

An Unconventional Warfare Mindset

The Philosophy of Special Forces Must be Sustained

By David Maxwell

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Unconventional Warfare (UW). What is it? For some nuclear weapons are unconventional weapons employed for "unconventional warfare," because, obviously, it is not conventional warfare. For many others, anything that is not conventional is unconventional: unconventional ideas, doctrine, equipment, tactics, techniques, and procedures, campaigns, policy, and strategy. Or anything executed by indigenous resistance forces is, by definition, unconventional.

The DOD Dictionary of Military Terms defines UW as "activities to enable an insurgency or resistance to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a nation or occupying power through and with an underground, auxiliary, or a guerrilla force in a denied area." I can talk in detail about this definition and how it was developed because I was part of the painful working group in 2009 when it was approved by Admiral Olson who was heavily influenced by CSM Tommie Smith, then the USSOCOM SEA.

Again, what is UW? For many others it is a subordinate element of irregular warfare. In fact, irregular warfare has become the new comprehensive term since it was (re-)introduced in 2007. DOD is currently working to revise the definition, but it has traditionally included five missions: Unconventional Warfare, Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Counterinsurgency (COIN), Counterterrorism (CT), and Stability Operations (STABOPS) thus making UW subordinate to IW.

However, I am not going to get into a doctrinal discussion. We can talk ourselves into doctrinal and terminology paralysis. What I want to talk about is our Special Forces (SF) philosophy. By philosophy I mean the "theoretical basis of a particular branch of knowledge or experience" as in "**the philosophy of** unconventional warfare and Special Forces." Philosophy is the collective assemblage of wisdom. And there is no greater assembly of Special Forces and unconventional warfare wisdom than the Special Forces Association.

Now there are two schools of anti-UW thought – First, UW is an anachronism and obsolete or will rarely ever be conducted and maybe not ever again. UW also has severe antibodies within DOD, at embassies, and in the national security community. Some believe no government official or political leader wants to approve let alone direct a UW campaign plan. The second idea is UW needs to be replaced with modern concepts such as the new triad of SOF, Cyber, and Space. To the second, I would argue that the UW philosophy can and must have a positive influence.

But in my opinion, it is UW thinking that has been the source of nearly every successful Special Forces operation since 1952 even if the operation was not in accordance with the strictest doctrinal definition of UW, e.g., traditionally the overthrow of a government. However, it is the thinking about and training for such an action that sets SF apart and informs the deep intellectual abilities of every SF operator.

What is UW thinking? It is **the essence of UW: UW thinking informs everything SF should do.**

- UW is fundamentally problem solving; using unique, non-doctrinal and non-conventional methods, techniques, people, equipment to solve (or assist in solving) complex political-military problems.
- *And it is about creating dilemmas for our adversaries.*
- UW is essentially about influencing behavior of target audiences (which can include a population, a segment of the population, a political structure, or a military force); therefore, PSYOP and CA are integral to the action arm of SF.

It is the two SF “trinities:”

(1) The Missions of Irregular Warfare, Unconventional Warfare, Support to Political Warfare

(2) The comparative advantage of Special Forces: Influence, Governance, Support to Indigenous Forces and Populations

It is thinking about the **human element** in the full spectrum of competition and conflict up to and including conventional and even nuclear war. It includes, but is not limited to, all aspects of lawlessness, subversion,

insurgency, terrorism, political resistance, non-violent resistance, political violence, urban operations, stability operations, post-conflict operations, cyber operations, and operations in the information environment.

