

US Special Operations Forces

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Adams, Thomas K. *US Special Operations Forces in Action: The Challenges of Unconventional Warfare*. London: Frank Cass, 1998.

Marquis, Susan L. *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces*. Washington, DC: Brookings, 1997.

Scholarly or even serious works on special operations forces are vastly outnumbered by autobiographies and popular histories published to feed a seemingly insatiable public appetite for sensational titles emblazoned with acronyms and insignia of special operations forces such as the British Special Air Service (SAS) or US Navy SEALs. Yet few who read these more numerous 'kill and tell' memoirs and novels may be aware of the complex issues associated with modern special operations forces. Often mistrusted and misunderstood by the executive political authority or senior conventional armed forces officers, US special operations forces in particular have been subjected to rapid expansion, misused, had their utility repeatedly questioned and been marginalized since their establishment during the bleak early years of the Second World War. Two recent works focus on different facets of this under-developed subject: Thomas Adams suggests changes in the organization and outlook of US special operations forces, while Susan Marquis examines how those changes took place.

The title of Adams' book should have been *US Special Forces in Action*, for although the difference in verbiage seems slight, it has significant implications. The reason for this suggestion is that in Adams' view, only the US Special Forces¹ are capable of effectively waging unconventional warfare, due in large part to his own definition of the latter term. True unconventional warfare is not, in his opinion, about dislocating enemy forces by raiding or otherwise creating havoc behind enemy lines, for such dislocation can be completed by precision guided munitions and sensors fielded by US conventional forces. A major theme running throughout *US Special Operations Forces in Action* is that US special operations forces have become more conventional in scope and outlook over the past 50 years. The various forces did so in order to gain a degree of legitimacy with their parent services, on whom their sustainment and existence relied.

The conventionalization of US special operations forces is not in itself a bad thing, should wars in the future be conventional in nature. Adams argues that the conventional and highly technological doctrine statement driving US defence planning and procurement, *Joint Vision 2010*, is not representative of the realities of modern or future conflict and this reflects recent military thought from Carlisle Barracks, home to both the US Army War College and Peacekeeping Institute at which he is the Director of Intelligence and Special Operations. The ability of US forces to strike with precision and weight on the battlefield is such a powerful deterrent to potential adversaries, according to Adams, that future threats to US security will be softer and less tangible. Heavy divisions waiting to fight a war that in all likelihood will never take place are not required in places like Bosnia, Haiti and Somalia; conflict not only will consist but already consists of nation building tasks. The future is, to some extent, already a reality in Adams' view. These tasks, such as the training of friendly forces, the establishment of civil affairs programs and the conduct of psychological operations, are what the author defines unconventional warfare to be and they are best performed by unconventional warriors with

language and cultural awareness skills; in other words, by US Special Forces.

To support his thesis, Adams surveys the development of US special operations forces from their earliest genealogical roots in the eighteenth century up to their activities more recently in northern Iraq, Somalia and Haiti. Individual chapters focus on different periods of Special Forces history, including treatment of the development period in the 1950s, the "doldrums" period immediately following the Vietnam War, the battle for legitimacy and 'renaissance' in the 1980s and the most recent deployments. In addition to two chapters on the tumultuous Vietnam era and introductory chapters on the definition of both special forces and unconventional warfare, the concluding chapter is devoted to prospects for the future and prescriptions to meet them. In terms of source material, Adams makes use of an impressive array ranging from official government documents and memoirs to numerous personal interviews and unit reports.

Where *US Special Operations Forces in Action* is less impressive is in the support of some assertions, which pose more questions than they answer, and the somewhat partisan suggestions made by the author. For example, he declares Operation Provide Comfort (northern Iraq) "a major unconventional success" and Operation Uphold Democracy (Haiti) "another unconventional-warfare triumph" for Army Special Forces without really providing benchmarks for success or failure in such "grey area" operations. If by success he means the short-term provision of aid and services, then they were indeed successful; but, this has disturbing implications for unconventional forces, relegating them to the role of uniformed humanitarian aid workers. If, however, the goalposts shift and success is evaluated in terms of the resolution of the problems that led to the crisis in the first place, then it is doubtful that such activities can be considered successful but merely palliative instead.

