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### H-Diplo | ISSF Article Review 33

**LTC Grant Martin. "Zero dark squared: Does the US benefit from more Special Operations Forces?"** *International Journal* 69:3 2014: 413-421. DOI: 10.1177/0020702014539279. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0020702014539279>

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Recently, there has been a spate of books dealing with the issue of strategy and its utility. Lawrence Freedman, Colin Gray, Hew Strachan, and Hal Brands have all weighed in with recent works on the tensions between what strategic theory discusses and the practical difficulties in achieving successful results through its use.<sup>1</sup> The growing attention to the 'praxis' of strategy points to the mounting sense of failure implicit in the return of Western military forces to Iraq (including some from states originally opposed to operations there in 2003). Since 2001, the illusive and shadowy warriors of Special Operations Forces (SOF) have been increasingly in the news and popular media.<sup>2</sup> These military forces are frequently touted as key enablers to address the complex problems presented by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq and Syria. Thus, Grant Martin, himself a Special Operations veteran now working at the U.S. Army's Special

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Hal Brands, *What Good Is Grand Strategy?: Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush*, (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> For example, Mark Owen, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy Seal*, (New York: Dutton, 2012).

Warfare school delivers a timely and informative article on the value that such capabilities bring to states engaged in conflict.

Given the secretive world in which such troops engage, there is considerable misunderstanding about how these forces are used and the type of value they bring to the international arena. The coverage of the Osama Bin Laden raid informs the average person's perception of Special Forces operations; in the academic literature, there are surprisingly few studies dedicated to the use of them. Many of the books are written by former soldiers and focus on the violent aspects of the capability of SOS. For many, it is the combination of secrecy and violence which makes these forces vaguely unsettling within a democracy, and worrisome within an international context. Martin helpfully shines a light on this murky world. As he suggests, a real 'special' force for democracies is one that is oriented towards building subtle, long term influence in the complex conflicts likely to confront the morally engaged but resource constrained, and casualty averse, polities of the West.

All that said, the piece also has an interesting, though unstated, discourse on the nature of institutional culture within the U.S. military in general, and the U.S. Army in specific – one with which many outside the narrow confines of the military will be unfamiliar. Specifically, this article speaks as much to the institutional problems of employing force in the goal of resolving complex social problems as it does to the question of what value SOF generates for state decision makers. This presents somewhat of a dilemma in Martin's article. Despite the value that special warfare techniques can bring to Western democracies, institutional forces within military organisations often resist such approaches *because they are special* and thus do not easily fit within the standard operating principles which regulate the praxis of military force.

The 'blitzkreig' campaign of 2002 led by the CIA and a variety of Western SOF forces in Afghanistan, during the early days of what became known as the War on Terror, has assumed an iconic status in the minds of many. Indeed, the coordinating role played by SOF between local militia units and overhead bombers suggested a new method of cheaply employing force. What has since come to be known as the "Afghan Model"<sup>3</sup> later influenced Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's thinking on how the 2003 Iraq campaign was planned and resourced, and has since been recommended again as a possible approach in dealing with the ISIL.<sup>4</sup> Coming after the failures of nation building in both Iraq and Afghanistan and at a time of American war weariness, a limited approach to warfare relying on a small highly professional community of super warriors has obvious attractions. Martin speaks to this trend as the "conventionalization" of SOF (416). The "insidious" (416) result of this is the routinization of SOF, making it less about special capabilities and more about fitting it within its proper place inside the large complex bureaucracy of the U.S. military system.

However, as Martin is right to point out, this trend misunderstands the range of capability SOF provides to decision makers. Afghan models and assassinations of key terrorist leaders, what Martin

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<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Andres, "Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model", *International Security*, Winter 2005/06, 30:3, 124-160; Stephen D. Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq", *International Security*, Winter 2005/06, 30:3, 161-176. For a critical perspective see H.R. McMaster, "On War: Lessons to be Learned", *Survival*, 50:1, 2008, 19-30.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Glyn Williams, "Want to beat Islamic State? Try the Afghan Model, circa 2001", *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Oct. 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-1005-williams-islamic-state-combat-controlle-20141005-story.html>.

refers to as “surgical strike” operations (418) capture the imagination, particularly of the denizens of Hollywood and Silicon Valley game design studios for obvious reasons. Less romantic is the role SOF plays in ‘Special Warfare’ – “the execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and non-lethal actions taken by specially trained and educated forces that have a deep understanding of cultures and foreign languages, proficiency in small unit tactics, subversion, sabotage, and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain or hostile environments”(418). These sorts of activities call more for Lawrence of Arabia than Rambo.

This brings us to Martin’s second key point, that “special warfare is characterized by long-term efforts that are supportive of emergent and local solutions and more nuanced in action”(419). As Western forces begin a new round of intervention in the Middle East the manner of force employment brings an important quality to the outcome of those military engagements.

