unfettered USSOCOM a threat to their self-interests. Like it or not, we created the system we have, as a nation, and changing a system, much less a culture, requires monumental shifts in thinking and attitudes.

The reader may notice in the figure presented in the U.S. Strategic Paradox section, the top rung in the graph is labeled “Theory.” While Liberalism’s effect on politics has been discussed, the first step in changing policy is to have a solid theoretical basis in order to argue, cogently, that change is needed. Such drastic changes do not happen overnight, if at all. The unified theory of special operations may be best utilized through broad interpretation,

The unified theory of special operations may be best utilized through broad interpretation, but in politics, perception is reality.

tion, but in politics, perception is reality. If the perception is that USSOCOM is making a power play for more funding, influence, billets, etc., then the outcome is likely to be negative. This is understandable, because while the unified theory of special operations does not

call for specific action, it also does not favor a service or logically lead to the diminishment of other agencies authority and utility; from the bureaucratic

standpoint, other organizations will have the opposite perception. It is the nature of culture and bureaucracies that have been built.

Congress, in particular, will be leery of expanding the scope and authority of USSOCOM to operate. The very nature of USSOCOM is seen to be shadowy, secretive, and clandestine.¹³⁵ These attributes have historically given the American people reason to pause and be distrustful of government, certainly since the 1960s, but also traceable all the way back to some of the Founding Fathers' hesitancy to build a standing Navy.¹³⁶ Following closely behind Congress and the interagency, the services themselves are likely to be less than enthusiastic with an unfettered USSOCOM. In the world of shrinking budgets, money matters. Money is finite, with each service jealously guarding their appropriations, deserved or not. As such, MFP-11 funding could require a dramatic increase if USSOCOM were to take on the mantle of any extraordinary operation. The money to expand the scope and role of USSOCOM would likely have to come out of the services' slice of the defense spending pie—another uphill battle regardless how sensible it may be.¹³⁷

Does this mean the unified theory is advocating for a greater share of resources from defense spending? No. It explains the phenomenon of special operations, and is now addressing the challenges of effectively using USSOCOM to fill a role within the unified theory. If USSOCOM does not embrace the unified theory and challenge itself to approach special operations in a more rigorously sound manner, then unusual operations should continue to be conducted by whomever is able, with the required funds going to that entity. It would likely be far easier for USSOCOM to retain the mantle of 'special' while comfortably remaining in the niche where the nail gun designs the house. But, the United States would be far better served if USSOCOM, the services, the Legislative Branch, and the other interagency organizations accepted that the unified theory is not an institutional threat. And while ephemeral and hard to pin down, special operations are extraordinary operations to achieve a specific result.

Conclusion

As stated previously, this is not the last word, nor is it an attempt to be the last word. The theory is a framework, a way to think about special operations that breaks the tautology of special operations and SOF being existentially linked in some unbreakable bond. It is precisely that bond that has prevented

the development of a holistic special operations theory for the last 75 years. Other writers, theorists, and academics have attempted to create a holistic theory, but the consensus is that one has not been developed to date. There is even debate as to whether there should be an independent theory of special operations. The author believes there is not only a need, but if the thinking of the community is to move forward on a sound theoretical basis, there needs to be an umbrella framework, a primer, that provides a context for the future work. This manuscript is that attempt. Other theories, like Admiral McRaven's theory of direct action and non-contradictory aspects of Spulak's theory of SOF, are accommodated by this meta-narrative. Hopefully, other theories will emerge that further the thinking and context of special operations and activities that USSOCOM engages in. Possible areas of exploration are a theory of U.S. special operations, foreign internal defense, special operations in the cyber domain, and many others, limited only by the creativity of the community and the need for explanatory tools. Other special operations communities beyond the U.S. military could also benefit under this umbrella framework and even inform the U.S. military special operations community as they develop theoretical foundations and implications that may transcend their own communities.

In summation, the world is changing rapidly and in unforeseen ways. New challenges will emerge which require dynamic and innovative responses. The unusual will always remain in warfare; special operations are in no danger of extinction. Even with the expanded scope which the unified theory advocates, SOF will remain eminently employable. The question is whether USSOCOM and the U.S. government have the willingness to reexamine what special operations are and how best USSOCOM can and will be allowed to meet the future challenges.↑

Acronym List

COIN	counterinsurgency
DIMEFIL	diplomatic, information, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and law enforcement
F3EAD	find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GCC	geographic combatant commander
HALO	high-altitude low-opening
HRT	Hostage Rescue Team
HVT	high value target
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
LOAC	Law of Armed Conflict
MFP	Major Force Program
ODA	Operational Detachment - Alpha
SOF	Special Operations Forces
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
USC	United States Code
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command

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