A dangerous pathway? Toward a theory of special forces

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ABSTRACT
This article explores what is considered by some to be a dangerous pathway: the development of a theory of special forces. The world is now in the third age of special forces and these secret military units are at the forefront of the use of force in international relations. This research identifies a large theory-knowledge gap concerning these military “first responders” for modern nation-states and offers a tentative theory of special forces that goes beyond traditional annihilation/attrition models of war toward a new anaphylaxis model. It makes the case that the theory pathway is not dangerous, but emancipatory.

Introduction
This article attempts to apply a social science approach to developing a tentative theory of special forces (SF). The application of a theoretical lens to a social phenomenon is so commonplace across academia around the world that it should hardly raise an eyebrow, but surprisingly, according to some, it is a fraught and perilous pathway. This in itself provides an intellectual puzzle at the heart of this seemingly risk-laden project: what makes developing a theory of special forces so dangerous? To contribute to an answer requires a close focus on what are perhaps the most socially fascinating military units of the modern age, commonly known by the opaque description, special forces. From a global popular-culture perspective, the interest in them is seemingly inexhaustible and, in high politics, these secret military units are a favored option for leaders of the most powerful nation-states concerning pressing military matters. From the destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in just three months in 2001, to the death of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 and a leading role in the capture of Crimea in 2014, SF have conducted extraordinary military operations. It is clear that the early twenty-first century will be viewed as a defining moment in the relationship between the most powerful unit-level actors in international relations and this traditionally very small component of their military power.

Nevertheless, the new age of special forces comes with an unspoken caveat: our understanding of them is remarkably limited from a theory perspective. Whether acknowledged or not, there is a large knowledge gap about them in this respect. Why does this matter? First, from a general academic perspective, the study of a military and social phenomenon that has great prominence in international relations today cannot be satisfactorily explored or explained without the development of theoretical lens. As David Silverman, in his excellent book Doing Qualitative Research, stresses, “without theory, research is impossibly narrow.” In the absence of theory development, the study and understanding of special forces will be intellectually limited in terms of its horizons. Inevitably, without the production of such knowledge to compete with other military concepts and topics that vie for the attention of military communities, the use of special forces will
always be subordinate to time-honored and dominant models of how to use military power in world affairs. To some, particularly within the small circle of scholars associated with special operations forces (SOF) in the United States who can be described as “insiders,” the issue of a theory is either not a focus of their work or, more explicitly, is publicly professed as potentially dangerous. To other scholars, or “outsiders,” work on a theory/broadening the debate on SF/SOF is very much needed. The insider/outsider perspective is an interesting one because good work is being produced by both sides, but largely in very different contexts. The insider viewpoint appears satisfied with the existing intellectual “status quo” that does not disturb the boundaries of SOF debates and a common characteristic of them is that they often work with the defense establishment in some way. In contrast, outsiders are usually found in universities/think tanks and are dissatisfied in some way with the parameters of the current SOF discussions. They seek change or an opening up of the discussion, either from a theoretical or a normative perspective. This research fits very much in the latter train of thought and openly acknowledges the existence of a lacuna in knowledge about SF that provokes foundational questions about purpose and roles with the potential to challenge accepted wisdom. It offers a divergent perspective away from dominating intellectual conventions that wittingly or unwittingly maintain the stability of the existing military intellectual order. It looks beyond traditional approaches to war based around the framing constructs of annihilation/attrition with SF in a support role for larger conventional forces toward a radical imagining of a supported future centered on anaphylaxis.

**Identifying the “theory” gap**

The rise to military prominence of SF in recent years has been unprecedented, but it is a phenomenon that has unfolded with relatively little mainstream scholarly attention in the great debates about modern strategy. Looking closely at the core strategy conversations and discussions of the last two decades, from fourth-generation warfare, risk-transfer warfare/spectator-war, and most recently, hybrid warfare, reveals little sustained interest. The paradox of SF is that while popular social fascination has never been higher and increases annually, the theoretical foundations have remained relatively stagnant. Put simply, it has not moved much further from early thinking when these units were first created nearly 80 years ago. SF may have become the preferred military “first responders” for advanced powers into international affairs in the twenty-first century, yet they are perhaps the most underexplored aspect of military studies from a theoretical perspective, with barely a scrap of weighty strategic thought to guide their employment. There is no Clausewitz or Galula (to take just two examples) of special forces and they are barely visible in the staples of contemporary military theory. This state of affairs begs large and pressing theoretical questions as to whether this relatively new dimension of warfare merely supplements, supports, and sustains traditional approaches or if it has the potential to transform the use of force between powerful nation-states. Without substantial theoretical exploration, the latter will always remain a largely undiscovered country with the odd accidental incursion (the Afghan Model in 2001), with little recognition of its significance.