As a former Commander of Canada’s special forces unit, JTF-2, once remarked to me, the good special forces soldier shares more in common with a long distance runner than a body builder. The runner must constantly monitor his/her own internal state with the demands the environment makes, balancing effort against scarce reserves of energy within a strategic context aimed at winning (or at least completing) the race.<sup>5</sup> The race in this case is the inherent creativity that war engenders within its participants. The West’s remarkable technological forces have succeeded in creating a highly efficient form of warfare, where targets can be rapidly and precisely struck without the massive collateral casualties inherent in the approaches used in World War Two, Korea, and Vietnam. Despite the prowess of these forces, the West has been unable to translate tactical competency into strategic success. ‘Asymmetric’ forces have succeeded in using the political/moral/legal limitations under which Western forces fight, frustrating designs to remake the Middle East into a more docile political environment.

Martin argues that special warfare offers a better approach than the air power heavy methods currently employed. He notes:

“[SOF] must be aligned to investigate, learn, and assist in emergent forces as opposed to using predetermined, doctrinaire approaches. This would seem to support a decentralised and flexible organization that is not tied down to systematically approaching all situations, one that is able to structure itself differently depending on the context, and one that is more focused on bottom-up methods and processes than centralised and hierarchical means” (419).

In this, the better model for complex interventions is not Afghanistan, but rather the Philippines, where American SOF has been working quietly with the Filipino military forces for over a decade.<sup>6</sup> In that time, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) has been brought to the negotiating table

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Banfield, “Special Forces as a Model for Design Teams”, *Fresh Tilled Soil*, 24 Oct. 2013, <http://www.freshtilledsoil.com/special-forces-as-a-model-for-design-teams/>

<sup>6</sup> Greg Wilson, “Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and The Indirect Approach”, *Military Review*, Nov./Dec. 2006, [http://www.army.mil/professionalWriting/volumes/volume5/january\\_2007/1\\_07\\_1.html](http://www.army.mil/professionalWriting/volumes/volume5/january_2007/1_07_1.html); Peter Brookes, “Flashpoint: No Bungle in the Jungle”, *Armed Forces Journal*, 1 Sept. 2007, <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/flashpoint-no-bungle-in-the-jungle/>

and the spread of radical Islam has been slowed dramatically.<sup>7</sup> But because the efforts in the Philippines are so contextualised, it is difficult to draw any but the most broad generalizations from them, and thus they offer no warfare ‘model’ on which to build. Still, the importance of such skills, and the challenge of developing them, have recently been remarked on. While many in the West are interested in assisting ‘moderate’ Syrian rebel forces, the ability to identify just which groups fit that criteria is not immediately apparent and require the sorts of skills Martin has identified. Furthermore, in order for such skills to exist, they have to be specially developed by a military’s training programs.<sup>8</sup>

The special warfare approach described in this piece for addressing such issues reflects the influence of “Design thinking,”<sup>9</sup> an anti-paradigmatic approach to solving problems.<sup>10</sup> Design thinking attempts to address complex and wicked problem sets by iteratively understanding the battlespace and creating unique human oriented solutions. Implementing such an approach within a rationalized and systematized bureaucratic entity like the U.S. Army has proven challenging to say the least and speaks to the obvious frustration with strategic development this article clearly conveys.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Claudia Hofmann, “Peace Negotiations in the Philippines: The Government, the MILF, and International NGOs”, *Peace Brief 91*, 28 April 2011, <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PB%2091.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Stein, “Inside the CIA’s Syrian Rebel Vetting Machine”, *Newsweek*, 10 Nov. 2014, <http://www.newsweek.com/2014/11/21/moderate-rebels-please-raise-your-hands-283449.html>; Jan K. Gleiman, “Australian SOF: Enthusiasm and Talent don’t Equal Capability”, *The Strategist*, Nov. 2014, <http://www.aspistrategist.org.au/australian-sof-enthusiasm-and-talent-dont-equal-capability/>.

<sup>9</sup> For the application of Design thinking in military environments, see in particular LTC Celestino Perez, “A Practical Guide to Design: A Way to Think About it and a Way to Do it”, *Military Review*, March/April 2011, [http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview\\_20110430\\_art008.pdf](http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20110430_art008.pdf); col. Stephan J. Banach, “The Art of Design: A Design Methodology”, *Military Review*, March/April 2009, [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/banach\\_mar09.pdf](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milreview/banach_mar09.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> The anti-paradigmatic nature of Design in military environments is made most forcefully here: Christopher Paparone, *The Sociology of Military Science: Prospects for Postinstitutional Military Design*, (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Martin has noted the problems with implementing Design in the U.S. Army elsewhere: Grant Martin, “A Tale of Two Design Efforts (and why they both failed in Afghanistan)”, *Small Wars Journal*, 7 July 2011, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/a-tale-of-two-design-efforts-and-why-they-both-failed-in-afghanistan>

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