

STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

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THE FUTURE OF UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

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ABSTRACT

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The use of United States Army Special Forces in Unconventional Warfare offers a unique capability to the National Command Authorities that is unduplicated in the world today. Several military thinkers and writers have forecasted the demise of classic Unconventional Warfare since the end of the Viet Nam conflict. History has shown the opposite to be true. Unconventional approaches, including Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency Warfare, Insurgency, Counterinsurgency, Unconventional Operations and Terrorism are expanding. The United States' experiences with Nicaragua, El Salvador, Kuwait and the Republic of the Philippines resulted in victories for the United States with a low cost in United States lives and casualties. Each of these conflicts included Unconventional Warfare tactics and techniques. The experience in Somalia demonstrates the power of a small unconventional force over a superior, technologically enhanced conventional force. An unconventional force

defeated the Ethiopian Army forming the country of Etheria.

The explosion of the information age and instantaneous media coverage lend themselves to unconventional operations.

This Study examines the application of Unconventional Warfare in the future Arsenal of the United States Army.

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THE FUTURE OF UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

Today's international security environment represents a quantum change from the last decade. Asymmetrical threats, instantaneous worldwide communications, failing states and nongovernmental threats to The United States are proliferating. Terrorism and Weapons of Mass Destruction dominate the media. To maintain the position of influence and power held by the United States, different approaches must be adopted. Many adversaries have learned lessons from the Gulf War and the Viet Nam conflict. Future enemies will not fight a conventional war against western style armies. Instead, Unconventional measures will be used to wear down the United States and win by attacking weak areas. The U.S. must adapt and develop other ways to counter asymmetrical threats.

UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

Considering the changing transnational threats, the United States Department of Defense continues to prepare for the wrong type of war.¹ As recent events have highlighted, terrorists are using unconventional tactics to strike at United States interests. Actions, such as the 1998 bombings of US embassies in Africa and the New York World Trade Center bombing demonstrate, these approaches are effective. Conventional approaches have failed to

prevent or discourage attacks on soft targets. New approaches are needed to counter threats such as these. Civilian Law Enforcement agencies are not trained and equipped to deal with threats of this magnitude. The National Defense Panel (NDP) recommends several ways to approach changing the US national defense focus. United States Special Operations Command (USCINCSOC) has the mission and capability to assist the NCA in maintaining global stability, countering the evolving challenges by transnational threats, and reducing or destroying Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). The NDP recommends a broad national security approach. Expanded alliances and Human Intelligence (HUMINT) are corner stones of this recommended policy.² Special Forces can best contribute to this kind of policy prior to a conflict. This capability is especially valuable during a transitional period from peace to armed conflict. During most recent conflicts, Special Forces were already present in the region, or even in the country when conflict arose. Additional capabilities reside in SF units. The ability to conduct sustained military and paramilitary operations for long duration may become critical in the future. Low visibility operations utilizing indigenous or surrogate forces can greatly increase the influence of the United States without direct

commitment of U.S. forces. Low profile operations function as economy of force measures and reduce the threat of direct retaliation against U.S. interests. The capability to conduct Unconventional Warfare (UW) or Unconventional Operations (UO) allows the U.S. to economize and swing forces in the event of two nearly simultaneous major regional wars. Examples of unconventional missions to accomplish UW or UO are sabotage, subversion, harassment, interruption of enemy supply and Command, Control, Communication, Computers and Intelligence (C4I) nodes, intelligence collection and establishing escape and evasion nets. The 1997 National Defense Panel Report identifies three imperatives. These are national survival, global economic and political stability, and domestic security.³ The National Security Strategy and National Military Strategy specify Shape, Respond and Prepare as the cornerstones of United States response. The Quadrennial Defense Review identified Deter Aggression and Coercion, Conduct Small Scale Contingency Operations, and Fight and Win Major Theater Wars as priorities. Together, these imperatives reach across the spectrum of conflict. United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) and U.S. Army Special Forces specifically, offer a unique capability to

address each of the requirements identified in these studies.