This research argues that, without theory development, the praxis of SF will always be limited and not capable of achieving emancipatory potential. Ignorance about these units stems from diverse endogenous and exogenous causes and include, for example, their traditional position in the shade of the intellectual academy devoted to studying war. From the Second World War to the early years of the twenty-first century, serious scholarship on these unorthodox formations has traditionally been very much a niche area. There has also been a very noticeable lack of academic interest in applying a rigorous conceptual inquiry into what constitutes special forces. Today, these units are subsumed within the broader categorization of special operations forces (SOF). A SOF “consensus” dominates discussions among policymakers and scholars and it has become the broad-brush label for everything “special” in a military sense. By contrast, this article
argues that SF and SOF, despite sharing two words/letters, are conceptually markedly different and should be treated as distinct for theoretical clarity. Compounding the lack of precision involving secret military units in general, scholarly interest in SF has not been concentrated in a single academic discipline. It has been widely dispersed across a broad multidisciplinary landscape that includes history, political science, security studies, sociology, and strategy, both within military education and without in universities and think tanks. To briefly map this broad intellectual terrain (and deliberately not include popular “kill and tell” books by former members of SF or doctrine manuals that rarely inform academic debates), a number of key works stand out in their attempt to develop a deeper understanding of SF/SOF as well as special operations more broadly conceived and this study builds on some of this research.

**Traversing the contemporary intellectual landscape**

A generation or so ago this would have been a short journey through a sparse intellectual wilderness with just a few prominent academic publications, but twenty-five years on the scholarly work in this area has become a veritable and growing forest of enquiry. One of the most noteworthy early attempts to apply a rigorous North American political science lens to generate a theory of special operations was written by the architect of the Osama Bin Laden raid (Operation Neptune Spear) in 2011, Admiral William McRaven, from his graduate work at the Naval Postgraduate School, a small center of excellence on the study of these units. In more recent times, a prolific body of writing within military education circles has emerged in Canada and uses interpretive cultural/historical approaches to the subject, typified by writers such as Emily Spencer, J. Paul de B. Taillon, Bernd Horn, and David Last. In Britain, Colin Gray has led the way in strategic studies in stimulating debate and influencing, directly and indirectly, doctoral research in special operations (this includes James Kiras, Alastair MacKenzie, and Adam Leong Kok Wey, to name some of the more prominent ones). From sociology, Anthony King has also lately brought quite a critical lens to bear on British Special Forces and increasingly there is developing work in the UK on its relationship with the intelligence realm through covert action.

Further afield, there is burgeoning interest in the Nordic region, not only in this intelligence element, but also in the role of special forces and SOF in so-called small states such as Denmark and Sweden. In the United States, SOF focus largely revolves around service schools and think tanks. For example, in the early years of the twenty-first century, the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS) at the U.S. Air University made a highly significant contribution by setting out and interrogating the idea of a novel model of warfare involving special forces, air power, and local allies during the Global War on Terror. Equally, there are naturally a number of prominent scholars from across political science, security studies, and sociology that stand out for their contribution to the wider field. They include Lucien Vandenbroucke, John Arquilla, Susan Marquis, Thomas K. Adams, Anna Simons, Michael Fitzsimmons, David Tucker, and Christopher Lamb, to name some of the more notable writers. Additionally, though not working in the realm of academia, numerous journalists have made fine additions to the literature, including Sean Naylor, Mark Bowden, and Linda Robinson.

