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**THESIS**

**NAVY SEALS GONE WILD: PUBLICITY, FAME, AND  
THE LOSS OF THE QUIET PROFESSIONAL**

by

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December 2015

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**NAVY SEALS GONE WILD: PUBLICITY, FAME, AND THE LOSS OF THE  
QUIET PROFESSIONAL**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Over the past decade, Naval Special Warfare (NSW) has built up significant symbolic capital due to a string of highly politicized and romanticized military operations. The publicity, and the ensuing fame, helped set the conditions for the emergence of a SEAL counterculture characterized by an increasingly commodified and public persona. There has been a shift away from the traditional SEAL Ethos of quiet professionalism to a Market Ethos of commercialization and self-promotion, especially among former SEALs. At the same time, government officials, special interest groups, Hollywood, the publishing industry, and the media writ large have seen the profitability of associating their agendas with the SEAL identity. They are likewise tapping into SEAL fame and offering SEALs an outlet for the commodification of their SEAL affiliation. Such a promotional construct contravenes the dual requirements of security and surprise necessary for the success of SEAL missions. This paper analyzes these trends, and argues that the cultivation of celebrity status has incentivized narcissistic and profit-focused behavior within the SEAL community, which in turn has eroded organizational effectiveness, damaged national security, and undermined healthy civil-military relations. To redress this, all parties must work to reestablish an environment that refrains from promoting special operations for entertainment value, for profit, or for political gain.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BUD/S	Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CLD	Continuum of Leadership Development
DOD	Department of Defense
DODEA	Department of Defense Education Activity
DOJ	Department of Justice
DOPSR	Defense Office of Prepublication Security Review
GAO	Government Accounting Office
GTD	Global Terrorism Database
JSOC	Joint Special Operations Command
OPSEC	operational security
NCIS	Naval Criminal Investigative Service
NSW	Naval Special Warfare
NSWC	Naval Special Warfare Command
NSWDG	Naval Special Warfare Development Group
PAC	political action committee
PAO	public affairs officer
POTUS	President of the United States
SEALPAC	Supporting, Electing American Leaders political action committee
SOF	special operations forces
SOFREP	special operations forces situation report
SWCC	Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewman
TTP	tactic, technique, procedure
UDG	Unauthorized Disclosure Group
U.S.	United States
USSOCOM	United States Special Operations Command

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## I. NAVY SEALS GONE WILD

What would have happened if U.S. Navy SEALs had not killed Osama bin Laden, but rather he had been killed by a drone strike? Would President Obama's administration have handled the publicity differently? Would the name and location of the drone operator's unit have been released? Would the man or woman who pulled the trigger to release the missile have been lionized in mainstream American culture? Would Fox News have hired this drone operator to be a Fox News contributor, paid to comment on domestic and foreign policy? Would drone operators have materialized from the shadows to write tell-all books, star in movies, blog about sensitive drone operations, criticize the president, and run for political office on the platform that they were drone operators? (Hint: this is what many former SEALs are doing.)

Such a scenario makes for an interesting counterfactual, because it may reveal something about how society views the functional role of special operations. For all intents and purposes, and from an "ends" perspective, there is no difference between a drone operator who pulls the trigger on his joystick and a Navy SEAL who pulls the trigger on his rifle. Both of these professionals have identical intentions—to kill. The only real difference is that the SEAL is in harm's way, which he appreciates as a function of his profession and for which he is well compensated.<sup>1</sup> Otherwise, both the drone operator and the SEAL work in teams. They both require security and surprise to do their jobs effectively. They both desire an information asymmetry vis-à-vis the enemy. They both kill with relative impunity. They both serve a role within the national security architecture in support of foreign policy objectives. They are both a weapons system.

If we can agree that the only intrinsic difference is that the SEAL voluntarily goes into harm's way, then it seems all the more critical that SEALs and their operations stay out of the press. Why would the government, society, and SEALs themselves want to romanticize and publicize the details of SEAL operations when this makes the SEALs'

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<sup>1</sup> A drone strike would have been messier and would have resulted in some uncertainty about whether bin Laden had been killed or whether he had even been there for that matter. Using SEALs on the ground eliminated these uncertainties, but the ultimate policy objective could have been achieved either way.

job more difficult and future missions more dangerous? Yet, this is exactly what is now going on. Indeed, in the fourteen plus years since September 11, 2001, the U.S. Navy SEALs have received unprecedented publicity. They have likewise attained an extraordinary level of fame in mainstream American society. But, this has also turned them into casual and consistent media fodder for the masses. In essence, U.S. Navy SEALs have become celebrities, and the SEAL brand has been transformed into a lucrative and powerful currency in the marketplace of things and ideas.

As indicated earlier, numerous former SEALs are now writing books, starring in movies, running for political office, blogging about special operations, and commenting on domestic and national security affairs. At the same time, government officials, private enterprises, special interest groups, Hollywood, the publishing industry, and the media writ large have seen the profitability in associating their products or agendas with the SEAL identity. They are thus also tapping into SEAL fame and offering SEALs an outlet for the commodification of their SEAL identity. These developments are interesting for two principal reasons.

First, Navy SEALs have traditionally shunned publicity, and are supposed to adhere to an ethos of quiet professionalism, otherwise known as the SEAL Ethos. One interpretation of the current environment is that, perhaps, attitudes within the SEAL community overall have shifted with respect to the acceptable use of the SEAL identity as a self-promotion and publicity tool. Indeed, emerging to take advantage of the SEALs' skyrocketing popularity is a new political and social pressure group of former SEALs with a distinct SEAL counterculture. Within this subculture there has been a shift away from the traditional SEAL Ethos of quiet professionalism toward a Market Ethos of commercialization and self-promotion. Put another way, it appears that many former SEALs have adopted a position that is counter to Naval Special Warfare's (NSW) traditional norms, namely, an adherence to a code of ethics that discourages profiting from or making a spectacle of one's membership in the SEAL Teams.

Second, the deliberate—and ironic—efforts by former SEALs, the White House, Naval Special Warfare Command (NSWC), and society writ large to profit from NSW's popularity have eliminated any and all mystique surrounding the Navy SEALs. These

promotional activities are ironic because, from a military effectiveness perspective, they are “anti-functional,” meaning that they do not support the SEALs’ security role on behalf of society. The dual requirements of security and surprise necessary for successful special operations forces (SOF) missions do not fit within such a promotional construct.<sup>2</sup>

Questions that arise given these two developments are: How can the SEALs—or any special operations units for that matter—perform their roles effectively when SOF practitioners, society, and the government are over-saturating the market with increasingly revealing and detailed commentary about special operations in real-time? Why has martial theater taken precedence over national security demands at a time when the men and women of SOF are still very much engaged in direct and indirect actions around the world?<sup>3</sup> Why have so many SEALs traded NSW’s hard-earned credibility to tarry with special interest groups, partisan political action committees, and corporate sponsors for a mere fifteen minutes of fame?

This paper examines these trends, and the extent, causes, and consequences of leveraging the U.S. Navy SEALs for entertainment value, for profit, and for political use. The following analysis questions the logic—or illogic—associated with these efforts. I will argue that the raising of Navy SEALs to celebrity status through media exploitation and publicity stunts has corrupted the culture of the SEAL community by incentivizing narcissistic and profit-oriented behavior. Ultimately, this behavior erodes military effectiveness, damages national security, and undermines healthy civil-military relations.

Society’s acceptance of the Navy SEALs’ new public persona points to a fundamental change in the values that define the normative relationship between elite units like the SEALs and society. Scholars and uniformed military members have yet to give proper attention to this evolving relationship. Much of the scholarship on special

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<sup>2</sup> See William McRaven, *SPECOPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Presidio Press, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Linda Robinson, “The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council Special Report no. 66, April 2013. Her monograph offers a good general understanding of the strategic utility and employment of SOF.

operations over the last decade has focused on theory, strategy, capabilities, and policy.<sup>4</sup> Where this project differs is by moving beyond the usual arguments to delve into social psychology, organizational culture, and the new tensions exerted by 21st century infotainment demands.

First, I will provide a description of the SEAL Ethos as a basis for understanding the normative and functional aspects of NSW's most trenchant cultural assumption, quiet professionalism. I will then argue that the quiet professional ethic has failed as a guiding cultural tenet, and that fame has corrupted the SEAL ecosystem. Second, I will provide several recent indicators of the extent of this corruption. Third, I will discuss some key events that likely contributed to a shift in SEAL thinking. Fourth, I will borrow extensively from Pierre Bourdieu and his theory about the "forms of capital" in order to conceptualize the transformation from SEAL Ethos to Market Ethos. Fifth, I will discuss the consequences of these changes as they relate to military effectiveness, national security, and civil-military relations. Sixth, I will address some important counterarguments. In the final chapter I will highlight current efforts by NSW to counter these trends as it tries to adapt to its new fame, and I will offer some additional thoughts and propose some new means of redress.

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<sup>4</sup> See Harry R. Yarger, "21<sup>st</sup> Century SOF: Toward a Theory of American Special Operations," JSOU Report 13-1, April 2013; Michele L. Malvesti, "To Serve the Nation: U.S. Special Operations Forces in an Era of Conflict," *Center for a New American Security*, June 2010; James D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2006); Robert G. Spulak, Jr., *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities, and Uses of SOF* (Hurlburt Field, FL: The JSOU Press, 2007); John B. Alexander, *The Changing Nature of Warfare, the Factors Mediating Future Conflict, and Implications for SOF* (Hurlburt Field, FL: The JSOU Press, 2006); David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, *United States Special Operations Forces* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2007); Joseph D. Celeski, "Strategic Employment of SOF in a UW Environment," *Special Warfare* 21, no. 4 (Jul/Aug, 2008).

## II. HISTORY AND UTILITY OF THE SEAL ETHOS

When I enlisted in 1997, the Navy SEALs did not have an official ethos. Instead, we adhered to a set of internalized cultural assumptions and ethics that were passed down from “old guy” to “new guy.” The behavior emphasized most was that of “quiet professionalism.” This is the ethic that has helped shape the culture of the U.S. Navy SEAL Teams since their inception in 1962, and arguably the very ethic that enabled their current successes. This fundamental principle has perhaps been put best by an anonymous, unseen SEAL in a 1969 Navy-sanctioned documentary about the Navy SEALs. In conveying to the viewers where SEALs stand on publicity and self-aggrandizement the speaker says:

We’re more or less an unsung soldier in a lot of respects, because they can’t write up a lot of the things we do. But I said, within yourself you’ll know. You’ll have this personal pride that you was there, and you did the job. After the war they’ll probably write about it. But if you are in here for just getting the Bronze Star and your name on the front page, no you won’t—because they don’t put our name on the front page. But you’ll know within yourself. You’ll know what your buddies have done and you’ll know our record.<sup>5</sup>

This quiet professional ethic was about more than just humility and camaraderie. It served a functional purpose by safeguarding the SEALs’ operational ambiguity. Samuel Huntington describes such a professional ethic this way: “A value or attitude is part of the professional ethic if it is implied by or derived from the peculiar expertise, responsibility, and organization of the military profession.”<sup>6</sup> SEALs need operational ambiguity to ensure they can conduct missions at a comparative advantage vis-à-vis the enemy. The American public does not need to know exactly what SEALs do, nor how they do it when executing missions. Arguably, the public only needs to know that a rare breed of man is willing to put his life on the line to protect America and its interests.

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<sup>5</sup> “MEN WITH GREEN FACES,” YouTube video, 28:53, posted by PublicResourcesOrg, July 22, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nzkeqJMfPN4>.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 61.

The speaker in the documentary referenced above also alluded to the idea that the narrative did not belong to him, but that “they” had the responsibility of determining the time and place of any disclosures. “They” can be interpreted to be the Navy, the White House, or the Pentagon. The point is that the speaker, and the men of his era, realized that NSW did not exist for its own sake, but that the organization was a tool of foreign policy. Drawing attention to the organization undermined the very reason for its existence. Or, so implies the SEAL Ethos.

## A. GENESIS AND MEANING OF AN ETHOS

In 2005, NSW leadership decided that the SEALs needed something more akin to a codified ethos than an unspoken rule. As a result, approximately 50 active duty and retired SEALs of various ranks and experience levels gathered on San Clemente Island to contemplate the SEAL archetype. The goal was to define the standard by which all SEALs could measure themselves. Through their efforts, the SEAL Ethos was born. The following is an excerpt from the SEAL Ethos. The bold sections reflect four key aspects of “quiet professionalism” as I understand it (emphasis mine).

***My Trident is a symbol of honor and heritage.***<sup>7</sup> Bestowed upon me by the heroes that have gone before, it embodies the trust of those I have sworn to protect. ***By wearing the Trident I accept the responsibility of my chosen profession and way of life. It is a privilege that I must earn every day.*** My loyalty to Country and Team is beyond reproach. I humbly serve as a guardian to my fellow Americans always ready to defend those who are unable to defend themselves. ***I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my actions.*** I voluntarily accept the inherent hazards of my profession, placing the welfare and security of others before my own. ***I serve with honor on and off the battlefield.*** The ability to control my emotions and my actions, regardless of circumstance, sets me apart from other men. Uncompromising integrity is my standard. My character and honor are steadfast. My word is my bond.<sup>8</sup>

Let us look more closely at each of these tenets of the SEAL Ethos:

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<sup>7</sup> The golden Trident is the insignia that all SEALs wear on their uniform and it is the most recognizable symbol of the SEAL Teams.

<sup>8</sup> For the full script see Appendix or SEAL + SWCC: Official Naval Special Warfare website, <http://www.sealswcc.com/navy-seals-ethos.html#.Vj3Ap4QkLih>.