Unconventional Warfare can be conducted during a Major Theater War (MTW). An example occurred during Operation Desert Storm when Special Forces soldiers assisted the Kuwaiti resistance forces. In conjunction with other SOF, SF can shape the environment by supporting a resistance or counter insurgency program. Resistance movements can be used against an enemy in a MTW to disrupt the enemy rear area, or function as an economy of force operation. Training indigenous forces to handle their own problems could preclude the need for U.S. military intervention.

Insurgencies have also developed and evolved in the past decade. Classic insurgencies seek to overthrow an existing social order or government. Today, they may also attempt to carve out territory, seek an autonomous country, cause the withdrawal of an occupying force or extract political concessions. Future goals may expand these objectives and develop new ones. Certainly, insurgencies must be considered as a threat to superpowers or western countries. Insurgencies offer a viable option to poor, nonstate supported or small, autonomous dissident groups. As discussed above, insurgencies offer a weak adversary potential to defeat a much stronger enemy.

U.S. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES UNIQUE UNCONVENTIONAL CAPABILITIES

USSOCOM developed five requirements to define Special Operations. These mission requirements were determined to be within the Special Operations area: unconventional training and equipment, is politically sensitive, requires an unorthodox approach, has a limited window of opportunity and requires specialized intelligence.⁴ USSOCOM approaches these missions with a group of the right people, well trained, with emerging, cutting edge technology. This approach is unique among the military services and makes Special Operations Forces (SOF) the force of choice to meet emerging threats.⁵ These forces provide a rapidly deployable, flexible, joint team before, during and after conflict. SOF can create conditions for stable national development; reducing or precluding armed conflict. This capability makes them the force of choice for both response and shaping in the National Strategy. The future, listed as preparing in the National Strategy, shows SOF to be better prepared than other forces available to the National Command Authorities. SOF is a value-based organization composed of experienced, self reliant warrior diplomats. These soldiers are trained to work with other cultures and operate for extended amount of time with minimal external support. Qualities essential for operations in the 21st

century. These forces are an integral part of the joint team. Yet, they are fully capable of operating independently. SOF can be a decisive factor in crisis response with a very small footprint. SOF also provides a pervasive force in peacetime. No other force in existence today has the capabilities inherent to USSOCOM.⁶

United States Army Special Forces (SF) offer unique capabilities to support the National Strategy. Special Forces soldiers are trained and organized with special skills to conduct operations requiring unconventional tactics, rapid deployability and unique capabilities. Special Forces soldiers are selected from the best of the Army. A rigorous process of selection, followed by months of training produces an entry-level SF soldier. The Special Forces Qualification course trains each soldier in a primary Military Occupational Skill, collective skills and ends with an intensive Unconventional Warfare exercise. In this exercise, the soldier is required to participate in training, organizing and equipping a guerrilla force. Next, the new SF soldier studies his assigned region and learns another language. He is then assigned to his first unit. Here, the focused training begins to build a true area expert. Each Operational Detachment A, the basic Special Forces unit, studies a particular region or country

and produces an in depth area study. Multiple deployments to the area of operations expand the knowledge base.

GUERRILLA WARFARE VERSUS UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

ARSOF Vision 2020 states Unconventional Warfare consists of several subsets. These include guerrilla warfare, subversion, sabotage, intelligence activities, escape and evasion, and counterinsurgency.⁷ These areas cross the continuum of conflict from peace operations to Major Theater War. "Unconventional Warfare and Special Operations are as old as war itself." Throughout history, success by a small force against a strategic or operational objective usually has called for units with a combination of special equipment, training, people or tactics that go beyond those found in conventional units.⁸

The future holds major changes for the United States military. Most sources claim asymmetrical threats are the way of the future. Asymmetrical is simply another way to say the threat is unconventional. Terrorism, transnational criminal activities and eroding or failing states offer new challenges to the military. As the Department of Defense attempts to implement the National Strategy and the National Military Strategy, conventional approaches and forces fail to meet the requirements. The most pressing

challenges of the future are power projection, information operations, space, urban operations, weapons of mass destruction and transnational challenges.⁹ Special Forces have the capability to execute all these missions, except space, today. SF units are trained and capable of working in urban areas to conduct offensive or defensive information operations, provide a global scout function, provide forward presence, find and destroy weapons of mass destruction, and address transnational threats through foreign internal defense, sabotage, subversion, direct action, special reconnaissance, or intelligence collection. New equipment and continued enhanced training will improve these capabilities in the 21st century. Information Operations (IO) can be a subset of UW. Offensive IO is a direct action, subversion or sabotage operation. SF can conduct these missions by identifying, locating, targeting and attacking critical information nodes.