This is qualitative-based approach, informed by an inductive logic and located within the field of strategic studies, that makes the case for the development of a specific theory of SF as opposed to a broader theory of SOF or SO. Superficially, this appears to be a subtle difference but in reality it constitutes an important shift in the baseline of analysis. It stresses an explicit bifurcation between SF and SOF, with SO as the framing environment for their activities. More broadly, it focuses on the character of the SF units and their relationship with strategy, rather than just the nature of the tasks they conduct. For theory development, it is helpful to look explicitly at the fundamentals of the SF relationship with strategy and part of the problem is that—historically—focus has veered away from big-picture (strategy and operations) applications. For whatever
reasons, unconventional units have been naturally drawn, or steered toward, the tactical environ-
ment because their enhanced firepower, close-combat skills, and mobility appear to offer a form
of “magic bullet” option. The world today, whether it realizes it or not, is now in a “third age” of
special forces (the first age was WWII and the second age was the Cold War), with profound
implications for the practice of war if military theory catches up with the exponential material
pace of their development in recent years.\textsuperscript{45}

**Developing a theory of special forces**

The pathway to a satisfactory SF theory is daunting. The intellectual ground remains largely
unprepared and the invocation of the word *theory* carries many cautions. Among scholars, it
throws up critical and intellectually provocative questions related to ontology, methodology, and
rigor, and indicates a flag of allegiance to one perspective over others. To military personnel, it
often induces a peculiar soporific effect akin with all matters that seems opaque, abstract, and
tangential to the practical matter of combat. As one “dangerous”\textsuperscript{46} naval theorist noted over a
hundred years ago, “nothing can appear more unpractical, less promising of useful result, than to
approach the study of war with a theory.”\textsuperscript{47} Much of the problem stems from the wide range
of interpretations. Stephanie Lawson suggests that “*theory*”—derived from the Greek *theoria*, mean-
ing contemplation or speculation—may be defined as an organized system of ideas devised to
explain a certain set of phenomena.\textsuperscript{48} This definition sits comfortably with Stephen Van Evera’s
understanding that “theories are general statements that describe and explain the causes or effects
of classes of phenomena.”\textsuperscript{49} Silverman posits that “*theories* arrange sets of concepts to define and
explain some phenomenon.”\textsuperscript{50} More recently, Colin Gray has argued with typical persuasion that
“it is the responsibility of theory to provide usable explanations of what strategy should do.”\textsuperscript{51}
The theory route adopted by this article draws upon these approaches, but also takes inspiration
from a classical work, the magisterial and unfinished *On War*, in which its author, Carl von
Clausewitz, uses theory as “a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will
light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls.”\textsuperscript{52} As another
student of Clausewitz put it, theory “can at least determine the normal,”\textsuperscript{53} and the aim is to
develop a theoretical framework through the expression of key propositions/general statements\textsuperscript{54}
to try to explain special forces, their complex relationship with dominant models of strategy, and
potential in modern warfare today. By being informed by an “inductive logic,”\textsuperscript{55} it attempts to
offer observations of SF drawn from historical examples and contemporary applications in order
to provide a basis for a new model of utility and the tentative development of future applications.

**Proposition 1: Special forces are different**

The most important observation about SF when framed against the development of all military
forces in human history is that they are fundamentally different.\textsuperscript{56} The level of variance is marked
because they are sui generis,\textsuperscript{57} or a category of soldier with no equivalent in the annals of war-
fare. This is a bold proposition with profound theoretical implications. First, it points toward the
unorthodox, but logical, pathway that atypical units need an atypical theory. Second, it also opens
up the possibility that, if SF fall outside of the traditional parameters of military formations and
strategies, then perhaps they could prosecute warfare in a different way to how applying force in
international relations is traditionally conceived. It builds on the often-overlooked fact that SF, or
even the idea of them, did not exist when mainstream military theory was developed. From this
perspective, SF are conceptually “out of time” and invisible to all of the classical work of strategy
endlessly taught in military academies, staff colleges, and defense universities around the world
that continues to inform the prosecution of war in international affairs today.

This is not an uncontroversial position because it stands in opposition to some “insider” SOF
perspectives that argue for “a broad definition of special operations, conceiving of them as that
class of military (or paramilitary) actions that fall outside the realm of conventional warfare during their respective time periods. Through this wide lens, non-special forces (such as dedicated SOF units) or even regular forces conducting such missions are unproblematized. While not denying that the Trojan horse ruse in Homer’s epic poem could be viewed as a form of special operation, this article pleads for more parsimony and intellectual rigor in interpretation with an explicit focus on units that are special. Achilles, for example, was undoubtedly “special” among warriors of his time, but he did not by any conceptual stretch of the imagination represent a form of special forces as understood in the twenty-first century. The interpretation of SF as different and unique has great analytical merit because it draws attention to the existence of an important knowledge space about them and, in order to measure the gap, it is necessary to map the development of special forces within the wider context of the evolution of soldiers in human affairs.