As I survey the history, I see the legacy of modern SF built on the OSS foundation and since 1952 the basis of training SF has been for the UW mission. At its core it has been about supporting indigenous forces and populations to achieve their objectives – either to resist oppression and seek self-determination or to defend against internal or external forces who want to impose authoritarian rule. This is what we all trained to do in some form or another and this is what we all executed during our careers. The UW mindset was applied to the Korean partisans, the tribes in Vietnam, the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) program, the Phoenix Program, and Military Assistance Command – Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG). And during Vietnam era the UW mindset was also applied in Africa and Latin America – surely Che Guevara was killed due to the UW mindset employed by some SF advisors working with the Bolivian military. Following Vietnam, the Army and all the services purged COIN doctrine and all things associated with irregular and unconventional warfare. We wanted to get back to preparing for the big fight against the USSR (and the pendulum has now swung in a similar way to China and Russia). I would argue that those of us who came into SF in the 1980s were mentored by our SF Vietnam vets and they kept the UW flame alive even as we had to fight for relevancy in the Army and DOD. There were flashes of recognition of the importance of SF during the Reagan era when we reactivated 1st and 3^d Special Forces Groups (SFG). 7th SFG relied on the UW mindset in El Salvador and demonstrated what relationships and a light footprint could accomplish for the nation. Although frustrated with the SCUD hunting and special reconnaissance missions in Desert Storm, the coalition support teams advising the Syrians, Saudis, Jordanians, and Egyptians were successful because SF soldiers applied a UW mindset to their advisory operations. Certainly 7th SFG showed its UW mindset in Just Cause. And throughout the 1990's SF showed the UW mindset in the Balkans and Africa and quietly in places such as Colombia to name a few.

During the Cold War we built a number of very diverse organizations based on different conditions and requirements in various theaters around the world. United States SF has long experience establishing permanent detachments uniquely organized and suited for specific missions in specific countries. These include **DET-A** or the Berlin Detachment, the **46th Company** in Thailand, The 8th Special Action Force (SAF) in Panama, the Special Action Force Asia (SAFASIA) in Okinawa, the Special Forces **Taiwan Resident Detachment**, and **Special Forces Detachment Korea** (SFD-K now DET 39, which remains operational to this day advising Korean Special Forces Brigades with an SF NCO serving as an advisor to Korean brigadier generals). Each of these unique organizations were tailored for the mission and specific requirements. Some of these detachments were responsible for extensive unilateral operations, others advisory operations, and some of them for supporting the temporary deployment of other SOF to conduct specific missions. Many of you in the Special Forces Association were members of these organizations. Although each one was unique, I think there was one common thread tying them all together: an unconventional warfare mindset. It was the philosophy of SF that influenced leaders to establish these organizations. I would argue that every one of these organizations, and some we have not yet thought of, will have relevance in what we are calling the strategic competition of the gray zone in the 21st century. Future organizations inspired by them are needed to support the full range of special operations up to and including unconventional warfare.

I want to provide one more historical example of why the UW mindset and SF philosophy are so valuable and has led to the continued success of Special Forces.

The nation, the intelligence community, and the military were caught off guard on September 11, 2001. While the government learned much from the 9-11 Commission Report and made many changes, America was flatfooted with no plan on how to respond to the attacks. However, there was one force that was part of the initial response that was trained and ready for just such a response. This was due to one person and his vision in two words: unconventional warfare. The man was the commander of the U.S. Army Special Forces Command, the late Brigadier General Frank Toney.

When General Toney took command, he sought to instill two things within the Special Forces Regiment: a total focus on unconventional warfare (UW) and advanced combat skills training with a heavy emphasis on combat marksmanship. He personally mentored every group and battalion commander (including me) and sought to infuse in them the mindset and philosophy of UW as the core foundational mission of Special Forces.

Despite there being no response plan for the September 11th attacks it was the UW focus and the advanced combat skills training that allowed 5th Special Forces Group (SFG) and its horse soldiers to effectively partner with the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and exquisite U.S. air power operating in shared battlespace to conduct a punitive expedition in Afghanistan to oust the Taliban and Al Qaeda. One author says the U.S won the war before losing it.

At the same time, through the early years of the war on terrorism, the other Special Forces Groups were just as effective. 3d SFG operated in Africa and Afghanistan. 7th SFG sustained operations in Colombia and throughout the rest of Latin America and rotated with 3d SFG in Afghanistan. 10th SFG conducted a highly successful UW mission in Northern Iraq with the Kurds as well and a little known mission in the Republic of Georgia. 1st SFG conducted long-duration operations in the Philippines and throughout Asia. All the groups, to include the National Guard 19th and 20th SFGs, rotated Special Forces battalions and companies to Afghanistan and Iraq while continuing their employment in their respective regional theaters.