Global urbanization will also force the military to adapt new approaches. Urban areas will be too large to bypass and too costly to attack. Unconventional operations are one way to attack or dominate these areas. Small units securing sectors with follow on conventional forces to secure the area is one such approach. Another approach is urban UW, like the Palestinians are using against the

Israelis. The soldier required to conduct these operations must be adaptive, cognitively skilled and team oriented.¹⁰ The Special Operations soldier must also be language proficient, culturally attuned and proficient at clandestine tradecraft. These are some of the criteria used in Special Forces Selection and Assessment today. The Special Forces warrior of the future must evolve with the changing threat and international environment. The SF soldier must retain the Warrior ethos while increasing intellectual agility and be able to use cutting edge technology. The future SF soldier must retain the unique skills that make Special Forces the force of choice today. These include language proficiency, political sensitivity and cultural awareness.¹¹ Training must also include Advanced Special Operations Training (ASOT) and Special Operations Training (SOT). ASOT teaches field craft and low level source operations. SOT teaches advanced close quarters combat. These courses are taught as advanced skills courses at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Fort Bragg, NC. The future indicates a requirement for all Special Forces personnel to receive this training.

The Army After Next series of experiments and wargames indicate evolving tasks that the Army is ill trained or

equipped to perform. The lack of Human Intelligence capability is one such requirement. Special Forces are trained in reconnaissance techniques and deployed in small elements across the globe. The Secretary of Defense should consider expanding the clandestine collection capability and assigning the mission to USSOCOM. These soldiers are often in place before conflict occurs. SF elements are able to establish long term relationships with individuals and elements in the foreign defense establishment. Many of these ongoing relationships are with nations not involved in treaties with the United States. These forward based or forward-deployed forces are postured to act as global scouts for the United States, the eyes and ears of the unified commanders. In the case of coalition warfare, the understanding of language and culture, and established trusting relationships are the glue that holds a coalition effort together.¹²

POLITICAL ASPECTS

Since the 1960s, the political and Department of Defense leaders have been reluctant to employ Unconventional Warfare. Two notable exceptions occurred in the 1980s in Afghanistan and Nicaragua. Covert operations have never been a mainstay of U.S. policy. Distrust of the Central Intelligence Agency resulted in dismantlement of

large portions of that agency's capability. Special Forces almost suffered the same fate until the Reagan years. The people of the United States abhor secrecy as contrary to the freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. As the political environment changed with the end of the cold war, political attitudes evolved. Several recent studies have identified the lessons learned from the 1960s and 1970s. The lack of a credible HUMINT capability, a covert operations capability, and new threats require new approaches.¹³

The change driven by the evolving future threat is demonstrated by the change in State Department missions. In 1997, seven State Department missions were developed to cope with the new global environment. These include:

1. Secure peace, stop proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, arms control and disarmament.
2. Economic stability.
3. Protect U.S. citizens abroad.
4. Combat Terrorism.
5. Support the establishment and consolidation of democracy, and uphold human rights.
6. Provide humanitarian assistance to victims of crisis and disasters.

7. Improve the global environment, stabilize world population and protect human health.¹⁴

This change of missions appears more like a military operation than diplomatic guidance. As the mission lines blur, warrior-diplomat becomes more than a catch phrase. SF soldiers become peacetime diplomats while training around the world. During routine deployments, SF soldiers find themselves conducting UW missions in peacetime.