1. ***“My Trident is a symbol of honor and heritage.”***<sup>9</sup> The golden Trident is the most recognizable symbol of the SEAL Teams. It bestows upon the wearer the credibility of the organization. A recent trend amongst former SEALs is to place a small Trident pin on the lapel of their suit coat in social settings. It says, “Look at me, I am a U.S. Navy SEAL. Trust what I have to say. After all, we killed Osama bin Laden.” When SEALs wear the pin, but then act contrary to NSW’s core values, they erode NSW’s credibility, and besmirch the Trident’s honor and heritage.
2. ***“By wearing the Trident I accept the responsibility of my chosen profession and way of life. It is a privilege that I must earn every day.”***<sup>10</sup> SEALs, both past and present, have a responsibility to uphold the SEAL ideal. That includes accepting a way of life somewhat different than society’s. Social critics tell us that America’s values have become “narcissistic, morally relativist, self-indulgent, hedonistic, consumerist, individualistic, victim-centered, nihilistic, and soft.”<sup>11</sup> These are not SEAL values, yet many of the SEALs in the public eye appear to adhere to, if not exemplify, these new norms.
3. ***“I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my actions.”***<sup>12</sup> This may be the most oft-quoted line in the SEAL Ethos, especially by those who subscribe to a stricter interpretation of the verbiage. And though the bounds of what should/should not be publicly discussed are subject to interpretation, one cannot deny that dozens of SEALs have recently chosen to “advertise the nature of their work,” “seek recognition for their actions,”<sup>13</sup> and turn a profit.
4. ***“I serve with honor on and off the battlefield.”***<sup>14</sup> The commitment to the SEAL Ethos is supposed to be lifelong. Every active duty and former SEAL is responsible for upholding the tradition of excellence no matter when his active service ends. Non-disclosure agreements are legally binding. The SEAL Ethos is ethically binding. Whether on the battlefield or in the boardroom, SEALs must strive to preserve their honor, even in the face of spectacular public adulation and fame.

The SEAL Ethos establishes a set of principles that those who earn and wear the SEAL Trident ostensibly share. These beliefs and values have been assumed by many to

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<sup>9</sup> Navy SEAL Ethos.

<sup>10</sup> Navy SEAL Ethos.

<sup>11</sup> John Hillen, “Must U.S. Military Culture Reform?” *Orbis* 43, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 53.

<sup>12</sup> Navy SEAL Ethos.

<sup>13</sup> Navy SEAL Ethos.

<sup>14</sup> Navy SEAL Ethos.

transcend active duty service, especially since SEALs typically regard themselves as SEALs for life. However, somewhere along the line, particularly over the course of the past decade, something has broken down. One could argue that the Ethos has failed to inspire quiet professionalism in its target audience, namely the SEALs.

## **B. WARNING SIGNS**

In a 2014 letter directed at Navy SEALs past and present, the current commander of NSWC, Rear Admiral Brian L. Losey, called for an end to the casualness with which a growing number of former SEALs have been discussing SEAL operations and exposing NSW to unsanctioned publicity. Rear Admiral Losey wrote:

At Naval Special Warfare's core is the SEAL Ethos. A critical tenant of our Ethos is "I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my actions." Our Ethos is a life-long commitment and obligation, both in and out of the service. Violators of our Ethos are neither teammates in good standing, nor teammates who represent Naval Special Warfare. We do not abide willful or selfish disregard for our core values in return for public notoriety and financial gain, which only diminishes otherwise honorable service, courage, and sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

Rear Admiral Losey's message came on the heels of the announcement that the "The Man Who Killed Osama bin Laden" would reveal himself on Fox News in November 2014. Yet, in the years and months before Robert O'Neill's appearance on Fox, dozens of former SEALs had cast aside their anonymity to create a commodified and public persona. Just two years before Rear Admiral Losey's letter, the previous NSW commander issued a similar plea to the SEAL community. Rear Admiral Sean Pybus wrote:

I am disappointed, embarrassed and concerned. Most of us have always thought that the privilege of working with some of our nation's toughest warriors on challenging missions would be enough to be proud of, with no further compensation or celebrity required. Today, we find former SEALs headlining positions in a presidential campaign; hawking details about a mission against Enemy Number 1; and generally selling other aspects of

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<sup>15</sup> For a full text of the letter see Kelsey Harkness, "Top Navy SEAL Officials Aren't Happy with Teammates Spilling bin Laden Secrets," *The Daily Signal*, November 6, 2014, <http://dailysignal.com/2014/11/06/top-navy-seal-officials-arent-happy-with-teammate-spilling-bin-laden-secrets/>.



NSW training and operations. For an elite force that should be humble and disciplined for life, we are certainly not appearing to be so. We owe our chain of command much better than this.<sup>16</sup>

These letters by NSW's top commanders signal that the level of self-aggrandizement and inappropriate media exposure by former SEALs has reached an unmanageable and potentially damaging level. According to NSW's leaders, SEALs should know better than to advertise the nature of their work because there is a real enemy out there who is attentive, and is constantly seeking an advantage. SEALs should also know better than to seek recognition for their actions because that diminishes the efforts of the team, and erodes the credibility of the organization. When members seek to promote their own actions, they do so not for the good of the team, but for their own benefit.

American society writ large has deemed it reasonable to grant SEALs broad legitimacy based on a handful of highly publicized military missions, such as the raid that killed Osama bin Laden. These tendencies have nurtured a growing fame that has carried with it concomitant opportunities to profit from that fame. As NSW's leaders have pointed out, these tendencies appear to be at odds with the SEAL Ethos and quiet professionalism in general. A big question that confronts our special operations forces today is whether Admirals Pybus and Losey are correct. Or, has the need for such an ethic become obsolete? One might be forgiven for thinking so, especially given how many former SEALs have embraced the limelight. Yet, in my view, given the nature of the current threat environment, the speed of information flows, and the connectedness of America's 21st century adversaries, special operations units, to include the SEALs, need to actually maintain even *greater* professionalism, secrecy, and operational ambiguity

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<sup>16</sup> Barbara Star, "Scathing Message Sent to Navy SEALs on Discussing Secret Work," *Fox2Now*, September 5, 2012, <http://fox2now.com/2012/09/05/scathing-message-sent-to-navy-seals-on-discussing-secret-work/>.

with respect to their methods and capabilities.<sup>17</sup> To me, quiet professionalism remains a key element in safeguarding national security, building trust relationships, ensuring freedom of maneuver, and, most importantly, protecting the lives of our men and women in uniform.

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<sup>17</sup> For a description of 21st century threats see Donald C. Winter, “Adapting to the Threat Dynamics of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 2603, September 15, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/09/adapting-to-the-threat-dynamics-of-the-21st-century>.

### III. CULTURAL CHANGE OR CULTURAL CORRUPTION?

What, then, are some indicators that publicity around the Navy SEALs has increased? A LexisNexis key phrase search of “U.S. Navy SEAL” shows a 400% and 1000% increase in reporting in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, respectively, since 2001. Navy SEAL-related reporting in U.S. journals also rose 400% since 2001. A Google key phrase search of “U.S. Navy SEAL 2001” shows a jump from 1.2 million search results in 2001 to 46.1 million in 2015. But perhaps the best evidence that the Navy SEALs have become increasingly newsworthy is found in media headlines. The following is just a sampling of headlines from 2015.

- “UCLA wearing cool Navy SEAL tribute helmets Saturday”
- “Transgender ex-SEAL Kristin Beck: My mission to help”
- “Former Navy SEAL smashes wingsuit distance record in daring flight”
- “Haute scene LA: Navy SEAL Foundation honors Clint Eastwood”
- “Navy SEALs save ‘President’ Donald Trump’s hair in unaired SNL sketch”
- “Former Navy SEAL commander explains the philosophy that made his unit the most decorated of the Iraq War”
- “6 crucial career lessons we can all learn from the Navy SEALs”
- “VIDEO: What Hollywood Gets Wrong About Navy SEALs, According to Badass Navy SEALs”
- “Millionaire hires Navy SEAL to shape him up”
- “If You’re Lying About Being a Navy SEAL, This Man Will Catch You”
- “Wanted: Handsome, educated Navy SEAL for friends-with-benefits”
- “HELL YEAH! Navy SEAL Marcus Luttrell Issues Brutal Message To Obama #Chattanooga”

These headlines reflect both society’s interest in the SEALs, and also the deliberate efforts by some SEALs to seek publicity. For these publicity-seeking SEALs, where does the SEAL Ethos end and acceptable self-promotion begin? How has the

SEALs' understanding of themselves and of their responsibilities to the SEAL Ethos undergone revision? Former Navy-SEAL-turned-media-personality Brandon Webb nicely captured the climate emerging in the former SEAL community during an interview for *Men's Journal* when he proclaimed, "Right now the SEALs are having their moment, and I intend to ride this wave as far as I can."<sup>18</sup>

## A. CHANGING CLIMATE

Mr. Webb represents perhaps the best example of the 21st Century deviant SEAL—and here I use deviant in its technical sense to describe someone who defies the norms of his particular culture.<sup>19</sup> In general, Mr. Webb has created a business around advertising the nature of his work and seeking recognition for his actions.

After a short stint in the SEAL Teams, Mr. Webb founded *Force12 Media*, which, according to *Men's Journal* is "a network of military-themed websites with Hollywood deals and a publishing imprint. His flagship site, SOFREP (Special Operations Forces Situation Report), hires former SEALs, Green Berets, and Army Rangers to write about the U.S.'s clandestine wars around the globe."<sup>20</sup> Mr. Webb is the author of numerous non-fiction SEAL books, and openly encourages SEALs and other special operations personnel to publish their own books through his publishing imprint. For instance, the following describes the partnership between SOFREP and the publishing company, St. Martin's Press:

St Martin's Press editor Marc Resnick has negotiated a deal with SOFREP.COM (Special Operations Forces Report) [sic] to publish hard-hitting, news-breaking original e-books from the world of Special Operations. With millions of visitors monthly, SOFREP is the largest Spec Ops site on the Internet devoted to *authentic, accurate, and timely*

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<sup>18</sup> Stayton Bonner, "Navy SEAL Inc.," *Men's Journal*, June 2015, <http://www.mensjournal.com/magazine/navy-seal-inc-20150519>.

<sup>19</sup> Vijay Sathe, *Culture and Related Corporate Realities* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin INC., 1985).

<sup>20</sup> Bonner, "Navy SEAL Inc."

*analysis of Special Operations*, Intelligence, and foreign policy issues that affect the United States (emphasis mine).<sup>21</sup>

One might wonder about the purpose of devoting a site to the “authentic, accurate, and timely analysis of Special Operations.” Does such an entity help or harm the men and women still serving in special operations roles? According to *Force12 Media*’s own website, “[Its] niche network reaches over 40 million monthly. The audience is over 21, mostly male, and smart.”<sup>22</sup> How critical is it that 40 million 21-year-old males are up to date on contemporary U.S. special operations? Are efforts like Mr. Webb’s driving the market? Or, is a market for special operations information driving the commercialization of SOF?

*Force12 Media* also owns NavySEALs.com, which, according to the website, is “The only authentic Navy SEAL media property on the Internet, managed and run by former Navy SEALs. NavySEALs.com provides community news, training, recruiting and fitness tips.”<sup>23</sup> Of course, the problem here is that NavySEALs.com cannot be considered authentic, because NSW does not officially endorse it. In fact, according to the Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team, which is NSW’s recruiting arm, the information promulgated on Mr. Webb’s website and others like it is almost always wrong. One unfortunate consequence is that NSW must then continually try to reeducate potential recruits.<sup>24</sup> Why NSW does not own the Internet domain name www.NavySEALs.com remains a mystery, but the fact that it *does not* highlights the degree to which NSW has little to no control over former SEALs and their promotional (and self-promotional) activities.

## **B. BOOKS**

Arguably, the most tried-and-true method of self-promotion is via the publishing industry. From 1962 to 2010, only 80 or so books total about SEALs had appeared.

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<sup>21</sup> “St. Martin’s Press Teams with SOFREP for EBooks,” Soldier Systems, September 28, 2013, <http://soldiersystems.net/2013/09/28/st-martins-press-teams-with-sofrep-for-ebooks/>.

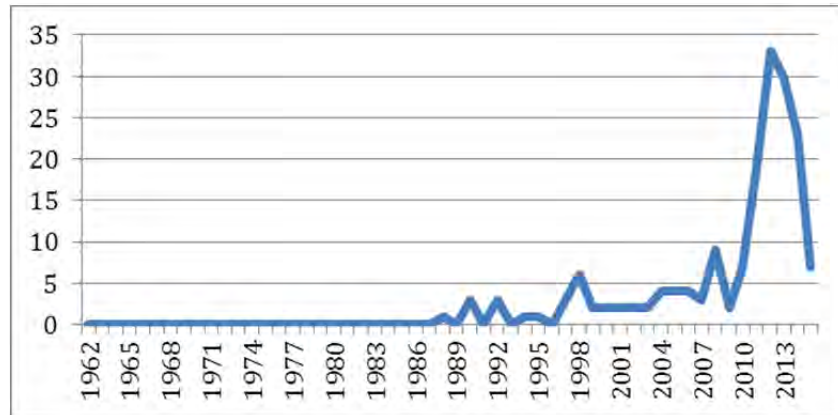
<sup>22</sup> Force12 Media, <http://force12media.com>.

<sup>23</sup> Force12 Media, <http://force12media.com>.

<sup>24</sup> Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team employee, in discussion with the author, July 2015.

Between 2011 (bin Laden’s death) and 2015, that number increased by 200%. Of these new books, over 75% were authored by SEALs:<sup>25</sup> after bin Laden’s death, it was as if a dam had burst (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Navy SEAL-Related Books: 1962–2015



The Defense Office of Prepublication Security Review (DOPSR) confirms this general growth curve, and notes a significant boost in SEAL books starting in 2012. DOPSR chose not to share exact numbers.<sup>26</sup>

Typically, in the past, if a SEAL wrote a book it would have been about decades-old operations. There are exceptions, such as Richard Marcinko’s book *Rogue Warrior*, and a few others.<sup>27</sup> But, in the main, SEALs avoided turning their service into a commodified story immediately upon leaving active duty. Former SEALs today apparently see things differently, and have seized on the lucrative opportunity to cash in on their service. Several recently separated-from-active-duty SEALs are now prolific writers, with two, three, or more books published. To be fair, as long as former service members submit their manuscripts to the Department of Defense (DoD) for pre-publication security review there is no legal issue with their right to publish. However, the question is less about whether they *can* publish, and more about whether they *should*

<sup>25</sup> There is room for error here with regard to exact numbers. Amazon.com and GoodReads.com were my main sources. There are certainly more books about SEALs. The relevant point is the jump in numbers after bin Laden’s death.