Taking a different approach to the subject matter, *Unconventional Warfare* by Susan Marquis focuses not on what US special operations forces should do in the future, but rather on how they were resuscitated so dramatically after their evisceration in the 1970s and in the wake of the spectacular failure of the Iran hostage rescue mission in 1980. She highlights the unique organizational processes by and cultural influences through which US special operations forces sustained themselves during the lean years and were eventually consolidated under a separate command (the US Special Operations Command, or SOCOM), presumably halting the development-disbandment cycle that plagues all special operations forces. One of the main themes throughout the work is that groups of like-minded individuals can make a difference in the development of policy; the pressure for Congress to pass legislation creating SOCOM in 1987 came largely as a result of a decade of lobbying by a core group frustrated by what they saw as foot-dragging for genuine reform on the part of both the executive and the Pentagon, despite mounting evidence for its necessity.

The narrative Marquis unfolds, of the "SOF Mafia" and their allies fighting against Department of Defense intransigence in order to secure a future for special operations forces, is set in the context of the events and crises of the day. Her "protagonists" include Representative Don Daniel, his staffer Ted Lunger, analyst Lynn Rylander and Deputy Assistant Secretary Noel Koch. Marquis does a laudible job detailing not just the tremendous difficulties faced by this group, but the eventual professional and personal toll such lobbying exacted upon them. The obstacles to special operations forces reform were daunting and many, especially those created by

the various members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and between the armed services. The case of Initiative 17, an attempt to absolve the US Air Force of its special operations capability and consolidate it instead under the US Army, displays how elaborate the obstacles could be. Ostensibly a rational approach to a problem identified by Congress, Initiative 17 was bitterly resisted by the SOF Mafia as potentially disastrous to a special operations aviation capability barely on the narrowest fringes of capability. The SOF Mafia saw the "initiative" as nothing more than a shell game; the Air Force would unload a tar baby on the Army, without providing the resources to fulfil it, and the capability would be no more developed or enhanced. Koch and Rylander successfully responded to the bureaucratic stonewalling over Initiative 17 and the establishment of SOCOM with dogged persistence and occasional dramatics.

Unconventional Warfare provides a rare glimpse not only into how military policies are developed and influenced but also the formidable degree of bureaucratic inertia that exists toward change and reform. One minor complaint about this otherwise superbly written and researched work by civilian Department of Defense official and Brookings fellow Marquis is in its overall structure. While she recounts adroitly the details of specific special operations and the effects they had within the Washington "Beltway", her idea of a distinctive organizational culture of special operations forces personnel sustaining them from the end of Vietnam until the creation of SOCOM is not developed to the extent it perhaps should have been. A whole chapter is devoted to an examination of the rigorous training and selection regimen of the various US special operations forces and how it apparently creates a common "unconventional" culture that cuts across the service differences, but is this necessarily the case? Do the Green Berets, for example, who possess a unique skill set and focus on foreign internal defence and nation building missions, feel a culture affinity for SEALs just because they are unconventional warriors from the same country? Do Green Berets and SEALs view their Air Force counterparts as cultural equals or strictly as mission fire and transport providers? Do operators share a greater cultural affinity with operators from other countries but the same service branch, rather than across the different American service branches, as has been suggested in other works? Likewise, the author concludes with a discussion of the implications of SOCOMs establishment, but the biggest questions remain unasked. For example, will there be an eventual backlash by the individual services or the Joint Chiefs of Staff against an independent command established as a result of "guerrilla" lobbying and congressional arm-twisting? Or, as Adams makes reference to in his conclusion, is this process already underway in the prioritizing and eventual deactivation of some Special Forces units? Perhaps Marquis will set her talents to answering these questions and developing further the idea of a special operations forces organizational culture as the subject of her next work.

Criticisms aside, *US Special Operations Forces in Action* and *Unconventional Warfare* are welcome additions to the meager number of serious professional or scholarly treatments of the subject of US special operations forces. Whether or not you agree with the authors conclusions, the former work will hopefully stimulate debate within academic and military circles on the future of conflict and the organization and orientation of the US special operations community. *Unconventional Warfare*, on the other hand, will no doubt be the standard reference work on the issues and events associated with the reestablishment and entrenchment of US special operations forces for many years to come. Both books are easily accessible to a wide audience and highly recommended for serving military officers, academics and interested members of the public

seeking to understand more about the policy issues associated with and development of US special operations forces.

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Endnotes

1. The term "special forces" outside of the United States denotes small-scale, well-trained specialist units capable of unconventional military operations that can be strategic, operational or tactical in design and are unique to but not necessarily separate from conventional operations. In the United States, the term "special operations forces" is used, as Special Forces refers to a specific unconventional unit better known as the Green Berets.

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