A cursory survey of 4,000 years of recorded warfare suggests humans have made war over the ages with a noteworthy degree of congruity. For millennia, people have fought using well-established groupings of soldiers who remain now at the forefront of modern war today. The triptych of infantry, cavalry, and artillery are permanent variables throughout the history of warfare and form the physical building blocks of land warfare. Even in the high tech, “smart” weapon/digital epoch of the twenty-first century, this ancient aggregation remains the primary means by which a nation-state defines its military power on land, defends itself, and makes war on the Earth’s surface. These basic categorizations of fighting personnel, universally described as conventional forces, have instrumentally affected understandings of the scope of making war throughout the ages. State-based warfare, the most advanced form of war, ideationally and materially perceives organized mass violence on land through the lens of these long-standing formations. The utilization of these forces in pitched contest or linear warfare (war being marked by the delineation of frontlines between opposing forces) forms the intellectual baseline of how people imagine and enact land warfare.

The collision of two or more sets of forces has been the basis of simple understandings of war, from the tribe to the state level. This can be categorized as confluent warfare when the armed forces of hostile nations/states/tribes come together to fight over a broad swathe of territory or within a concentrated area, commonly known as a battlefield. Military strength is typically marshaled in these areas and it is the point of confluence where decisions in the form of failure, stalemate, and victory are obtained. The domination of confluent warfare in human affairs has provoked powerful intellectual, military, social, and political framing narratives. These have gone largely unchallenged, until the birth of airpower and nuclear weapons in the twentieth century. The master narrative of them all is that wars are won by the pitched clash of conventional arms in battle and the successful breach of enemy lines. The emergence of specialized groupings/branches in this interpretation of making war has strongly influenced the military cognitive and functional limits of what is and what is not possible on the battlefield.

The traditional dominance of annihilation and attrition models

For much of recorded human history, two general approaches or models of wars, identified by some as forming “basic strategies,” have been recognized as exercising a strong influential pull on the large-scale application of violence that continues to the present day. The use of the term model as opposed to strategy has many benefits here because it captures how it offers “an overall framework for how we look at reality” or, in this case, strategic reality. Silverman argues that “models roughly correspond to what are more grandly referred to as paradigms” and this captures in a better sense the ideational framing effect of models of war that will be unmistakably apparent in concepts about applying force flowing from them. The most famous work in the area of paradigms is The Structure of Scientific Revolutions by Thomas Kuhn and his insights are
useful with regard to the idea of a dominating model of warfare. Kuhn argues that the word paradigm, as is the case in the so-called “hard” sciences, accepts that “transformations of the paradigms ... are scientific revolutions, and the successive transition from one paradigm to another via revolution is the usual developmental pattern.” From this analytical perspective, a model of war will set the boundaries and horizon of a strategic reality from which concepts of using force will be drawn which, in turn, provide a basis for theory development.

The best historical description of annihilation and attrition models comes from the work of the prolific German military historian Hans Delbrück in his masterful study of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE) between Athens and Sparta. It is better understood as the choice between annihilation or attrition. The annihilation model, as a simple definition of the term indicates, revolves around the physical destruction of the enemy. Delbrück argues that in annihilation, the concept of war calls for one opponent to seek to come to grips with and subdue the other one in order to submit him to his will. All the forces are gathered for a great blow, a battle that is supposed to bring on a decision or which is followed by others until the decision is reached.65

This has been a favored approach or model of war for the powerful from the beginning of human conflict to the present day. Its appeal stems from simplicity and benefits: a decisive battle can end a war quickly. It also offers a potential route to limiting the damage to the victor, unless the battle is too evenly matched. In contrast, the strategy of attrition, as Delbrück suggests, could “almost be called a ‘nonconduct of war’? An overwhelming decision, never. Everything depended on who first reached the point of no longer being able to bear the pain, who first became exhausted.”66 It is a generally more long-term approach that demands patience and caution in comparison to annihilation by wearing down the enemy. The framing strategic reality of annihilation/attrition models of war rests on armed formations, now known as conventional forces, applying military might to win. The power of these dominant models of war cannot be overstated. War has been commanded by this strategic reality for thousands of years and the vast majority of concepts and theories of applying force are based on conventional forces, even today in the twenty-first century.