<sup>26</sup> DOPSR employee, in discussion with the author, June 2015.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Marcinko, *Rogue Warrior* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1992).

publish. The sheer number of SEAL-authored books represents a departure from the pre-9/11 norm, and a general tendency by SEALs to embrace a Market Ethos rather than the SEAL Ethos.

### C. POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

If books represent an avenue for SEALs to make money, politics offers an avenue for SEALs to access power and popularity of a different sort. Over the past few years, it could appear to an outside observer that SEALs have become what the famed sociologist Morris Janowitz would call a “political pressure group.”<sup>28</sup> Former SEALs have been appearing more regularly on media networks as contributors and analysts. They are weighing in on a range of politically charged topics, and their viewpoints are often very partisan. For instance, a Google search with the keywords “Navy SEAL MSNBC” returns 306,000 hits, “Navy SEAL CNN” returns 512,000 hits, and “Navy SEAL Fox News” returns 3,620,000 hits. According to a 2014 Pew Research report, Fox News consistently leans conservative, while MSNBC consistently leans progressive. The same Pew Research report states that Republicans and Democrats are more divided along ideological lines now than at any point in the last twenty years.<sup>29</sup>

If Navy SEALs are ten times more likely to appear on a conservative media channel than a progressive media channel, this could create the perception that SEALs ideologically lean right. This could then lead biased media to actively search out former SEALs and have them speak as partisans on certain topics with the added credibility of their being SEALs. The latest example of just such a phenomenon involves former SEALs Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, who have recently made media appearances with the release of their new book *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win*. Within days of publishing their book, both men appeared on Fox News criticizing President Obama’s policies on military spending, and the fight against Daesh in Iraq and

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<sup>28</sup> Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1971).

<sup>29</sup> “Political Polarization in the American Public,” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, June 12, 2014, <http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

Syria.<sup>30</sup> The progression from publishing a benign book on leadership to becoming immediate pawns in a political debate shows the slippery slope that awaits SEALs who market their identities and pursue public personas in the wake of SEAL fame. At a minimum, perceptions of partisanship brand SEALs a certain way—something that critics might say borders on media exploitation and use of SEALs for domestic propaganda.

In recent years, several conservative-leaning political action committees (PACs) have appeared with former SEALs as their front men. These include Special Operations OPSEC Education Fund, Special Operations Speaks, Veterans for a Strong America, Supporting Electing American Leaders (SEAL PAC), and Special Operations for America. One political advertisement in 2012 for the PAC Veterans for a Strong America starred four former SEALs who claimed that over 95% of the active duty SEAL community would not be voting for President Obama in the reelection.<sup>31</sup> These men form the core of what is becoming a special interest pressure group that uses the credibility of special operations to push partisan politics. Two of those men, Ryan Zinke and Scott Taylor, are now elected lawmakers.<sup>32</sup> A third man, Brad Nagel, works for Donald Trump’s presidential campaign.<sup>33</sup> The fourth man, Ben Smith, is involved in Virginia legislator Scott Taylor’s PAC Special Operations OPSEC Fund, and regularly engages in anti-government and anti-Muslim rhetoric. He has even gone so far as to intentionally drop a Koran on the ground at the South Carolina Tea Party Coalition Convention to show his disdain for Islam. The video is posted on YouTube, with the title “WATCH:

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<sup>30</sup> “PRESIDENT OBAMA THREATENING TO VETO MILITARY SPENDING BILL,” YouTube video, 4:34, from Fox News on October 20, 2015, posted by “FOX NEWS,” October 20, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7urxU9MMsI>; “FORMER NAVY SEALS REACT TO OBAMA’S PLANS FOR SYRIA,” YouTube video, 4:44, from Fox News on November 01, 2015, posted by “Tea Party,” November 01, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-vG3FBR\\_QA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H-vG3FBR_QA).

<sup>31</sup> “NAVY SEALS EXPOSE OBAMA,” YouTube video, 3:20, from Veterans for a Strong America on November 3, 2012, posted by “Veterans for a Strong America,” November, 3 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o3kK5neqzHE>.

<sup>32</sup> Ryan Zinke is Montana’s congressman and Scott Taylor serves in the Virginia House of Delegates for the 85th district.

<sup>33</sup> “Trump Hires Three More Iowa Based Operatives,” The Iowa Republican, April 7, 2015, <http://theiowarepublican.com/2015/trump-hires-three-more-iowa-based-operatives/>.



SEAL Ben Smith Drops Koran on Ground.”<sup>34</sup> Mr. Smith’s Facebook name is even “Former Navy SEAL Benjamin Smith.”<sup>35</sup> Separately, former SEAL Carl Higbie, who was kicked out of the Navy for writing a book critical of the Obama administration, told Fox News that 90% of those in uniform did not support President Obama.<sup>36</sup>

Questions any reasonable observer would be right to ask are: Where is the evidence to back up what these men are saying, and why is anybody listening to their unsubstantiated claims in the first place? Also, why are their assertions being broadcast, as if their (sometimes short) time in the SEAL Teams qualifies them to comment on such matters in a meaningful way? Take the following statement from another former SEAL Christopher Mark Heben, who told Fox News, “Let me make something very clear: nobody that wears a Navy SEAL Trident on their chest...nobody is a fan of Obama, nobody is a fan of Hillary Clinton period.”<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately for Mr. Heben, he spoke too soon, as Hillary Clinton’s campaign has also jumped on the SEAL bandwagon for 2016. In one of Mrs. Clinton’s presidential campaign videos a former SEAL named Eric Gardiner has the following to say, “As a former SEAL, as a veteran, I’m confident knowing that Hillary as commander-in-chief will have a sense for the gravity of her decisions at that level.”<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, it appears many political hopefuls have bet on a piece of the SEAL magic in 2016. For instance, no fewer than six former SEALs were on stage with Governor Rick

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<sup>34</sup> “WATCH: SEAL BEN SMITH DROPS KORAN ON GROUND,” YouTube video, 3:22, from South Carolina Tea Part Coalition on January 19, 2014, posted by “Western Journalism,” January 27, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hq0zBNS7q8c>.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Smith’s facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/SEALBenjaminSmith/>.

<sup>36</sup> “NAVY SEAL CARL HIGBIE: OVER 90% OF TROOPS DO NOT SUPPORT OBAMA,” YouTube video, 2:40, from Fox News on September 18, 2014, posted by “*Washington Free Beacon*,” September, 18 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnc2FiSYvjM>.

<sup>37</sup> “Nobody That Wears A Navy SEAL Trident Is A Fan Of Obama Or Hillary,” Fox Nation, <http://nation.foxnews.com/2014/01/19/seal-nobody-wears-navy-seal-trident-fan-obama-or-hillary>.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Bedard, “Navy SEAL, Obama, Republican Gates praise Clinton in new video,” *Washington Examiner*, October 19, 2015, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/navy-seal-obama-republican-gates-praise-clinton-in-new-video/article/2574403>.

Perry when he announced his (now failed) presidential bid.<sup>39</sup> Also, at least two former SEALs are running for political office in 2016. Take the first transgender Navy SEAL, Kristen Beck, who is running for Congress in Maryland.<sup>40</sup> She typically sports a Trident pin on her civilian dress, along with her medals. Former SEAL Eric Greitens is running for governor of Missouri, and his campaign page is not without blatant SEAL symbology as well.

These candidates may be taking their cues from Congressman Zinke, who won Montana's congressional seat in 2014. Zinke emplaced the SEAL Trident emblem on his campaign bus. Indeed, it is difficult to find a picture of him in which there is not a Trident pinned somewhere to his suit. It does not stop there though, as Congressman Zinke has now enlisted the help of Robert O'Neill ("The man who killed Osama bin Laden") to solicit contributions for the political action committee SEAL PAC. The following is an excerpt from an e-mail solicitation that a colleague of mine received from Robert O'Neill in support of SEAL PAC:

Friend, my name is Robert O'Neill. You may recognize my name. I'm a former U.S. Navy SEAL. I served on SEAL TEAM SIX, and I took part in more than 400 missions—including some of the most high-risk and high-profile missions that have recently been turned into Hollywood films. I'm e-mailing you today because I know you care greatly about our nation and its future. You likely share my frustrations and like many Americans—including a strong majority of our active duty military and veterans—believe that ineffective leadership from career politicians in Washington, D.C. has put our great country on a dangerous path to disaster both at home and on the international stage. Friend, that's why I'm standing with SEAL PAC, and why I hope you will too. You see: this organization, founded by 23-year SEAL Veteran and current Congressman Ryan Zinke of Montana, has a clear mission—to elect more veterans and like-minded leaders to serve in Congress. Friend, I'm inviting you to stand with me by joining SEAL PAC with a contribution at the \$20, \$35, or \$50 level, or even \$100 or \$250 if you're able. When you join today, your name will be entered in a drawing to win a U.S. Navy SEAL Battle Flag, which I have

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<sup>39</sup> Katie Pavlich, "Flanked By Navy SEALs, Rick Perry Will Announce He's Running For President Today," *TownHall.com*, June 4, 2015, <http://townhall.com/tipsheet/katiepavlich/2015/06/04/rick-perry-to-announce-presidential-plans-surrounded-by-american-heros-special-ops-veterans-n2008046>.

<sup>40</sup> Maxwell Tani, "Kristin Beck, Transgender Former Navy Seal, To Run Against Steny Hoyer," *Huffington Post*, February 12, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/12/kristin-beck\\_n\\_6673744.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/02/12/kristin-beck_n_6673744.html).

personally signed and prepared for delivery. Hurry, this contest ends on Veteran's Day—November 11th.<sup>41</sup>

Former Navy SEAL Robert O'Neill—the man who killed Osama bin Laden—is sending signed Navy SEAL flags to Americans willing to donate money to Congressman Zinke's political action committee. How can the symbol of an apolitical military unit be used in such a partisan way without any protest from society or the military?

My point, meanwhile, is not that these individuals do not have a right to get involved in politics or support a particular candidate. But, rather, they are using the SEALs' credibility and current popularity as a heuristic to affect Americans' decision-making. The problem, in my view, is that most of these men appear with a Navy SEAL Trident emblem on their lapels, and the banners that unscroll across the bottom of the TV screen clearly state that these individuals were/are Navy SEALs.

The civil-military relations issues here are profound. As Morris Janowitz explains, "By means of its professional organizations, more than by post-retirement employment activities, the military elite operate as a pressure group and place strains on the traditional formula of civil-military relations."<sup>42</sup> Eliot Cohen, in his study of elite military units, contends that "Elite units may be misleading or ambiguous symbols, distorting serious public and governmental discussion of complex issues, encouraging instead a preoccupation with martial theater."<sup>43</sup> As previously described, there are already signs of a shift in this direction, with SEALs commenting on such politically charged topics as gun control, Ebola, Benghazi, military spending, and Bowe Bergdahl. There appears to be a strong "halo effect" whereby society deems that if the SEALs can kill bin Laden, then their opinions must be worth listening to on a plethora of unrelated issues. Or, as Erving Goffman describes this phenomenon: "Audiences tend to accept the self projected

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<sup>41</sup> A fellow SEAL received this solicitation in an e-mail from SEALPAC in November 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 374.

<sup>43</sup> Eliot Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (Cambridge, MA: Center for International Affairs Harvard University, 1978), 65.

by the individual performer during any current performance as a responsible representative of his colleague-grouping, of his team, and of his social establishment.”<sup>44</sup>

What Janowitz, Cohen, and Goffman seem to be hinting at is that there are possible dangers when a polity grants blanket credibility to an individual or organization based solely on its status or fame—credibility that, in this case, realistically derives from a very narrowly defined military skillset that may not necessarily transition to social issues. As an example of such blanket credibility given to SEALs, take this testimonial from ExBellum’s website:

As a psychologist who studies them, a team member who works alongside them, and a professional in the applicant screening industry, learning someone is a former Navy SEAL would lead me to recommend hiring him knowing little else about him. They are that good! – Joshua D. Cotton, Ph.D. <sup>45</sup>

Should we take Mr. Cotton’s word for this simply because he has a Ph.D.? No, just as we should not take a SEAL’s word for something just because he is a SEAL, especially in the realm of politics. Although Janowitz advises that professional soldiers should be “above politics,” he likewise recognizes that men in unconventional careers involving politico-military duties are especially attuned to “political consciousness.”<sup>46</sup> If this is true, SEALs should realize the danger in using organizational credibility to engage in partisan politics. Like all Americans, SEALs hold important political perspectives. NSW’s duty, however, is to ensure the protection of all citizens, regardless of their political leanings. As Richard Kohn points out, “Surely partisanship undermines public confidence in the objectivity and loyalty of the military and by association in the policies of their civilian masters.”<sup>47</sup>

To sum up thus far, the numbers of books published, media appearances made, and political stunts used are evidence that many former Navy SEALs are evolving in how

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<sup>44</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Random House, 1959), 242.

<sup>45</sup> ExBellum: Emergent Leadership Solutions, <https://www.exbellum.com/about>.

<sup>46</sup> Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 234–235.

<sup>47</sup> Richard H. Kohn, “Tarnished Brass: Is the U.S. Military Profession in Decline?,” *World Affairs* 171, no. 4 (Spring 2009): 79.

they interact with society. There is currently no commonly agreed upon line between what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior post active duty service, but the use of the SEAL brand as a political weapon or as a marketing tool is at clear odds with the SEAL Ethos. Alternatively, we might also conclude that the Ethos itself is up for grabs, as former SEALs increasingly promote their SEALness for personal gain. Even more worrisome, the public's adulation of SEALs points to the extreme vulnerability of NSW's reputation overall, as the SEAL brand diffuses across new and unmanaged venues. All of this begs the question: what kind of control does NSWC really have over the SEAL brand if any SEAL can hijack NSW's symbolic capital for personal gain, whether in the realm(s) of infotainment, entertainment, or politics?