Although throughout the years the perception developed that special operations forces (SOF) broadly, and Special Forces in particular, emphasized direct action to capture and kill high value targets, the core of the UW mission remained instilled within every Special Forces operator, along with Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs soldiers. This is an innate desire to work “through, with, and by” indigenous forces as retired Colonel Mark Boyatt first described in the 1990’s. This concept greatly influenced BG Toney and the entire Special Forces Regiment and beyond. By 2010 it was adopted as a fundamental operating concept for U.S Forces in Iraq.

The UW mission and General Toney were responsible for the success of Special Forces in the beginning of the war on terrorism. No one was certain what threats would emerge throughout the 21st Century. General Toney understood the best way to prepare for uncertainty was to focus on unconventional warfare.

Some thought leaders are saying that Special Forces must return to its roots (I actually said that in a thesis I wrote in 1995 for my first master's degree – "a return to the roots for a vision of the future" – I argued that UW must always remain the primary mission of Special Forces and I believe that to this day).

There is a lot of criticism about the two decades of the GWOT and rightly so. Some say that SF became overly focused on direct action. But the criticism of Special Forces is somewhat misplaced. Now there are those who worry that the 18X program is attracting the wrong type of soldier. But I am not sure. I believe that our selection and assessment process is sound. Many join SF with the desire for combat experience and some criticize this. Would we want someone to join SF who does not want combat experience? They want to march to the sound of the guns. They want to live a hard life. They want to work through, with, and by indigenous forces. And yes, as our ballad goes, they want silver wings upon their chest.

When I was the USASOC G3 the thing that kept me sane was going out to Camp Mackall to take Robin Sage brief backs. This was 2007 through 2010 so the 18X program was in full swing. I used to tell the students that whether they knew it or not they were selected because the cadre could read their DNA and their DNA revealed that they had a desire to live and work overseas with indigenous personnel. Despite the perceived focus on direct action and capture/kill missions they were selected for SF because they wanted to develop long term relationships with indigenous personnel and advise and assist, using an indirectly approach, to support US strategic objectives. Again, despite the perception of DA, all our SF troops were developing relationships in Afghanistan and Iraq and around the world. Relationships that persist to this day. And there is no better proof of this than how the SF community, along with many others, responded to the tragedy of the Afghanistan withdrawal. I am sure many in this room were involved in trying to evacuate all those who were (and many who still are) at risk of retribution and retaliation by the Taliban. If we were simply a direct action focused force this might not have happened. But because of the philosophy of SF and the UW mindset you did not want to leave behind your indigenous brothers with whom you had fought and bled. This is the power of the UW mindset.

So where does that leave us today? The Army and the DOD are going to reduce the size of USSOCOM and that will likely include not only the Army's enablers of intelligence, communications, and logistics which will cut away the connective tissue and nerves of the force. We will also be cutting to the bone when SF, Civil Affairs, (CA) and Psychological Operations (PSYOP) operators are reduced as well. In 2006 the ODR directed

the growth of the 4th battalions in each active duty group. This was designed to grow the authorization of 270 SFODAs to 360 by 2013. However, we could not recruit and train sufficient SF personnel, so SF had to adjust and that is how the 4th battalion evolved and the Jedburgh teams were developed. Unmanned spaces were turned back to the Army, but USASOC and USSOCOM receive no credit for that. I wonder if we will be able to even man the pre 9-11 authorization of 270 ODAs. We were unable to do so before 9-11.

However, I remain optimistic. USSOCOM is led by a great Command Team. As I read their interviews and the publications coming from USSOCOM I have a sense of where the command is going. A few words from their vision are worth sharing and reflecting upon.

“SOCOM is focused on winning in highly complex and ambiguous environments. For a small investment (2% of the DOD budget) SOCOM solves highly complex, politically sensitive, ambiguous problems – in any environment using highly trained problem solvers.”

Recall my previous words that **UW is fundamentally problem solving; using unique, non-doctrinal and non-conventional methods, techniques, people, equipment to solve (or assist in solving) complex political-military problems.**

“We live in a volatile, uncertain world with a challenge of keeping peace. SOCOM solves problems that pose significant political, economic and strategic risk when discretion, precision, and speed are essential – and failure is not an option.”