**Proposition 2: Special forces challenge traditional models of war**

The second principal observation is that SF do not conform easily to traditional war-making approaches or models of war. For thousands of years, models (strategic reality), concepts, and theories of war have pivoted on conventional forces and it is unsurprising, therefore, that units that do not adhere to the mainstream should generally be allocated a support role to a wider military effort. This has been the hallmark of the utility of special forces from their emergence in World War II to the present day: supporting more powerful conventional formations. It begs the question of whether the dominance of these traditional models of war do not provide conceptual space or oxygen for the emergence of a special forces’ theory. If so, it perhaps partially explains the intellectual absence of a theory. A noticeable feature of the relationship between SF and conventional forces throughout their relatively short history is that tension is a permanent condition affecting their utility. SF challenge both historically tried and tested models of war and equally do not fit comfortably within the long-standing triptych of regular military forces. In essence, they offer a non-confluent way of prosecuting warfare or a means beyond the traditional clash of arms that extends outside of the time-honored abilities and confines of conventional armies. The development of special forces offered at the time (and now) something profoundly new because they are the by-products of highly advanced warfare. As a truly modern phenomena, they evolved in the fiery maelstrom of the most destructive conflict in human history, World War II. It is easy to forget that the Second World War was a time of revolutions in war, from harnessing the power of atoms to ballistic missiles, and the emergence of special forces sits alongside them, though
with little recognition. Special forces, in their true modern sense, were for the large part developed by Britain during the Second World War in a time of national desperation. Like Athens of old, the British were manifestly weaker than Germany on the field of battle after Dunkirk in 1940 and needed alternative ways of fighting the war, alongside traditional conventional approaches, that redressed the balance of advantage and the creation of special forces was one such pathway.

**The historical meaning of “special”**

The word *special* is an unhelpful term from a definitional sense in modern times. It does not aid conceptual clarity due to all its possible connotations. During the Second World War, it had a more precise meaning as a generic label to encompass “a proliferation of units that were different in some way, either in purpose or role, from traditional conventional forces.” In the UK, a variety of so-called special units were created that were all situated broadly on the spectrum of unconventional warfare, but conducting different tasks. Unconventional warfare, broadly conceived, can be best imagined as a scale of activities that spans the conditions of peace, the so-called gray zone, and war, including a number of different actions involving diverse personnel, from spies and paramilitary forces to special forces. In the Second World War, the separation between paramilitary forces and special forces was captured by the two British exemplars: Special Operations Executive (SOE) and the Special Air Service (SAS).

SOE was a paramilitary organization created in 1940 under the Ministry of Economic Warfare and was designed “to co-ordinate all action, by way of subversion and sabotage, against the enemy overseas.” Its personnel worked out of uniform in occupied countries, undermining the occupation through organizing resistance activities. SOE hit the ground in Nazi-dominated Europe many years before special forces and as such was an “independent precursor force” helping to shape the theater of operations before D-Day in 1944. The difference with the SAS was that it was a purely military unit that worked in uniform in enemy territory (sometimes shared with SOE and working with the same resistance movements), usually after conventional forces had a toehold in the theater. The meaning of “special” was not just an indicator of difference, but also on occasions was used as a vehicle for deception to fool enemy forces into thinking that they were dealing with a much larger unit. The SAS is a good example. Brigadier Dudley Clarke created their title, “L” Detachment, Special Air Service Brigade, to lull the German Army in North Africa into mistakenly assuming the original 66 members of the SAS were in fact a brigade-size unit.