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## IV. POLITICS, PUBLICITY STUNTS, AND MIXED MESSAGES— SETTING THE CONDITIONS FOR FAME

### A. POLITICS

One could well make the argument that the publicity given to the SEALs due to a handful of high-profile military operations was the spark that ignited NSW's rise to prominence in contemporary American culture. Maybe the most widely known of these missions was the raid by SEALs on May 1–2, 2011, which resulted in the death of Osama bin Laden.<sup>48</sup> In the days and weeks following the operation, several individuals in the administration spoke openly about the details of the raid. Vice President Biden commented publicly that SEALs had conducted the operation; Secretary of Defense Panetta allegedly released classified details at an awards dinner in the presence of *Zero Dark Thirty* scriptwriter Mark Boal; and several administration officials went on record with the press about the operation.<sup>49</sup> Freedom of Information Act requests by Judicial Watch revealed that the White House intentionally leaked sensitive and classified information to the press and to the filmmakers of *Zero Dark Thirty*.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> A Google Trends search with the key word “U.S. Navy SEAL” shows the spike in interest following the bin Laden raid. This correlates with data from Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team. NSW's official website received so much traffic after bin Laden's death that the server shut down. (Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team employee, in discussion with this author, July 2015).

<sup>49</sup> See Tony Harnden, “Joe Biden Opens His Mouth about U.S. Navy SEALs,” *The Telegraph*, May 4, 2011, <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/tobyharnden/100086416/joe-biden-opens-his-mouth-about-us-navy-seals/>; “CIA Papers Show Leon Panetta Revealed bin Laden Secrets,” *Politico*, December 11, 2013, <http://www.politico.com/story/2013/12/cia-papers-show-leon-panetta-revealed-bin-laden-secrets-100993.html>; Rowan Scarborough, “Details of bin Laden raid leaked first by Obama aides,” *Washington Times*, September 16, 2012, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/sep/16/details-of-bin-laden-raid-leaked-first-by-aides/?page=all>. (*Zero Dark Thirty* is a movie about the efforts to find and capture Osama bin Laden. The movie also depicts the SEALs' part in the raid).

<sup>50</sup> See Judicial Watch, 15 November 2012, <http://www.judicialwatch.org/press-room/press-releases/obama-administration-admits-information-released-to-zero-dark-thirty-filmmakers-might-pose-an-unnecessary-security-and-counterintelligence-risk/>; Project on Government Oversight, 16 April 2015, <http://www.pogo.org/our-work/articles/2015/new-documents-in-zero-dark-thirty-affair-raise-questions.html>.

The conservative media claims that the bin Laden raid leaks were part of a political strategy to boost the president's ratings before the 2012 presidential election.<sup>51</sup> That may be the case, but the White House and DoD have released the operational details of other high-profile Navy SEAL missions as well.<sup>52</sup> As a political tactic, this certainly sets a dangerous precedent, though Eliot Cohen suggests that behavior like this is typical in democracies, and that the actions are meant as signals, both to the domestic population and to enemies abroad.<sup>53</sup> He writes, "An elite unit offers the public the illusion if not the reality of brilliant and sudden military successes. Even when the minutiae of a particular escapade are forgotten, the reputation of heroism remains."<sup>54</sup> Roger Beaumont, in his study of 20th century elite units, goes further and writes, "[Elite units] serve a publicity and propaganda function, and they were also good show business."<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of the political reasons for the release of mission details by the White House, the commentary on the conservative side has been just as political and in many ways even more damaging. The conservative argument is that the Navy SEALs "deserve all the credit."<sup>56</sup> One has to wonder: Is it really a good idea to tout the SEALs as the heroes, parade their stories in the media, and give them even more exposure, while at the same time expecting them to remain effective in covert and clandestine missions?

The SEALs exist as an extension of foreign policy, nothing more. They do not need public recognition by the government or any political class within the country. Arguably, the only thing the world needs to know is that the United States has a

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel Halper, "Obama Campaign Trots Out Bin Laden, Spikes the Football," *The Weekly Standard*, April 27, 2012, [http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/obama-campaign-trots-out-bin-laden-spikes-football\\_642143.html](http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/obama-campaign-trots-out-bin-laden-spikes-football_642143.html).

<sup>52</sup> A simple Internet search of "SEAL missions" provides plenty of evidence of this. Two fairly recent examples are the April 12, 2009 rescue of Captain Richard Phillips from armed pirates off the coast of Somalia and the January 24, 2012 rescue of Jessica Buchanan and Poul Thisted in Somalia. In each of these recent cases, tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and methods were immediately the subject of media commentary.

<sup>53</sup> Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians*, 49.

<sup>54</sup> Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> Roger Beaumont, *Military Elites* (New York, NY: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1974), 148.

<sup>56</sup> See the transcript from Fox News "The Five Debates Who Really Gets Credit For Bin Laden Death," May 1, 2012, <http://nation.foxnews.com/five/2012/05/01/five-debates-who-really-gets-credit-bin-laden-death>.



capability that can travel across borders undetected, break into heavily guarded compounds, shoot its enemies in the face, and dump their bodies in the ocean. In my view, politicians and the media more generally are making an unfortunate mistake when they believe that openly talking about the details of these operations in the press somehow honors the men and women that execute these missions. By invoking such “patriotic correctness,” these self-avowed supporters of the troops ironically do more damage to the SEALs by exposing the nature of their work and undermining their strategic utility. But the White House and the media are not the only ones to blame for stirring up publicity about the SEALs.

## **B. PUBLICITY STUNTS**

Around 2008, NSW leaders decided to endorse the making of the movie *Act of Valor*, which starred active duty Navy SEALs. NSWC’s actions may have been driven by the 2006 *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, which mandated that SOF grow by 15% to meet global commitments.<sup>57</sup> According to the Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team, NSW reorganized its recruiting efforts to raise public awareness and meet these new demands. During this time, NSW went through a phase when the leadership felt it could boost recruiting by taking an “entertainment” approach.<sup>58</sup> Initially conceived as a recruiting documentary, *Act of Valor* morphed into a full-blown Hollywood production.<sup>59</sup> While not exactly a blockbuster, the result was a movie that grossed \$83 million worldwide and had \$43 million in domestic video sales.<sup>60</sup>

From a military propaganda and recruiting perspective, there are plenty of historical precedents for embarking on such an endeavor. The movie *Top Gun* is a perfect example. The Navy saw an additional 20,000 sailors join following the movie’s release in

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<sup>57</sup> Secretary of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report*, Washington, DC: Secretary of Defense, February 6, 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Navy SEAL+ SWCC Scout Team employee, in discussion with the author, July 2015.

<sup>59</sup> See Jordan Zakarin, “‘Act of Valor’ and the Military’s Long Hollywood Mission,” *Huffington Post*, February 17, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/17/act-of-valor-military-hollywood\\_n\\_1284338.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/17/act-of-valor-military-hollywood_n_1284338.html).

<sup>60</sup> The Numbers, *Act of Valor*, <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Act-of-Valor#tab=summary>.

1986.<sup>61</sup> For reasons like this, *Act of Valor* may have seemed like a good idea at the time. But NSW's willingness to selectively forsake the SEAL Ethos in order to raise awareness points to a compromise in values that ultimately undermined the traditional trust relationship between the leadership and the men. As Brandon Webb himself commented: "Don't just create an ambiguous rule and try to enforce it when you just completed f\*\*\*ing *Act of Valor*."<sup>62</sup> In Mr. Webb's case, as well as that of many other SEALs with whom I have spoken, the SEAL Ethos leaves too much to interpretation, and *Act of Valor* only validated certain SEALs' latent proclivities for self-promotion.

From where I sit, there are two major problems with NSW's endorsement of *Act of Valor*. First, from a national security perspective, it was completely anti-functional for NSW to have endorsed the making of a Hollywood movie that showcases current tactics and active duty Navy SEALs. Even if NSW scrubbed sensitive information, the movie can only crystalize in the mind of America's competitors and adversaries the culture and capabilities of America's maritime special operations force. Second, as mentioned previously, the making of the movie sent a confusing message to SEALs, who were left to question why NSW could take advantage of the public interest and adulation but individual SEALs could not. Former SEALs like Mr. Webb now use *Act of Valor* to rationalize or excuse away their own breaches of the SEAL Ethos. Unfortunately, and at a minimum, even if NSW did not consciously set out to compromise its values, it sent confusing messages to SEALs throughout the larger active duty and retired communities, and in the end only perpetuated the cycle of commercialization that is currently causing NSW so much grief. As an aside, the Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team conducted surveys of new recruits following the release of the movie to gauge market penetration and the movie's impact on recruits' decision to join the Navy. The results were negligible, meaning that there was little to no return on investment for recruiting

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Parker, "The Armed Forces Need Another Top Gun," *Proceedings* 131, no. 12 (December 2005): 58.

<sup>62</sup> Bonner, "Navy SEAL, Inc."

purposes.<sup>63</sup> In the final analysis, it appears the only thing NSW received from *Act of Valor* was the ire of the SEAL community.

Neither was *Act of Valor* necessarily the first mixed signal from NSW leadership. According to a source within NSW, the point at which the current generation of SEALs first saw the lucrative nature of selling their stories was with NSWC's endorsement of the book *Lone Survivor*, which hit shelves in 2007.<sup>64</sup> NSW's endorsement of Marcus Luttrell appears to have sent the initial signal to the SEAL community that writing books about current operations was acceptable. With the runaway success of that book, an entire generation of SEALs, both past and present, saw a lucrative opportunity to cash in on personal stories, and many have fully embraced this new Market Ethos.

### C. MIXED MESSAGES

So, what kind of messages are the White House and NSWC sending when they deliberately expose the Navy SEAL brand to publicity for political use and recruiting? As Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) professor Dayne Nix notes, "The political realities of the contemporary security environment require that civilian leaders establish political expectations and end states...[but] lack of guidance from political leaders results in confusion on the battlefield and the squandering of resources."<sup>65</sup> The government and NSWC's strategic messaging on operational security (OPSEC) and SEAL operations has often been schizophrenic, and arguably confusing. Although political realities like these should hold little sway over men of high character who are governed by a common ethos, the mixed messages from top leadership within NSWC and the White House can only confuse the situation.

There are certainly other drivers behind the SEALs' foray into the limelight beyond operational success, poor messaging by leadership, and weakening organizational

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<sup>63</sup> Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team employee, in discussion with the author, July 2015.

<sup>64</sup> Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team employee who was present during initial discussions between Luttrell and the NSW Public Affairs Office regarding publication of *Lone Survivor*, in discussion with this author July 2015.

<sup>65</sup> Dayne E. Nix, "American Civil-Military Relations: Samuel P. Huntington and Political Dimensions of Military Professionalism," *Naval War College Review* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2012): 101-102.

values within NSW. Charles Moskos and others have argued that there has been a cultural shift in broader society that has introduced “a profound relativism into discourse.”<sup>66</sup> Is it possible that society’s mores are slowly influencing the military, and hence affecting SEALs’ attitudes? These shifting values are the essence of Samuel Huntington’s concerns about the two imperatives of civil-military relations: “the functional imperative stemming from the threats to the society’s security and the societal imperative arising from the social forces, ideologies, and institutions dominant within the society.”<sup>67</sup> New 21st century currents include the “interpenetrability of civilian and military spheres,”<sup>68</sup> “the dissolution of old categories, the rejection of absolutes...and the disappearance of allegiances to units greater than the individual.”<sup>69</sup>

Though there is no perfect explanation for why SEALs have decided to make an increasingly public spectacle of their SEAL accomplishments, shifting societal mores, the lure of fame, and lucrative opportunities have converged to create a host of new tensions for which NSW may not have been prepared, and for which the SEAL Ethos has no longer proved adequate.

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<sup>66</sup> Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, and David R. Segal, *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces after the Cold War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

<sup>67</sup> Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 2.

<sup>68</sup> Moskos, Williams, and Segal, *The Postmodern Military*, 2.

<sup>69</sup> Mackubin T. Owens, *U.S. Civil-Military Relations After 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2011), 134.

## V. THE COMMODIFICATION CYCLE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

The history of fame, according to cultural historian Leo Braudy, “is also the history of the shifting definition of achievement in a social world, achievement often defined by the eyes of others.”<sup>70</sup> According to Braudy’s formulation, the Navy SEALs would appear to have achieved considerable fame in the eyes of American society, particularly when one considers their lionization in the last decade.

### A. THE COMMODIFICATION CYCLE

In the case of NSW, the progression from obscurity to fame has developed in four steps. First, publicity through government leaks and media coverage has led to increased awareness of the Navy SEALs across American society.<sup>71</sup> Second, increased awareness has fed increased curiosity and interest in SEAL operations, methods, and capabilities. Third, society’s interest and curiosity has invigorated the media and set the conditions for a lucrative market in which anything “SEAL” sells. This market is characterized by the commodification of the SEAL identity and everything associated with it. Fourth, this new market has created opportunities and incentives for those with institutional knowledge of the SEAL Teams to profit from that knowledge—even if their association was only tangential. This commodification cycle has then perpetuated itself with every new book, media appearance, movie, blog post, and publicity stunt. Consequently, while publicity was and is the catalyst for NSW’s rise to prominence, fame and money are the corrupters and the fuel that keeps the cycle going.

The most important aspect of this cycle is that without the SEALs’ complicity there would be no cycle. Media interest would likely dry up due to lack of reputable sources. The film and publishing industries would gain rights to no SEAL stories. The blogosphere would be devoid of any SEALs trying to set the record straight. Public interest would likely wane, while the mystique would remain—mystique crucial to

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<sup>70</sup> Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1986), 10.

<sup>71</sup> According to the Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team the average age of awareness in America of the Navy SEALs has dropped to 8 years old, down from 12 years old prior to the death of Osama bin Laden.

recruitment and retention in the U.S. and to bolstering SEALs' image of stealthy, highly capable operators abroad. Unfortunately, the reality is quite the opposite as former SEALs jockey for media appearances, blog about contemporary SEAL missions, publicize their service through autobiographies, leak information to journalists and, for all intents and purposes, keep the SEAL name perpetually in the spotlight.