Other changes are as profound. The legal meaning of terrorism has become exceedingly broad and obscure.¹⁵ Originally used as a term for criminal acts, terrorism now encompasses forms of irregular warfare against military targets. This expansion creates political problems for any UW operation. The Geneva-Hague Conventions made attacks against unarmed civilians unlawful. However, guerilla operations and combat against legitimate military targets were legal within parameters spelled out in the accords. Unless the international community redefines the standards to include the forces of nonstate players, legitimate nation states may find it impossible to combat the future threat on politically justifiable grounds. Ethnic and tribal violence is an example of the dilemma posed when nonstate players are involved. These examples display more traits of insurgency than terrorism. Yet, they fail to

meet the legal criteria for combatants under international law.¹⁶ Other potential targets are more perplexing. Asymmetric strategies may include Information Systems attacks, unconventional delivery of WMD, or even attacks on space assets. The political implications are intriguing, but existing international law to prosecute a non-state player in some of these realms is lacking.

Attempts to defeat the United States, and other western style militaries, by conventional means have almost always failed.¹⁷ Asian communists in Indochina opted for a protracted war and defeated the United States politically without battlefield victory. Potential adversaries learned from Desert Storm. These adversaries can avoid defeat by using unconventional means rather than direct confrontation. The United States can not afford to ignore the reciprocal lesson of the value of UW against its advisories. The congress and executive branch must reach a consensus on the cost the U.S. is willing to pay to defend the country's interest by means of UW. The political will must be present before troops are committed. The Department of Defense challenge becomes adjusting the doctrine and force structure to emerging missions within a new strategic environment. A New World dominated by small wars and military operations other than war.¹⁸ Leaders of

the U.S. must develop a strategy to deal with scenarios that include a capability to conduct conventional war while addressing the more likely scenario of long term unconventional operations.

THE FUTURE

As the 21st century unfolds, insurgencies will evolve and adapt to their environment. This evolution will present new challenges to the United States in meeting the national objectives. The organization of Special Forces allows rapid task organization to meet the threat posed in the new millenium. Small units, conducting direct or indirect operations across the spectrum of conflict, offer a means to counter many of the possible scenarios. Indigenous forces, trained by SF, offer an alternative to placing conventional forces into untenable situations. The core purpose of Special Forces should remain accomplishing mission with or by use of indigenous forces. To accomplish these missions, the traditional view of Unconventional Warfare requires expansion. The original concept included the areas now referred to as Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance and Foreign Internal Defense. These concepts were part of UW until the Goldwater/Nichols act made them separate missions under title 10, U.S. code. The difference between the current definition of these terms

and the proposed one is simply the environment in which they are conducted. When operations are conducted with indigenous forces in a conflict, these missions become unconventional.

As global urbanization becomes a reality, new approaches must be developed.¹⁹ The ability to conduct offensive Information Operations (IO) will become critical. U.S. forces need to identify, locate, target and attack C4I nodes. This capability must be present in both conventional and unconventional forces. The capability to conduct clandestine or covert IO should be included in UW and UO. In intrastate warfare, SF will likely be called on to assist in UW or counter UW roles.²⁰ During interstate warfare, the roles will continue to be coalition warfare, DA, SR and FID in support of conventional forces. However, Guerrilla Warfare, counter insurgency and other UW missions promise to be more crucial. In Escape and Evasion, WMD or Terrorism scenarios, the skills of UW move to the forefront.²¹ Expanded UW roles in the field of personnel recovery are likely. Counter Insurgency operations must be an interagency activity. Integrated with both U.S. agencies and those of the host nation. The operational strategy is to disassociate the populace from the insurgents. The only other option is to attack the

insurgents with conventional force. This approach has not worked well in recent history.

The most pressing challenges of the future are power projection, information operations, space, urban operations, WMD and Transnational challenges.²² The future soldier must be adaptive, cognitively skilled and team oriented.²³ These requirements are part of the current Special Forces selection and assessment criteria. The SF soldier of the future must be able to integrate technology. However, language proficiency, cultural awareness and political sensitivity remain even more important requirements. The human dimension of UW is timeless and not technology dependent. Intellectual agility must be developed. With a shrinking pool of recruits, the entire Army cannot hope to achieve these standards. By recruiting the best of the other branches, SF can meet these high standards. SF can then provide the widest range of capabilities, lethal and nonlethal, to the NCA or theater CINCs.