**SF/SOF and special operations**

The creation of special forces inevitably raised quite a profound conceptual question of what constitutes a special operation. In the wider literature, a significant amount of intellectual wattage has been put into defining the activities of these soldiers, broadly encompassed by the term *special operations*. One of the earliest generations of scholars in the form of Maurice Tugwell and David Charters defined it as “small-scale, clandestine, covert or overt operations of an unorthodox and frequently high-risk nature, undertaken to achieve significant political or military objectives in support of foreign policy.” Their interpretation places an emphasis on operations that are not orthodox and usually of a small size to generate noteworthy effect (military and/or political). This captures well a common theme that intersects many perspectives on SF/SOF, that they do missions outside of or “beyond” the capabilities of conventional forces. However, another common thread, notable among American practitioners who have turned attention to writing about their work, is that training is an important factor in distinguishing the special dimension. Proponents of this interpretation include Admiral McRaven and Hy Rothstein. This emphasis raises the question, What is the difference between SF and SOF? Despite sharing the word *special*
and often missions, SF and SOF are not equivalents and for that matter do not exist on the same spectrum of categorization.

SOF equates to high-quality, usually battalion-size, infantry units of the shock variety such as the U.S. Rangers or the British Parachute Regiment. They are the elite of conventional forces or, in other terms, they are at the qualitative “high end” of this spectrum of soldier, but are not by nature “special.” The term SOF conveniently broadens and dilutes the specialness factor to include space for mainstream conventional units and does not hugely challenge the existing military order. It also perhaps intellectually explains why some scholars feel there is no need for a particular theory because these SOF forces fit comfortably within traditional understandings of conventional forces. Furthermore, these elite formations have been traditionally larger, with more cultural capital within the armed forces, which has often led to turf wars with dedicated SF. Susan Marquis captures these tensions well over the establishment of a new SF unit, Delta Force, in 1977 by revealing that “the conventional army was suspicious of this interloper. The airborne and Ranger units viewed the new counterterrorist detachment as competition for the army’s best talent.” The birth of Delta Force within the U.S. Army was by no means easy and it spotlights the bureaucratic-politics dimension involved in large organizations, albeit here with a military focus, concerning anything considered standing apart from the mainstream. In contrast to elite conventional forces, SF are truly unconventional non-confluent warfare units that are fundamentally different in size, organization, culture, character, outlook, and mission orientation but, to confuse matters, they often recruit heavily from SOF elite formations because their higher fitness and skill levels are suitable for this type of work.

**Proposition 3: SF are defined by a technology “fusion”**

The third major observation is that SF are defined by a technology fusion that could only occur once a certain level of technological development had been reached. This is why, prior to the twentieth century, special forces did not and could not exist. This is an argument that for some “insider” SOF scholars who have spent years working on a broad interpretation of them is not a comfortable fit. At the heart of conceptual explorations of special forces is the central question of what makes them different to other types of fighting personnel. For the large part, arguments tend to coalesce around a focus on human agency in the form of selection and training. Some, for example, place a spotlight in this respect on their better performance due to a combination of “selection, conditioning, rehearsal, and practical training.” While not dismissing the significance of human agency, this study makes the case that the critical interconnection with technology is the nub of the definitional debate about special forces. Previous categories of soldier in history possessed a particular relationship with a specific technology that was typically one-dimensional, instrumental, and defining. Archers, to take just one historical example, were defined by their bow technology whose qualities (long, short/crossbow, compound, or simple) played an important role in determining their utility on the battlefield.

Special forces, however, possess a more evolved and complex multidimensional association with not one, but several advanced technologies. In isolation, they have no defining quality, yet in fusion provoke new capabilities and military possibilities. These technologies cover three broad areas: communications, firepower, and transport, that all rose to prominence in the Second World War. The development of wireless Morse sets and later S-phones allowed soldiers to communicate with either their headquarters, nearby ships, or overflying aircraft while located deep behind enemy lines. The development of lightweight small-arms technologies in the form of submachine guns, light machine guns, and plastic explosives permitted special forces to have an impact far out of proportion to the size of the units deployed, especially when targeting vital enemy material assets such as aircraft, fuel dumps, and key personnel. Finally, transport
technologies in the form of aircraft/parachutes, jeeps/lorries, and ships/submarines allowed special forces various means to locate themselves within enemy territory.