## **B. SOCIAL CAPITAL**

These efforts to expose the brand point to problems internal to NSW. The SEAL Ethos has fallen prey to the lucrative nature of the cycle that converts fame and publicity into authority and legitimacy in the civilian realm. This has happened thanks to the intersection of NSW's unprecedented social capital and the entrepreneurship of former SEALs in partnership with outside sponsors. The late sociologist Pierre Bourdieu defined social capital as:

The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.<sup>72</sup>

If we accept Bourdieu's definition, then all SEALs, past and present, benefit from NSW's accumulated credit and prestige. The volume of the social capital possessed by each individual SEAL "depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected."<sup>73</sup> Put simplistically:

$$\textit{Social capital} = \textit{symbolic capital (NSW)} + [(\textit{economic capital}) \times (\textit{size of network})]$$

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<sup>72</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 86.

<sup>73</sup> Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 86.

Over the past decade, NSW's symbolic capital has grown significantly and hence so has its social capital. Until recently, the quiet professional ethic helped delimit these boundaries. NSWC controlled the size of the network and the exchanges that granted access to its symbolic capital. The NSW commander determined which official relationships to sponsor, and the SEAL Ethos (at least theoretically) ensured SEALs were not making relationships independent of the command that would expose NSW or lend its credibility to non-sanctioned entities. In this way, NSW and its most important resource, its people, worked together to protect their collectively owned capital, and all of this rested on implied mutual trust.

As Bourdieu argues when talking about the kinds of societies anthropologists typically study:

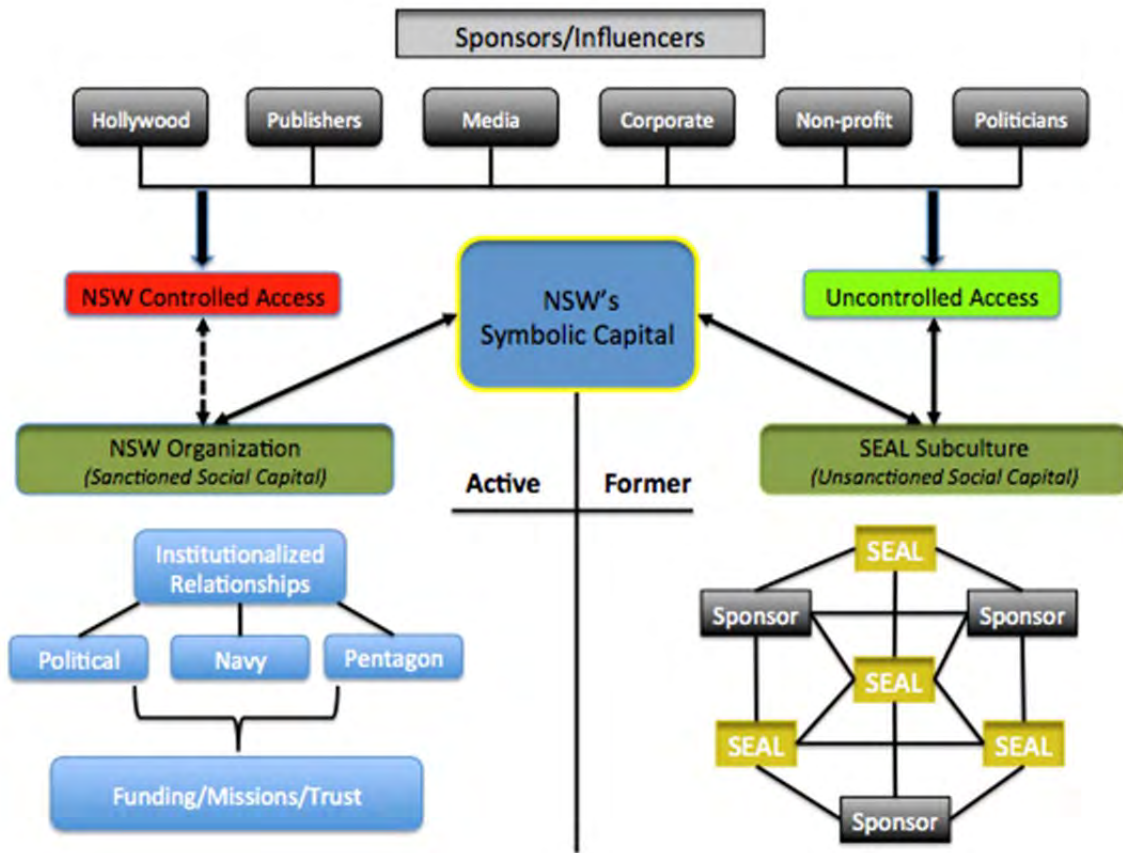
Each member of the group is thus instituted as a custodian of the limits of the group: because the definition of the criteria of entry is at stake in each new entry...It is quite logical that, in most societies, the preparation and conclusion of marriages should be the business of the whole group, and not of the agents directly concerned. Through the introduction of new members into a family, a clan, or a club, the whole definition of the group, i.e., its fines, its boundaries, and its identity, is put at stake, exposed to redefinition, alteration, adulteration.<sup>74</sup>

Given the criteria Bourdieu describes, any access to NSW's symbolic capital should remain centrally controlled, and of benefit to the whole group if the group is to thrive (or even survive). Sanctioned efforts lead to the institutional relationships that support NSW's role and effectiveness, to include the trust that leads to funding, authorities, and missions. But, as discussed, even sanctioned efforts can lead to problems if they introduce corrupting influences into the group. Any relationships that leverage NSW's symbolic capital for the benefit of anything other than the collective run the risk of fundamentally altering the nature of the organization. The following (Figure 2) depicts how NSW, former SEALs, and outside actors all work to access NSW's shared symbolic capital.

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<sup>74</sup> Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 87.

Figure 2. NSW's Shared Symbolic Capital



As the figure shows, NSW shares its symbolic capital with all SEALs, past and present. In order for outside actors to legitimately tap into NSW's symbolic capital, they must either go through officially controlled NSW channels, or through former SEALs who have shown a willingness to market their SEAL identities. Ostensibly, for many outside actors, this uncontrolled channel offers the path of least resistance and the greatest payoff. Applying Bourdieu's logic, one could argue that NSW's culture has been corrupted *because of* a growth in these relationships with various outside actors. This is true of both NSW's *sanctioned* efforts, such as supporting *Act of Valor*, and former SEALs' *unsanctioned* efforts that hijack NSW's symbolic capital and bring unwanted exposure to the brand through outside sponsors.

Preventing misuse of NSW's symbolic capital is the basis of the trust relationship among members, but particularly between the leadership and the men. One could argue



that this trust relationship in NSW has weakened significantly. Otherwise, presumably, SEALs would not have leveraged NSW's symbolic capital to the extent they have to create personally profitable relationships beyond NSW's purview. As mentioned, one thing that has made this possible is the use of financial incentives and economic capital by outsiders. The transaction that occurs is SEALs' trading of their symbolic capital for others' economic capital. Again, Bourdieu explains what happens as the group-based ethos gives way to a market ethos:

[For] those who, like the professionals, live on the sale of cultural services to a clientele, the accumulation of economic capital merges with the accumulation of symbolic capital, that is, with the acquisition of a reputation for competence and an image of respectability and honorability that are easily converted into political positions as a local or national notable.<sup>75</sup>

In the case of NSW, SEALs bring their competence, respectability, and stature to the deal, and the sponsors, who want a piece of the SEAL "magic," bring the cash, the influence, and the network of outside relationships. SEALs then gain a position as the front men for any number of undertakings, from marketing SEAL knowhow, to lending themselves to politicians, to becoming political actors in their own right. In this way, the opening of new venues exposes the SEAL brand in new ways, and NSW's credibility becomes increasingly vulnerable to partisan or corporate sponsors' agendas.

Essentially, by collecting SEALs, sponsors come into possession of an inherited symbolic capital. This is the conversion process of turning fame and publicity, based on the SEAL name (or brand), into authority and legitimacy, and NSW ends up with no control over how its own capital is spent.

As the individual in command of Naval Special Warfare today, Rear Admiral Losey acts in a role akin to that described by Bourdieu as the *pater familias*, or head of the family. In that role, Rear Admiral Losey's responsibility is to "[limit] the consequences of individual lapses by explicitly delimiting responsibilities...and shielding the group as a whole from discredit by expelling or excommunicating the embarrassing

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<sup>75</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 291.

individuals.”<sup>76</sup> Basically, one of Rear Admiral Losey’s responsibilities is to protect the symbolic and social capital that the SEAL community has earned, and to ensure that it is not misused. However, his control does not extend beyond active duty SEALs and the relationships NSW sanctions. Control thus becomes a difficult and potentially delicate undertaking. Once SEALs leave active service, there is nothing that legally binds them to the SEAL Ethos. The current spate of self-aggrandizement is proof of that.

So, we should wonder, who actually *owns* NSW’s symbolic capital? Are there ways in which NSW can exert greater authority over the management of its trademark symbology to protect it from embezzlement by self-serving individuals and groups? What are the implications when an organization of NSW’s stature does *not* control its own narrative or symbolic capital? What are the consequences for a critical special operations organization when it can no longer count on maintaining its operational ambiguity vis-à-vis the enemy?

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<sup>76</sup> Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” 88.

## **VI. CONSEQUENCES OF PROMOTING SEALS FOR ENTERTAINMENT, PROFITS, AND POLITICS— WHY WORRY?**

### **A. UNDUE PROMINENCE AND CIVIL-MILITARY RELATIONS**

One of the few individuals to look at elite military units from a civil-military relations and policy perspective was Eliot Cohen in *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies*. Many of Cohen’s concerns about the costs and consequences of elite units as a matter of military efficiency—such as SOF draining off high-quality manpower, fostering inappropriate tactics, and demoralizing other forces—were addressed as a consequence of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the follow on Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987. The formation of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) created institutional stability for special operations. But Cohen’s reservations about the temptation to overly promote elite units for political purposes seem eerily prescient, especially when viewed against the backdrop of the U.S. Navy SEALs in 2015. His observations also offer a springboard for updating his analysis.

Cohen lists the following potential consequences of promoting elite units for political or romantic reasons. Notice that Cohen is not talking about promoting elite units for military/functional purposes, but rather for political-societal/non-functional purposes.<sup>77</sup>

- When politicians support elite military units for political or romantic reasons, these units run the risk of achieving “undue prominence.”<sup>78</sup>
- These units provide “temptingly colorful television footage or newspaper columns” in the short run. But, thereafter, “the expansion and publicity

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<sup>77</sup> I use the term “functional” as Samuel Huntington used the word, which relates to the security role of the unit. The intrinsic functional role of the SEALs, for instance, is primarily to fight and win. The SEALs train to this. Any romantic or political role is a secondary effect and not considered necessarily “functional.”

<sup>78</sup> Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians*, 96.

associated with prominence undermine military efficiency and civil-military relations.”<sup>79</sup>

- The government may initiate efforts to promote elite units as a popular symbol for political purposes, but in the end will find it hard to control or rein the publicity back in.<sup>80</sup>
- Continued media reporting, public interest, and efforts by members of these elite units to seek publicity on their own terms only perpetuate the problem.<sup>81</sup>

Cohen’s analysis from nearly forty years ago reads like a timeline for the SEALs’ rise to prominence in contemporary American culture. The government’s use of SEAL operations for political leverage with the voters—a short run win—created a publicity machine that has granted undue prominence to the SEALs. The spectacular commercialization of the SEALs manifested through media reporting, Hollywood movies, TV shows, documentaries, books, political commentaries, and blog posts is the result of cultivating undue prominence. In essence, society has granted SEALs suprarational credibility based primarily off of a handful of highly romanticized and politicized military missions.

President Obama and his policies are, in many ways, responsible for these trends and the SEALs’ current credibility. He approved the missions, gave the missions to the SEALs, and promoted their success in public forums, thereby turning SEALs into instant celebrities. It is then quite ironic that SEALs are transforming that credibility into a platform from which to attack the president and his policies. Such are the vagaries of fame.

By romanticizing and publicizing SEAL missions, the government fostered an insatiable curiosity that has driven a lucrative new market for SEAL information. Many former SEALs have seen the opportunity to capitalize on this lucrative market. In doing so, they perpetuate the cycle of commodification through profit-based activities

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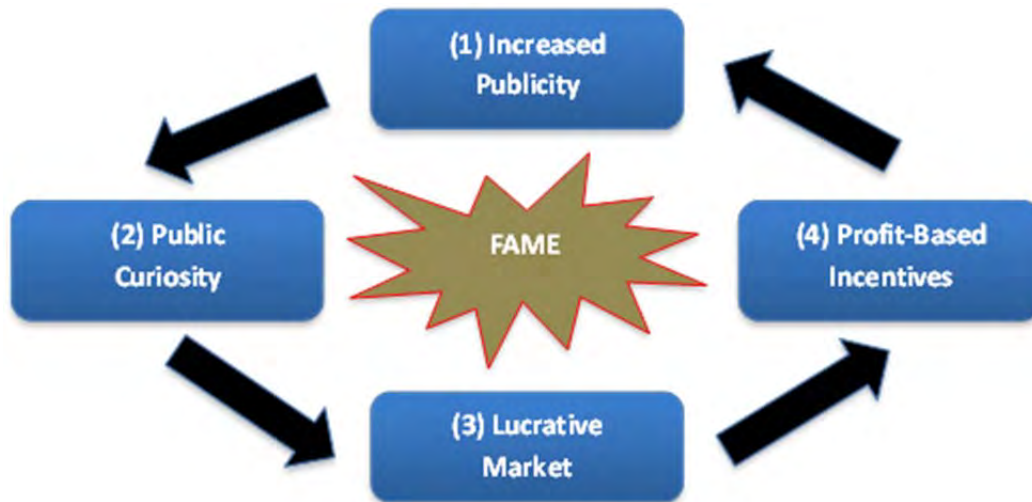
<sup>79</sup> Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians*, 96.

<sup>80</sup> Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians*, 65.

<sup>81</sup> Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians*, 65.