Most importantly is the “SOF way.” If you read between the lines USSOCOM is really saying that the “SOF way” is rooted in the SF philosophy and the UW mindset:

“The ‘SOF Way’ is unconventional, irregular, asymmetric, asynchronous, and done alongside the U.S. Government Interagency Team as well as with allies and partners.”

It does not take a rocket scientist to note the emphasis on UW – unconventional is the first word used in their description because if you recall the history of SF and SOF it goes back to 1952 when 10th SFG was activated. It

was born out of the OSS operations in Europe and the Guerrilla Warfare operations in Asia during World War II. Unconventional warfare is the essence of SOF.

So where does that leave us? The UW mission and General Toney were responsible for the success of Special Forces in the beginning of the war on terrorism. No one was certain what threats would emerge in the 21st Century. General Toney understood the best way to prepare for uncertainty was to focus on unconventional warfare. The definitions of UW have evolved over the years and the term itself is controversial, complicated, and often misunderstood. However, rather than focus on the doctrinal definition, UW should be understood as a mindset and philosophy that drives the thinking of Special Forces. At the root of UW, it is about working through, with, and by indigenous forces to solve or contribute to solving complex political-military problems. It is also about working through, with, and by indigenous forces to create dilemmas for the nation's adversaries through developing resistance capabilities among populations. The training, and more importantly the education, required for the UW mission is what gives Special Forces not only the capability to outfight the enemy but to outthink him as well. This is especially true as the U.S. and its friends, partners, and allies face myriad threats from strategic competition, gray zone, hybrid warfare and violent extremism. As the former USSOCOM Commander General Schoomaker used to say, "train for certainty, educate for uncertainty." There is no better way to prepare for the uncertain future than through UW.

In strategic competition, the dominant threat or problem the U.S. faces is one of political warfare supported by hybrid military approaches – and these approaches are today described as irregular warfare. Again, the current doctrine states that IW consists of UW, FID, CT, COIN, STABOPS.

The revisionist powers of China and Russia are employing their own forms of political warfare and hybrid approaches through the "Little Green Men" and "Unrestricted Warfare." The rogue and revolutionary powers of Iran and North Korea conduct their own unique forms of unconventional and political warfare. Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR) and 10th Special Forces Group, along with NATO allies, have supported development of an innovative approach called the Resistance Operating Concept which employs indigenous forces to counter the malign activities of the likes of the Little Green Men and to make sure an adversary knows that the cost of invasion and occupation will be too expensive in blood and treasure.

The Irregular War Annex to the National Defense Strategy in 2020 and the current National Defense Strategy of 2022 provide the guidance for preparing for the wide range of threats as well as the activities necessary to counter them including in the context of strategic competition. The 1st Special Forces Command's Vision for 2021 and Beyond provides guidance to Special Forces, Psychological Operations, and Civil Affairs units on organizing and preparing for the future, from employing cross functional teams built from across the SOF disciplines to leading with influence and developing, supporting, and when appropriate countering, indigenous

resistance. A close reading of the vision reveals that most all concepts are derived from a deep knowledge of the UW mission. BG Toney would find this vision completely in synch with his in 2001.

Although most might not recognize Congress as a place for strategic military thought, in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act it outlined a sound operational concept for employing forces in IW: *“Irregular Warfare is conducted in support of predetermined United States policy and military objectives conducted by, with, and through regular forces, irregular forces, groups, and individuals participating in competition between state and non-state actors short of traditional armed conflict.”* (Sec. 1202). This succinct statement provides the basis for planning and conducting IW operations from the strategic to the tactical level.