By expanding the definition of Unconventional Warfare, a new approach is available to combat the envisioned threats of the future. Special Operations Forces of all services are capable of conducting supporting operations in the unconventional environment. USSOCOM has forces

uniquely qualified to operate in the gray world of non nation state players, transnational organizations and terrorists. If the NCA decides on this policy change, no threat would be beyond the reach of U.S. forces. This is not to propose summary justice. Unconventional Operations (UO) consist of teaching, training and organizing host nation forces, other paramilitary or military forces. UO also includes traditional UW or Guerilla Warfare (GW), nation building, counter drug operations, or some humanitarian operations. Peacetime UO could also include Foreign Internal Defense and Security Assistance. Wartime UO encompasses GW, E&E, subversion, sabotage, low visibility, clandestine or covert operations. The discriminator would be the environment in which the operations are conducted. The use of Unconventional Operations allows low visibility, economy of force and economy of resources.²⁴ These operations could be conducted utilizing indigenous forces or with foreign counterparts, further acting as a force multiplier. Peacetime Unconventional Operations can fill a void in the Human Intelligence capability by collecting information and establishing contacts with other nation's forces. Many of these potential contacts are outside the reach of our

intelligence organizations. Special Forces language and cultural capabilities make this type of mission possible.

Other capabilities are being fielded which will enhance the probability of success. Low observable technology increasingly reduces the risk of detection during infiltration and exfiltration of SF. Masking technology reduces detection on the ground. Long range precision strike capabilities lower the footprint. Information technology lowers the risk of radio transmission intercept or decoding. Other enhancements, such as articulated body armor, are on the horizon. Together, these new tools reduce the risk and provide increased capabilities across the spectrum of conflict.

CONCLUSIONS

The future relevance of Unconventional Warfare in the United States National Security Strategy remains high. The ability to shape, respond and prepare resides in this force today. Modernization will improve the capabilities already present. Special Forces are particularly adept at responding to the full spectrum of conflict. These forces are highly adaptable, flexible and capable of addressing asymmetrical and transnational threats. Warrior-diplomats, Special Forces soldiers are mature, politically attuned and combat ready. Terrorism, Weapons of Mass Destruction and

other evolving threat pose the greatest security challenges to the United States in the foreseeable future. Special Forces bring a cultural understanding and language capability to the options available. Preconflict shaping of the environment, rapid response and preparation for the future are organic to the ethos of these soldiers.

The five regional Commanders in Chief chose counter-proliferation, Foreign Internal Defense and Counter Terrorism as the highest priority missions in the near future. Unconventional Warfare varied between priority five or six.²⁵ The threats that most worry the CINCs fall in the areas discussed as unconventional operations. Direct Special Operations offer a capability to quickly strike an asymmetrical enemy engaged in the activities that most worry the CINCs. Indirect Special Operations conducted over time provide a broad, general strategic or operational effect. Together these unconventional approaches allow the CINC to shape and respond to any type of threat. Introducing surrogate forces, high technology and low profile missions into the toolbox greatly expands the CINCs options.²⁶

Unconventional operations waged against the United States are a certainty. Special Forces provide an Unconventional Warfare capability to the National Command

Authorities and the Regional Commanders in Chiefs. Special Forces are uniquely qualified and well suited to address the expected threat in the future strategic environment. During the next decade, noncombat contingencies, operations short of war, and asymmetrical attacks will dominate our national security environment.²⁷ The conduct of unconventional warfare and countering UW are requirements for the 21st century. Special Forces are uniquely suited for the challenge.

(Word Count = 3623)

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⁵ Ibid., 40.

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²⁰ Kenneth E. Tovo, "Special Forces Mission Focus For the Future," Special Warfare Magazine, 9, no. 4 (1996) 9.

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