(infotainment, entertainment, politics) that ultimately lead to even more unsanctioned and out-of-control publicity (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Government-Fostered Fame



Former SEAL Robert O’Neill is an important example in this regard, having recently made a public spectacle of his participation in the bin Laden raid. He has been under investigation by DoD for possibly violating his non-disclosure agreements.<sup>82</sup> However, that fact seems to make little difference to the American public; Mr. O’Neill is not only now a Fox News contributor, but several lawmakers have submitted letters on his behalf requesting that DoD not pursue charges.<sup>83</sup> Lawmakers apparently reason that Mr. O’Neill only provided details that were already in the press, and his admissions have not endangered national security.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Shane Harris, “Exclusive: Bin Laden Shooter Under Investigation for Leaking Secrets,” *The Daily Beast*, December 23, 2014, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/12/23/exclusive-bin-laden-shooter-under-investigation-for-leaking-secrets.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Brian Steinberg, “Fox News Gives Contributor Role to Rob O’Neill, the Navy SEAL Who Claims He Killed bin Laden,” *Variety*, March 12, 2015, <http://variety.com/2015/tv/news/fox-news-gives-contributor-role-to-rob-oneill-the-navy-seal-who-claims-he-killed-bin-laden-1201451577/>; and “Man who killed bin Laden speaks out on NCIS probe,” January 5, 2014, <http://insider.foxnews.com/2015/01/05/rob-oneill-seal-who-killed-bin-laden-speaks-out-ncis-probe>.

<sup>84</sup> “Man who killed bin Laden speaks out on NCIS probe,” January 5, 2014, <http://insider.foxnews.com/2015/01/05/rob-oneill-seal-who-killed-bin-laden-speaks-out-ncis-probe>.

Nevertheless, there are three problems with this logic. First, Executive Order 13526 Section 1.1 (c) states, “Classified information shall not be declassified automatically as a result of any unauthorized disclosure of identical or similar information.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, while the White House or other SEALs may have released information, that does not change the fact that the information is still classified. Mr. O’Neill is still legally bound to uphold his federal non-disclosure agreements. Second, some operations that SEALs take part in are not NSW or even DoD led operations in terms of authorities. Operation Neptune Spear—the bin Laden raid—was just such an operation, the details of which were not NSW’s to release to the press in the first place, much less did its success belong to any one individual who took part in it. Third, the arguments made in favor of Mr. O’Neill point to a fundamental misunderstanding of the military’s functional imperative and the Navy SEAL Ethos. The logic used by Sean Hannity during an interview with Mr. O’Neill is indicative of the problem. Hannity, in defense of O’Neill’s actions, emphatically states, “Every President when he gets out of office writes a book, every Vice President, every Secretary of Defense, every CIA director.”<sup>86</sup> There are two problems with this line of thinking. First, NSW’s standards must be above the average politician’s standards, even the commander-in-chief’s. This is the essence of the SEAL Ethos. Second, Hannity’s logic is reminiscent of the Kelly Flinn affair, when the American public broadly questioned the military’s policies on adultery, and lawmakers attempted to pressure DoD to change what it perceived to be DoD’s antiquated rules.<sup>87</sup> What lawmakers and members of society misunderstood then, and apparently misunderstand now, is that such rules serve as the foundation of a distinctly military ethos. These rules are about good order and discipline. They are not only legal, but are also functionally necessary, in that they support the

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<sup>85</sup> White House, Executive Order 13526 Section 1.1 (c), December 29, 2009, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/executive-order-classified-national-security-information>.

<sup>86</sup> “Man who killed bin Laden speaks out on NCIS probe,” January 5, 2014, <http://insider.foxnews.com/2015/01/05/rob-oneill-seal-who-killed-bin-laden-speaks-out-ncis-probe>.

<sup>87</sup> Tony Capaccio, “Pilot Errors,” *AJR*, October 1997, <http://ajrarchive.org/Article.asp?id=336>.

military's warfighting role. And warfighting, as James Burk contends, "still determines the central beliefs, values and complex symbolic formations that define military culture."<sup>88</sup>

We might ask: *Is* ensuring operational security through non-disclosure agreements antiquated? Should every military member with a security clearance be encouraged to make a public statement or write a book? Surely answering "yes" would lead to the complete undermining of operational security. As for the legality of the government releasing information: to be sure, the White House has every right to promote the success of certain missions, and even to take credit for them. Executive Order 13526 clearly gives original classification authority to the President of the United States (POTUS).<sup>89</sup> The president has the legal authority to determine what should and should not be classified, although it is also the Pentagon's responsibility to ensure POTUS fully understands the implications when releasing military details to the press. This dialogue that exists between our nation's elected leaders and the men and women charged with the management of violence on the nation's behalf represents the essence of civil-military relations.

By questioning DoD's efforts to prosecute O'Neill, lawmakers and others who self-identify as supporters of the troops challenge the authority of the imperatives that govern military personnel under the Uniform Code of Military Justice. This sets a dangerous precedent for future cases. Does Mr. O'Neill's status as a former SEAL provide him with special clemency not available to the common citizen or soldier? If so, it shows the special, and thereby extremely problematic, clout behind the SEAL brand. It would appear that a halo around the U.S. Navy SEALs may be clouding people's judgment. As a result, NSW is now caught in the middle of a civil-military relations

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<sup>88</sup> James Burk, "Military Culture," in *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict*, ed. Lester Kurtz (San Diego, CA: Academic Press, 1999) cited in Don M. Snider, "An Uninformed Debate on Military Culture," *Orbis* 43, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 15.

<sup>89</sup> The White House, "Executive Order 13526-Classified National Security Information," December 29, 2009. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/executive-order-classified-national-security-information>.

struggle that pits the societal imperative of promoting heroics against the functional imperative of adhering to a distinctly military ethos of duty and professionalism.

## **B. NATIONAL SECURITY**

From a purely functional perspective, releasing the operational details of SEAL missions can rarely enhance national security—unless of course, the information is part of a deliberate deception scheme aimed at taking advantage of an adversary’s cognitive biases, such as was the practice in World War II. But, as Walter Jajko noted with regard to deception today, “One is led to conclude that the United States seems to lack an intellectual, ethical, and institutional framework for understanding and undertaking deception operations systematically on any significant scale against its adversaries.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, if intentional leaks are not designed to deceive, then no functional military purpose is served by disclosing detailed operational information to the public, and especially not while special operations forces remain employed around the globe. Keeping such information proprietary has been considered key to maintaining a comparative advantage over the enemy. Information about the capabilities, composition, tactics, techniques, procedures, and methods of special operations units is of potential use to an adversary; a concept engrained in military thinking from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz.

Surprise in battle comes from knowing enemy tactics and doctrine. This is why militaries around the world study threats and technologies: to better understand the enemy. The goal is to create information asymmetry or, rather, to achieve “information dominance.” Professor John Arquilla defines information dominance as “Knowing everything about an adversary while keeping the adversary from knowing much about oneself.”<sup>91</sup> It stands to reason, then, that any information that undermines the operational security of the SEALs and limits their ability to surprise the enemy increases their chances of failure and puts American lives at risk.

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<sup>90</sup> Walter Jajko, “Deception: Appeal for Acceptance; Discourse on Doctrine; Preface to Planning,” *Comparative Strategy* 21, no. 5 (2002): 353.

<sup>91</sup> John Arquilla, “The Strategic Implications of Information Dominance,” *Strategic Review* 22, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 25.



When SEALs lose their operational ambiguity, they simultaneously lose two critical components related to the established “principles of war” and the “principles of special operations”: namely, security and surprise.<sup>92</sup> Accepting this, it then naturally follows that government leaks, in-depth documentaries, realistic video games, media reports, blogs, and tell-all books that discuss contemporary SEAL missions have the potential to undermine the SEALs’ military effectiveness and, hence, national security. It also follows that if raising the SEALs’ visibility endangers national security, every effort should be made to protect and preserve the operational ambiguity of the SEAL Teams.

On August 6, 2011, Taliban fighters shot down a CH-47 helicopter loaded with special operations personnel, half of whom were SEALs from Naval Special Warfare Development Group (NSWDG). The crash killed everyone onboard. This event is widely known as “Extortion 17,” which was the call sign of the helicopter. Many of the families of the men killed believe that President Obama’s administration is to blame for the crash. They claim that revelations provided by the administration about the SEALs’ role in the bin Laden raid gave the Taliban the details necessary to target the SEALs in Afghanistan.<sup>93</sup> Critics can, and should, counter that there is no credible evidence that these allegations are correct. But, as described earlier, the White House released many of the details of the bin Laden raid to the press almost immediately after the Abbottabad mission, and according to documents released through the Freedom of Information Act, the White House now acknowledges that information it gave to the filmmakers of *Zero Dark Thirty* could have posed an “unnecessary security and counterintelligence risk” if made public.<sup>94</sup> How would the administration answer the charge that its efforts to promote the SEALs for political points actually led to a catastrophic loss of American life?

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<sup>92</sup> See Army Field Manual FM-3: *Operations*, and McRaven, *SPECOPS*.

<sup>93</sup> Rowan Scarborough, “Families suspect SEAL Team 6 crash was inside job on worst day in Afghanistan,” *Washington Times*, October 20, 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/oct/20/families-suspect-seal-team-6-crash-was-inside-job-/?page=all>.

<sup>94</sup> See Judicial Watch, 15 November 2012, <http://www.judicialwatch.org/press-room/press-releases/obama-administration-admits-information-released-to-zero-dark-thirty-filmmakers-might-pose-an-unnecessary-security-and-counterintelligence-risk/>.

Such a scenario is not outside the realm of the possible. Unforeseen dangers always attend the release of operational details about contemporary special operations missions.

A common misunderstanding about OPSEC is that it only relates to classified information. The U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA) defines OPSEC as “the process by which we protect *UNCLASSIFIED* information that can be used against us. OPSEC challenges us to look at ourselves through the eyes of an adversary (individuals, groups, countries, organizations).”<sup>95</sup> According to DoDEA, 90% of the information collected by America’s adversaries comes from “open sources.” Open sources include books, media broadcasts, social media accounts (e.g., Twitter feeds, Facebook), newspapers, government reports, blogs, and academic papers. That statistic—90%—should shock people. How can anyone argue that government leaks, books, video games, NSW-endorsed movies, and detailed media commentaries about SEALs *do not* put America’s national security at risk? The purveyors of information about SEALs need to ask themselves how comfortable they feel sending their products directly to a terrorist group, and how comfortable they feel about sharing TTPs with future adversaries.

Al-Qa’ida (AQ) has consistently shown its willingness to gather open-source information, going so far as to cull Government Accounting Office (GAO) reports.<sup>96</sup> AQ is also known to have translated U.S. military training manuals into Arabic.<sup>97</sup> The U.S. must assume that the likes of AQ and Daesh pay attention to reporting, especially any and all reporting on the unit that successfully killed Osama bin Laden. We should hope that they do not pick up on sensitive details and that OPSEC violations go unnoticed. However, the dangers multiply when sensitive details are repeated on national news until every last cable subscriber hears about them. This is exactly what has happened with several of the SEALs’ operations. Worth noting is the same logic applies across the full

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<sup>95</sup> U.S. Department of Defense Education Activity, “Operations Security (OPSEC),” <http://www.DoDea.edu/Offices/Safety/OPSEC.cfm>.

<sup>96</sup> Eric Lichtblau, “Terrorists Noted Flaws in Security, Report Says,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 01, 2002, <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/feb/01/news/mn-25804>.

<sup>97</sup> Richard H. Shultz, Jr. and Ruth M. Beitler, “Tactical Deception and Strategic Surprise in Al-Qai’da’s Operations,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8, no. 2 (June 2004): 60.

spectrum of media exposure, while every book that a SEAL writes about current operations does untold damage; every play-by-play walkthrough in the press helps complete the mosaic of how SEALs operate. If war is rational, as Michael I. Handel claims, then “there is never a reason to make life easier for the adversary or more difficult for oneself.”<sup>98</sup> But even if war is irrational, as it so often is, the same logic still applies.

Cultivating a public persona around one’s SEAL identity also puts families and communities at unnecessary risk, especially in the era of social media when so many people are connected. Now-deceased former SEAL Chris Kyle is an example of the dangers inherent in cultivating a public persona when one is a special operations practitioner. The national attention that Mr. Kyle attracted from his book, *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in U.S. Military History*, may very well have contributed to his and his friend’s death at the hands of a disturbed military veteran. The tragic irony of his death is most evident in one answer to why he decided to write the book in the first place.

I wanted to be able to get it out about not the sacrifices that the military members make, but the sacrifices that their families have to go through about the single mothers now raising their children and doing all the day-to-day house chores.<sup>99</sup>

Chris Kyle’s wife is now a single mother raising their two children on her own. What’s more, former SEAL Jesse Ventura successfully sued the Kyle estate because of public statements Chris Kyle made disparaging Mr. Ventura’s reputation, causing added duress to the Kyle family.<sup>100</sup> Again, this is a result of Chris Kyle creating a commodified and public persona around his SEAL identity, something that could have been avoided.

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<sup>98</sup> Michael I. Handel, “Intelligence and Deception,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 5, no. 1 (1982): 143.

<sup>99</sup> Belinda Luscombe, “Read the Full Interview With American Sniper Chris Kyle That Didn’t Make It to Press,” *Time*, January 20, 2015, <http://time.com/3674546/chris-kyle-american-sniper-interview/>.

<sup>100</sup> Dan Lamothe, “Jesse Ventura vs. Chris Kyle: A Case Where No One Won,” *The Washington Post*, July 30, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2014/07/30/jesse-ventura-vs-chris-kyle-a-case-where-no-one-won/>.

Robert O’Neill provides another example: How must Mr. O’Neill’s neighbors have felt when a Daesh sympathizer released O’Neill’s home address and called for Islamic extremists to execute him?<sup>101</sup> How many people has Mr. O’Neill put at risk in his quest for the spotlight?