The Chinese threat is the dominant one for the foreseeable future. China seeks to export its authoritarian political system around the world to dominate regions, co-opt or coerce international organizations, create economic conditions favorable to China alone, and displace democratic institutions. It is doing this through its One Belt and One Road (OBOR) initiative which provides the economic and diplomatic capability to coerce and co-opt nations in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Like Europe against Russia, there are ways to develop resistance and resilience against Chinese hegemony and malign activities that is built on the foundational mission of UW. Special operations forces, the interagency, and U.S. country teams must consider new approaches to address Chinese malign influence and threats. There are forces in Taiwan helping to create the “porcupine defense” to first deter China and if deterrence fails, they will make a significant contribution to the defense of Taiwan by not allowing its population to be pacified by the invasion and occupation by the People’s Liberation Army who are there to liberate no one and only impose the tyranny of communism.

The current National Defense Strategy calls for the US to conduct strategic competition against the revisionist and rogue powers of China, Russia, Iran, and north Korea while deterring war and when deterrence fails to be able to fight and win. This has led the DOD and all the services to refocus on large scale combat operations (LSCO) and rightly so. We need the strongest possible nuclear and conventional forces to deter war. The strategy also requires that the US conducts campaigns in the gray zone that is the space between peace and war. In this space it must conduct integrated deterrence which is a whole of government effort to deter conflict and sustain the rules based international order. In the space between peace and major war it is irregular warfare that is taking place. This leads to two important concluding thoughts.

First is that the DOD lacks an irregular warfare proficient campaign headquarters. To be proficient in irregular warfare you must be grounded in unconventional warfare and the two SOF trinities I have described. A new headquarters is required to meet this challenge and I would argue that it should come from USSOCOM.

Second, is that we need to further describe integrated deterrence. I think it consists of three types of deterrence: nuclear, conventional, and unconventional. It is because of our superior nuclear and conventional deterrence that the revisionist and rogue powers choose to operate in the gray zone so as not to challenge the US directly. Unconventional deterrence is not a doctrinal concept, but it should be. It was coined by an SF brother, retired Colonel Robert Jones now a strategist at USSOCOM. The concept is basically to create a resistance and resilience capability to counter an adversary's malign activities that seek to undermine a society through subversion. It seeks to demonstrate a resistance capability that if a hostile power considers invading and occupying a nation that that population will resist at such a cost as to deter such a decision. It also postulates support to resistance elements that may be operating in a hostile power's territory. While this unconventional deterrence failed to deter Putin's War, the strength of the resistance that continues today may give pause to other powers thereby strengthening the concept of unconventional deterrence. The force most suited to contribute to unconventional deterrence is of course Special Forces employing its UW philosophy.

One last point. The new Army FM 3-0 Operations says that the Army will train for LSCO and accept risk with Irregular warfare because you can prepare for war and conduct irregular warfare, but you cannot prepare for irregular warfare as the main effort and be effective in conventional war. However, it should be understood that LSCO does not take place in irregular warfare, but IW will take place within LSCO as well as on the margins and adjacent to the combat theater and in other theaters around the world. Perhaps that should lead to the conclusion that the responsibility for conducting campaigns in the gray zone of irregular warfare should be those who have a deep grounding in unconventional warfare and possess a UW mindset who can then incorporate conventional forces in the appropriate manner commensurate with their capabilities and the requirements of the campaign. I have often been told in no uncertain terms that the services will not subordinate conventional forces to a SOF headquarters – they never read the concept of the basic counterinsurgency doctrine of 1963 when the Army doctrine said that each Special Action Force (8th SAF in Panama and SAFSIA in Okinawa) should include an assigned infantry battalion, and an engineer, intelligence, medical, and aviation company. Yes, the Army did prevent the assignment of an infantry battalion back then despite its own doctrine.

To be both blunt and bold this is what Special Forces soldiers need to be able to do – e.g., conduct IW that is informed by a UW mindset – against what the DOD now calls the “pacing threat” to the US – China. We are in strategic competition with China because, and I must repeat this because it is so important: **China seeks to export its authoritarian political system around the world in order to dominate regions, co-opt or coerce international organizations, create economic conditions favorable to China alone, and displace democratic institutions.** Indigenous populations around the world, and especially those under the influence of China's One Belt and One Road concept, must resist Chinese domination. This is unrestricted warfare but to us it is a UW fight. And I would argue that the SF philosophy and UW mindset can make important contributions to support the approaches to counter Chinese malign influence.