### **C. ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

From an organizational perspective, the SEALs’ rise to prominence has come with both positive and negative implications. According to the Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team, the SEALs’ popularity has almost entirely eliminated the need for NSW to raise awareness for SEAL recruiting efforts, which has allowed NSW’s recruiting directorate to focus on the other two pillars of its program, Information and Assistance.<sup>102</sup> For the first time in years, NSW has been able to completely fill its Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL (BUD/S) classes. NSW also enjoys unprecedented support from the American people. There are currently 40 charitable organizations partnered with NSW, raising a significant amount of money each year for SEALs and their families.<sup>103</sup> SEALs are better trained and better funded than before, and have proven themselves in combat time and again over the last fifteen years. From this perspective, publicity has been a boon for NSW. However, there are insidious downsides to this fame as well.

The greatest danger for NSW may lie in the erosion of trust and credibility with other military units, interagency partners, and civilian leaders. It does not look good for NSW when SEALs are writing the majority of the tell-all books on the market. Since 9/11, NSW has worked hard to establish relationships with other SOF units. But, when SEALs consistently jockey for the spotlight, it can only put strains on relations grounded in mutual trust among quiet professionals. Trust and reputation are everything in the special operations community; without it there can be no credibility. The question that the current USSOCOM commander may be asking himself is, “Why should I send NSW on

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<sup>101</sup> Kellan Howell, “Islamic State Sympathizer Publishes Robert O’Neill’s Address, Calls for Extremists in U.S. to Attack,” *Washington Times*, October 6, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/oct/6/robert-oneill-seal-who-killed-bin-laden-targeted-i/>.

<sup>102</sup> Navy SEAL + SWCC Scout Team employee, in discussion with the author, July 2015.

<sup>103</sup> NSW Staff Judge Advocate staff, in discussion with the author, April 2015.

this mission if there is a good chance one of their guys will write a book about it?” This is a valid question, and nobody should fault General Votel, who is not a SEAL, for asking it. This is especially the case in the wake of the release of Sean Naylor’s new book, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command*. According to Naylor, several of his sources for the book were NSWDCG operators that spoke candidly about Joint Special Operation Command (JSOC) operations.<sup>104</sup> Granted, he had other sources as well, but the fact that he had SEAL sources is what garnered the most press.

From a non-SEAL SOF perspective, SEALs are not only writing more books than ever, but are now actively talking to the press about national missions. If the USSOCOM commander loses faith in SEALs’ ability to keep quiet it would pose an existential threat for NSW. This is especially true if it results in NSW losing missions to other SOF units, or if it means NSW loses access and placement and freedom of maneuver with our interagency partners in Washington, DC, and around the world.

This new environment also has the potential to seriously strain NSW’s relationships with the executive branch, especially as former SEALs engage in political attacks against POTUS. When SEALs publicly choose sides in a political contest, they alienate themselves from and turn their backs on members of the party they oppose. NSW’s credibility is eroded when SEALs appear in media broadcasts wearing Trident pins while engaging in partisan discussions. Regardless of how a former SEAL feels about his commander-in-chief, he must recognize that his actions will affect the relationship between his teammates, as successors who continue to serve, and the man who assigns the missions. Do these former SEALs want POTUS to ask: Why not send in Army special operations? Most likely, the answer is “no.”

Even internal to the NSW organization, fame has had a corrupting influence. In the last ten years, the number of disciplinary actions taken against active duty SEALs who have sought to profit from commercializing NSW information has markedly

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<sup>104</sup> Kristina Wong, “Special Ops Brace for Release of Tell-All Book,” *The Hill*, August 31, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/defense/252342-special-operations-community-bracing-for-book-release>.

increased.<sup>105</sup> NSW is currently dealing with multiple Ethos violations by active duty SEALs who are moonlighting and engaging in unsanctioned side projects outside the Navy. Even the relationships created between SEALs and wealthy donors at NSW charity events have proven to be ground zero for subsequent Ethos violations.<sup>106</sup> The temptations that come with fame and interest place NSW on the horns of a dilemma, as it must walk a fine line between securing public funding and support for SEALs and their families on the one hand, and guarding them from the lure of outside money on the other hand. Even sponsors with pure intentions, who are simply trying to give back, can put NSW and its people at risk by creating a venue for the publicity-commodification cycle to take off.

My intent here is not to suggest that these consequences represent the end of the world for NSW. But, I would argue that we will see increasingly negative consequences in the future if current trends continue. America seems to have a need to celebrate its special operations practitioners through media exposure, charitable giving, and for-profit opportunities. This is laudable—but only up to a point. The reality is that the adulation, glorification, and lionization of the Navy SEALs by the government and society writ large have had a corrupting effect. The consequences of that corruption are evident in the actions undertaken by SEALs to personally profit from and capitalize on being SEALs, thereby trafficking in unsanctioned publicity about NSW. This celebrity SEAL environment poses threats not only to our men and women in uniform, but to national security more broadly, and to the quality of civil-military relations in America.

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<sup>105</sup> NSW Staff Judge Advocate staff, in discussion with this author, April 2015.

<sup>106</sup> NSW Staff Judge Advocate staff, in discussion with this author, April 2015.

## VII. COUNTERARGUMENTS

I have argued that when SOF practitioners, the government, and society writ large cultivate the prominence of SEALs for monetary or ideological gain they corrupt the SEAL culture by incentivizing narcissistic and profit-focused behavior. This, in turn, erodes military effectiveness, damages national security, and undermines healthy civil-military relations. Others might contend that this is not true, that the benefits that come from publicizing SEAL exploits in the press outweigh any negative ramifications, and that the exposure is not that big a deal. I will address three of the most common counterarguments I encountered when conducting my research.

### A. DETERRENCE

According to those who cite publicity's value for deterrence purposes, the United States government should publicize special operations missions in the press because this sends a strong signal to our enemies to not mess with America. Basically, describing and discussing SEAL operations will deter America's current and potential adversaries. According to this line of thinking, North Korea, Russia, China, Iran, Daesh, and Al-Qa'ida will think twice about opposing the United States because of the incredible capabilities, characteristics, tactics, techniques, procedures, and methods of the U.S. Navy SEALs, which deliberately have been made public.

However, for this to hold, the fear of the Navy SEALs would have to outweigh the politics and the ideologies of state and non-state actors alike. This is unlikely. What is more likely is that these entities will adapt and adjust their tactics based on what they see, hear, and can access via open sources. There is already evidence that our adversaries change their tactics following disclosures about U.S. surveillance practices.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) points to a worldwide rise

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<sup>107</sup> Eric Schmitt and Michael S. Schmidt, "Qaeda Plot Leak Has Undermined U.S. Intelligence," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2013, [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/us/qaeda-plot-leak-has-undermined-us-intelligence.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/30/us/qaeda-plot-leak-has-undermined-us-intelligence.html?_r=0).

in terrorism activity and intensity, especially since 2011.<sup>108</sup> This suggests that enemies of the U.S. are not being deterred at all by the efforts of American special operations. Also, the fact that Daesh published Robert O'Neill's home address suggests that Islamic extremists, at least, are not scared of the Navy SEALs. If anything, the detailed commentary about SEAL operations helps prepare them for when the SEALs come knocking on their doors.

## **B. OVERSIGHT AND THE RIGHT TO KNOW**

A different argument involves the need for transparency. Many believe that SOF units, like the SEALs, not only need government oversight, but that Americans have a right to know what SEALs are doing and how they do it. Some fear the development of praetorianism. In the balance between national security and transparency, many would rather see more transparency.

Critics and skeptics are not wrong: Congressional oversight of special operations is not only healthy, but absolutely necessary. America's elected leaders have a responsibility to understand how SOF is employed in pursuit of national security objectives. There is a difference, however, between elected leaders who hold the highest security clearances being told the details about these missions and what the average American citizen, or even reporter for that matter, needs to know. Without operational security, protection of methods and sources is impossible. The problem with the oversight argument is that it assumes the United States operates in a vacuum, and that all of America's business should be done in the open, even though every other nation state on planet Earth operates exactly opposite. At the same time, this argument cannot simply be brushed aside since it goes to the heart of civil-military relations, which rests on a foundation of mutual trust. The American people must trust that the SEALs are only doing what they are told to do, and that they are being told to do it only by the officials the citizenry elected into office to act on its behalf.

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<sup>108</sup> *Global Terrorism Index 2015* (IEP Report No. 36) (New York: Institute for Economics and Peace, 2015), 15, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>.



### **C. THIS IS ONLY A PASSING PHASE**

A stoic might contend that what we are seeing with the SEALs today is merely the equivalent of a shiny nickel. Society will tire of SEAL stories and move on to the next big thing. Recall the U.S. Army Green Berets during Vietnam. The Green Berets went through a similar phase, breaking into pop culture with a major motion picture and even a No. 1 hit song, “The Ballad of the Green Berets.” For those who believe the Navy SEALs are simply victims of their own success and that their time will likewise pass, patience is the most important virtue.

However, while this is the counterargument that I hope does come true, in order for the SEALs to slip back into the shadows, the government and the SEALs themselves need to stop cultivating publicity. This assumes, too, that there will be no more Osama bin Ladens who need killing or Captain Phillipses who need rescuing. It assumes that the publicity problem will also take care of itself.

Unfortunately, this type of “wait-and-see” logic is what allowed the SEALs to reach the level of undue prominence that they have. Also, unlike the Green Berets of the 1960s, special operations forces today are employed on a much greater scale around the world conducting overt, covert, and clandestine operations. It will take deliberate efforts by all parties to break the lucrative cycle of commercialization that feeds the market for the “authentic, accurate, and timely analysis of Special Operations” that knowledge of SEAL missions generates.

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## VIII. WHAT TO DO?

Every problem highlighted in this paper finds its origin in a violation of NSW's quiet professional ethic. Even in the face of externally generated publicity, self-serving politicians, and lucrative moneymaking opportunities, the SEAL Ethos should suffice to ensure that SEALs only engage in responsible and sanctioned behavior. Therefore, restoring the ethic within the SEAL Teams must be NSW's number one priority. A second, but equally important task must be to sensitize the American public to what is and is not acceptable to talk about. Third is to recapture the narrative from a subculture of publicity-seeking SEALs who are eroding NSW's credibility, putting SEALs' lives at risk, confusing the American public, incentivizing violations of the SEAL Ethos, and generally undermining civil-military relations. The fourth task falls to all Navy SEALs who need to actively oppose the commodification of the SEAL brand through peer pressure and by discrediting abusers of NSW's symbolic capital. Altogether, these recommendations can be thought of as the internal approach, the external approach, and the grassroots approach.

### A. INTERNAL APPROACH

NSW must reinforce weakened cultural assumptions in the SEAL community. According to Vijay Sathe, "The individual becomes fundamentally committed to the organization's beliefs and values when he or she internalizes them, that is, when the person comes to hold them as personal beliefs and values."<sup>109</sup> Consequently, in order for the SEAL Ethos to govern behavior once a SEAL leaves active duty service, SEALs must truly internalize NSW's beliefs and values. Sathe says, "It is through the process of internalization by individual members of an organization that the assumptions become shared assumptions."<sup>110</sup> Somehow over the course of the past decade these cultural assumptions significantly weakened. Why? Sathe argues that:

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<sup>109</sup> Vijay Sathe, *Culture and Related Corporate Realities* (Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin INC., 1985), 12.

<sup>110</sup> Sathe, *Culture and Related Corporate Realities*, 12.

By focusing on stressful periods in history, particularly those that were traumatic for the organization, one also has the opportunity to discover the ordering of the cultural assumptions. Order is hard to decipher during normal periods because assumptions may not ordinarily conflict with each other. However, during a stressful period, the organization may be forced to choose between two important assumptions.<sup>111</sup>

We can point to the convergence of publicity, fame, and the pressure to boost recruiting, as having had just such a “traumatic” impact on NSW, one that proved stronger than the SEAL Ethos. This, in turn, reveals the weakness in NSW’s cultural assumptions. Sathe argues that an important aspect of a cultural pattern is the “relative ordering of its basic assumptions.”<sup>112</sup> These assumptions guide which values, principles, or beliefs will prevail during a time of tension; otherwise they will come into conflict with each other. Borrowing from Sathe, we can say that the normative and functional military ethic of quiet professionalism was challenged by societal assumptions about just rewards, and that given a rise in narcissism and self-centeredness overall, the SEAL Ethos failed to guide behavior at a critical time during NSW’s history. NSW’s leadership team failed to realize this and, indeed, fell into the same trap. Therefore, as a first step, NSW should apologize to the SEAL community for *Act of Valor*. As one SEAL expressed to me, “Until we can officially acknowledge our mistakes and have the leadership apologize to the community, we will never be able to hold others’ feet to the fire for Ethos violations.”<sup>113</sup> Acknowledgement by the NSW leadership that *Act of Valor* was not in line with NSW’s Ethos about self-promotion and publicity would go far in signaling to all SEALs that the time has come to rebuild not only the quiet professional ethic, but also the trust between the leadership and the men.

Even without such an acknowledgment, NSW has already initiated numerous internal efforts to resurrect quiet professionalism in the wake of this overexposure. Rear Admiral Losey, in his role as NSWC commander, has introduced several of what Edgar

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<sup>111</sup> Sathe, *Culture and Related Corporate Realities*, 19.

<sup>112</sup> Sathe, *Culture and Related Corporate Realities*, 19.

<sup>113</sup> Active duty SEAL in discussion with this author, November 2015.

Schein calls “primary embedding mechanisms” in order to reinstitutionalize the SEAL Ethos:

- What leaders pay attention to, measure, and control
- How leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crises
- Deliberate role modeling and coaching
- Operational criteria for the allocation of rewards and status
- Operational criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion, retirement, and excommunication<sup>114</sup>

As evidenced by his letter to the NSW community, Rear Admiral Losey is paying attention to the issue of Ethos violations, and he has undertaken efforts to assess and control the embezzlement of NSW’s symbolic capital within the organization. He has initiated an education campaign about the SEAL Ethos, and his staff has updated the policy on outside employment activities by NSW personnel. SEALs are now provided with a *Standards of Conduct* card to reference in ambiguous situations. In short, the leadership has stepped up enforcement of the SEAL Ethos to set the example, and to begin to roll back the culture of permissiveness fostered by previous leadership.

Finally, and perhaps most critically, NSW recently introduced a Continuum of Leadership Development (CLD) program. The aim of this program is to overcome two pitfalls that have historically caused problems within the SEAL/SWCC training pipeline: deselecting/dropping good candidates and selecting/qualifying bad candidates. CLD focuses on selecting men based on character and competence rather than physical performance alone.<sup>115</sup> This is the crux of the problem with individuals like Robert O’Neill, Matthew Bissonnette, Brandon Webb, and others.<sup>116</sup> They may have been very successful practitioners, but they categorically failed when faced with the tough decision

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<sup>114</sup> Edgar H. Schein, “Organizational Culture,” *American Psychologist* 45, no. 2 (February 1990): 115.

<sup>115</sup> NSW staff members, in discussion with this author, between February and April 2015.

<sup>116</sup> Matthew Bissonnette, under the pseudonym Mark Owen, wrote *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama bin Laden*. He also collaborated on the video game “Medal of Honor Warfighter.” In both cases he did this without Pentagon approval. See Steve Friess, “SEAL helps on ‘Medal of Honor,’” *Politico*, September 19, 2012, <http://www.politico.com/story/2012/09/navy-seal-helped-on-medal-of-honor-game-081427>.

of defending the SEAL Ethos. The goal of CLD will be to ensure that individuals prone to putting themselves first (for whatever reason) never make it through training.

Central to the success of the internal approach will be the leadership from the officers and chiefs at the lowest (and most critical) level of NSW's structure—the SEAL platoon. NSW's leaders must set the example for their people, and assist the commander in institutionalizing the SEAL Ethos. The example that NSW's chiefs and junior officers set will lay the foundation for the next generation of SEALs. It all starts with the SEAL platoon.

But not even these internal fixes will be sufficient unless NSW develops an equally aggressive approach to managing the growing counterculture outside of the active duty Navy.

## **B. EXTERNAL APPROACH**

No other corporation in the world would allow a group of external actors to so significantly drive its corporate narrative. In the civilian sector, corporations jealously guard their trade secrets and their corporate images. They employ teams of lawyers, public relations personnel, and marketing specialists to ensure that the message supports the bottom line and the corporation's values. Their non-disclosure agreements actually *act* as effective deterrents because corporations will spend the money to enforce them. NSW and USSOCOM must adopt the same approach.

The special operations ecosystem has evolved to the point where adopting a bunker mentality of not engaging with the outside world in the face of transgressions of the SEAL Ethos only helps to undermine the official narrative. Essentially, by doing nothing, NSW gives deviant SEALs and a hyper-interested media free reign to say or do whatever they want. Right now, NSW is not in control of its own symbolic capital *or* its own narrative. Right now, the American public learns about what SEALs think from books, Fox News, SOFREP.com, and SEAL-led public speaking engagements, because these are the outlets where publicity-seeking “deviant” SEALs have found a voice. NSW's silence in the face of this publicity seeking only reinforces the behavior, and sends a message to active duty SEALs that NSW will not defend its image. One takeaway

for those of us within the community is that NSW must challenge these men and their messages, or we will find that outsiders will continue to drive the narrative.

NSW today cannot afford to ignore former SEALs any more than it can ignore what SEALs on active duty do and say. Both affect NSW's efficiency and image. NSW's seemingly passive approach turns out to be ill-adapted to the media-saturated environment in which we live today.

Consequently, NSW should consider two approaches to managing the effects of unsought fame. First, it should grow its public affairs arm into a more robust entity that "actively" protects the NSW narrative. This means assigning the current public affairs officer (PAO) a larger staff to handle NSW's image full time. NSW should also create a position in the public affairs office for a high-ranking SEAL who would work side-by-side with the PAO on NSW-related press for the commander of NSWC. Currently, there is no SEAL working in NSW's public affairs arm, and the office appears to function in more of a *passive* role, responding to inquiries, but not *actively* defending NSW from the SEAL infotainment insurgency. Much like the White House press secretary, NSW's PAO or press secretary should have the authority to officially respond to any and all SEAL-related reporting. Major news networks would then have a point of contact and an official representative willing to appear on camera to comment on NSW-related news. Although it might seem counterintuitive for me to suggest this after describing the dangers of overexposure, the difference is that NSW would be driving the discussion, and the networks would have a reliable source to turn to rather than having to elicit from a SEAL-for-hire with an agenda who does not speak for the SEAL community.

Ideally, no information about sensitive missions should be released. But, if a leak does occur, and the information is going to get reported anyway, why not allow NSW to control the narrative? NSW would control the release of the information to ensure Americans were informed. But, at the same time, NSW would be in a position to only release non-sensitive details. This would not only ensure the credibility of what the news networks report, but would enable NSW to quickly correct false narratives and deviant messaging while ensuring some semblance of operational security.

Also, with an active press secretary and press office, if a news network decided to bring on a former SEAL to criticize the president or his policies based on false or flawed claims, NSW would be able to immediately discredit that individual's comments. In some cases, the press secretary might need to publicly shame the network for using the SEAL brand to push a partisan political agenda. This is something that is missing from the current dialogue between NSW and the media. For instance, when Fox News hired Robert O'Neill as a contributor, NSW and USSOCOM should have conducted an all-out public relations campaign, and used every connection in the Pentagon and in Washington, DC, to get Fox News to desist. Unfortunately, Fox News today owns the "man who killed Osama bin Laden," and the only thing the SOF community can do is lick its wounds while O'Neill profits.

Whether SEALs like it or not, NSW is now famous. That means the status quo has changed, and NSW must change along with it. A more active public relations approach by NSW would be a critical first step. Bottom line; NSW needs to be more aggressive with its press engagement strategy, and adopt a proactive stance focused on building closer relations with the media. NSW must actively push official narratives; discredit deviants, and protect NSW's symbolic capital from embezzlement. Not only must NSW jealously defend its narrative, but it must also educate the American people about who to listen to when it comes to Naval Special Warfare. As Walter Lippman famously said, "Public opinion is always wrong, much too intransigent in war, much too yielding in peace, insufficiently informed, lacking the specialized knowledge upon which lucid judgments can be based."<sup>117</sup> NSW should endeavor to change this.

Secondly, NSW should consider establishing a permanent ethics board chaired by an active duty high ranking SEAL officer, and comprised of retired SEALs and a team of lawyers dedicated to protecting NSW's trademark, its image, and its proprietary information. The ethics board would help manage NSW's social capital and its network of official relationships with outside actors. Such a board should also be mandated to

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<sup>117</sup> Cited in Johanna Neuman, *Lights, Camera, War: Is Media Technology Driving International Politics?* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 90.



doggedly pursue non-disclosure agreement violations by working closely with the NSW security manager, NSW Staff Judge Advocate, Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review (DOPSR), Unauthorized Disclosure Group (UDG), Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS), and the Department of Justice (DoJ). This board would advise the NSWC commander on issues related to the SEAL Ethos, and should monitor the activities of former SEALs who use the SEAL identity to turn a profit, especially when those activities create publicity. The board could then leverage NSW's social capital and network of relationships to put pressure on those who violate the Ethos, and do damage to national security and NSW's credibility.

For example, *Force12 Media's* brand partners include Oakley, Danner, Thales, SureFire, and Sig Sauer, just to name a few. If NSW had an ethics board, it could work with the NSW public affairs office to inform these entities that NSW does not sanction or condone the actions of *Force12 Media*. Why should NSW or USSOCOM then pursue contractual relationships with companies that support an organization whose mission is to divulge authentic, accurate, and timely information about special operations? Maybe NSW should instead purchase shooting glasses, guns, boots, and communications gear from someone else. The point here is that USSOCOM and NSW have significant leverage through their buying power, which can be put to use when seeking to thwart and deter those bent on profiting from NSW's collective capital. The ethics board would serve as the first line of both defense and deterrence when it comes to protecting NSW's credibility by actively managing the SEAL brand and guarding against its embezzlement by political actors, corporations, and self-serving SEALs.

### **C. GRASSROOTS APPROACH**

Last, we come to the grassroots approach, which may be the most important effort of all—but is one that does not require official sanctioning or an additional expenditure of resources. Those of us who are Navy SEALs need to begin actively fighting against this emerging SEAL subculture of self-aggrandizement and exposure. We SEALs need to engage in a counterinsurgency to recover and preserve our mystique. We SEALs need to leverage our network of relationships to undermine publicity-seeking SEALs and their

efforts. We need to remind our families, our friends, and our neighbors that promoting SEALs in the media puts lives at risk. Every time a SEAL gets the chance, he needs to express his disgust with the current situation. There needs to be a dedicated information campaign to discredit individuals who seek to profit from exposing NSW in the public domain. Efforts like Don Shipley's to expose fake SEALs (for a nominal fee) are commendable, but the impact of a handful of individuals who want to impress somebody by pretending to be a SEAL is negligible at best.<sup>118</sup> There is far greater danger when *actual* SEALs use the credibility of NSW to confuse or misguide Americans. Ultimately, we SEALs are both a source of the problem *and* the solution in this fight for the soul of Naval Special Warfare. If we do not fix ourselves, who will fix us?

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<sup>118</sup> Extreme SEAL Experience,  
[http://www.extremesealexperience.com/2030.h.PHONY\\_NAVY\\_SEALs\\_Verifications](http://www.extremesealexperience.com/2030.h.PHONY_NAVY_SEALs_Verifications).

## IX. CONCLUSION

With U.S. troops still in Afghanistan, commitments to Iraq and Syria growing, and widespread unrest unfolding in other corners of the world, the United States will need to continue leveraging the unique skill sets of U.S. SOF well into the future. The relationship between these forces and society is undergoing an observable shift. Secrecy and discretion are no longer assured, as the benefits of disclosing operational details for personal gain may outweigh any loyalties to an organization or ethos. Eric Ouellet, in his edited volume, *New Directions in Military Sociology*, hints that work in military sociology may be too narrow, and that the field is due for an expansion.<sup>119</sup> The study of special operations and the delicate interplay among professionalism, secrecy, organizational ethos, politics, and retirement, may offer just such an opportunity. Ouellet recalls Janowitz's thesis that "the military institution must be examined in its process of change because it must necessarily change with the changing conditions of the society to which it belongs."<sup>120</sup> That change is happening now in special operations, and it may not necessarily be positive.

The individuals mentioned in this thesis, and others out promoting themselves as SEALs, represent the minority. However, the wrong message delivered by a false prophet can trigger problems across the full spectrum of civil-military trust relationships. Accordingly, the government, Naval Special Warfare, and society must take active steps to reverse current trends. The commodification of Naval Special Warfare by the government, former SEALs, and society writ large, is undermining the contract between the military and the society it is meant to protect. When there exists an appetite in society to know the intimate details of contemporary military operations, a real danger exists for members of the U.S. Armed Forces. If politics are allowed to cloud the apolitical nature of elite military organizations like NSW, credibility and capability are diminished, and the fabric of civil-military relations is strained. Society must not fall victim to the current

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<sup>119</sup> Eric Ouellet, "New Directions in Military Sociology," in *New Directions in Military Sociology*, ed. Eric Ouellet (Whitby, Ontario, Canada: de Sitter Publications, 2005), 4.

<sup>120</sup> Ouellet, *New Directions in Military Sociology*, 7.

“SEAL Mythos,” which, as retired SEAL Bob Schoultz correctly says “speaks more of bravado than quiet professionalism, more in-your-face, than humble servant of our country.”<sup>121</sup> The people of this nation should be suspicious of SEALs who speak too loudly about themselves or act too interested in undermining their elected leaders.

Admiral William H. McRaven’s retirement message in August 2014, after thirty-seven years in Naval Special Warfare is instructive. “We must maintain our humility in the face of great public adoration and acclaim. Today, we are inundated by stories in the media telling us how great we are. We are great, but success and praise can be fleeting, and the quickest way to lose the respect of the American people is to become too enthralled with ourselves.”<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Bob Schoultz, “Ethos or Mythos,” Bob Schoultz’s Corner, November 5, 2010, <http://bobscorner.wordpress.com/2010/11/05/ethos-or-mythos/>.

<sup>122</sup> “Passing of the Torch,” *Ethos* 26 (2014): 7, <http://www.sealswcc.com/pdf/navy-seal-ethos-magazine/ethos-magazine-issue-26.pdf>.

## APPENDIX. NAVY SEAL ETHOS<sup>123</sup>

In times of war or uncertainty there is a special breed of warrior ready to answer our Nation's call. A common man with uncommon desire to succeed. Forged by adversity, he stands alongside America's finest special operations forces to serve his country, the American people, and protect their way of life. I am that man.

My Trident is a symbol of honor and heritage. Bestowed upon me by the heroes that have gone before, it embodies the trust of those I have sworn to protect. By wearing the Trident I accept the responsibility of my chosen profession and way of life. It is a privilege that I must earn every day. My loyalty to Country and Team is beyond reproach. I humbly serve as a guardian to my fellow Americans always ready to defend those who are unable to defend themselves. I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my actions. I voluntarily accept the inherent hazards of my profession, placing the welfare and security of others before my own. I serve with honor on and off the battlefield. The ability to control my emotions and my actions, regardless of circumstance, sets me apart from other men. Uncompromising integrity is my standard. My character and honor are steadfast. My word is my bond.

We expect to lead and be led. In the absence of orders I will take charge, lead my teammates and accomplish the mission. I lead by example in all situations. I will never quit. I persevere and thrive on adversity. My Nation expects me to be physically harder and mentally stronger than my enemies. If knocked down, I will get back up, every time. I will draw on every remaining ounce of strength to protect my teammates and to accomplish our mission. I am never out of the fight.

We demand discipline. We expect innovation. The lives of my teammates and the success of our mission depend on me - my technical skill, tactical proficiency, and attention to detail. My training is never complete. We train for war and fight to win. I stand ready to bring the full spectrum of combat power to bear in order to achieve my mission and the goals established by my country. The execution of my duties will be swift and violent when required yet guided by the very principles that I serve to defend. Brave men have fought and died building the proud tradition and feared reputation that I am bound to uphold. In the worst of conditions, the legacy of my teammates steadies my resolve and silently guides my every deed. I will not fail.

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<sup>123</sup> SEAL + SWCC: Official Naval Special Warfare website, <http://www.sealswcc.com/navy-seals-ethos.html#.Vj3Ap4QkLih>.

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