**Exploiting depth: The new battlefield**

One of the most noticeable, but often overlooked, aspects of the Second World War was how depth and its exploitation was now an important part of the strategy landscape. For special forces, the fusion of specific technologies facilitated the exploitation of geography and the inevitable porousness of a battle theater from a non-confluent perspective. It permitted the infiltration of small but well-equipped parties of soldiers into "historically restricted realms of the battlefield" in which vital war-sustaining material assets and key political and military leaders are located. It is important to underline that there was nothing new about the ability to penetrate enemy lines in the annals of warfare, but historically these excursions, unless battle lines collapsed completely, were generally limited and once soldiers crossed over into enemy territory, often all regular communication would be lost until they returned. However, the emergence of special forces meant that "thanks to technology and new thinking, military forces could operate behind enemy lines with genuine effect and communicate/[or be coordinated] in real time with their headquarters." World War II witnessed numerous innovations in the prosecution of state military action, but perhaps the least recognized one concerned the possibility of conducting sustained non-confluent warfare better known as unconventional warfare, alongside traditional conventional efforts.

**The “supporting” roles of SF (largely unchanged over nearly 80 years)**

The natural operating environments of special forces as “non-contiguous" and non-confluent warfare units are historically behind enemy lines, just in front of them in the space between armies, popularly called “no-man’s land" in World War I, and today, increasingly undercover in national homelands during times of peace. The roles of special forces fall under the overarching term *advance force operations*. It covers three core activities. The first is special reconnaissance that was pioneered by the largely unsung special forces unit in World War II called the Long Range Desert Group. It specialized in road watch behind enemy lines: making a record of vehicle traffic going to and from the front lines and transmitting the data back to headquarters. Ostensibly, an unglamorous task; in reality, a data gold mine. It provided planners with two vital indicators for battlefield situational awareness: the buildup and identification/size of powerful formations and their equipment for attack as well as the withdrawal of units in the event of retreat. Forty-two years later, the special forces would conduct a similar role for British military planners during the Falklands Conflict in 1982 to locate, identify and confirm Argentine units.

The second major role is perhaps the most familiar one that is synonymous with these units in contemporary times: direct action. Direct action involves using the flexibility, mobility, and firepower of special forces to apply military force against targets with operational or strategic value. The forerunner of all special forces in this role was the Special Air Service that was used to attack German and Italian airfields to readdress the imbalance of theater-based air power by other means. It has been claimed that British Special Forces destroyed around 350 aircraft in this role, which is an operational-level effect. In more modern times, Operation Neptune Spear, the stealthy incursion of SEAL Team 6 into Pakistan to kill Osama Bin Laden in Abbottabad in 2011, also captures well this sort of mission under the auspices of counterterrorism. The final role of Special Forces is military assistance, or working with indigenous forces or resistance elements in a foreign country. This role was established during World War II and typified by the various SAS missions in occupied France, but it was developed further by the Green Berets during the Vietnam War and, most spectacularly, reached a high point with the development of the Afghan model in 2001.
Green Berets working with indigenous anti-Taliban elements known as the Northern Alliance using modern GPS systems allied with satellite-guided bombs dropped by the U.S. Air Force literally blew apart the Taliban’s political and military center of gravity: its fighting forces arrayed on the front lines against the anti-Taliban factions. It was perhaps the most accurate air campaign in history at the time due to a fusion of special forces, tribal warriors, and devastating twenty-first century air-power technology. Once the campaign really started in late October/November 2001, the Taliban lost its grip on the country in a matter of weeks.

Moving beyond annihilation/attrition models

The propositions that SF are different, challenge traditional approaches to making war, and are defined by a technology fusion which facilitates new possibilities for the coordinated use of military forces in previously restricted critical realms within the battlespace points back toward the need for fresh thinking and theorizing about future applications. For millennia, people have waged warfare within the framing context of annihilation and attrition or combinations of the two using predominantly conventional forces. Whether fighting ISIS in Syria or the Taliban in Afghanistan today, it is not difficult to discern the influence of these long-standing models. The limits of them have been apparent, however, since the twentieth century. The apogee of their application was the Second World War and the campaign against Germany exemplifies the fundamental problem facing advanced nation-states in trying to defeat another major international power using traditional approaches to war. To force the German state to surrender between 1939 and 1945, the Allies had to engage their armed forces in massive and prolonged air, land and sea campaigns over several years. To defeat Germany, the Allies killed 5.3 million people in their armed forces during the course of the war. The strategic air campaign alone caused the deaths of around 400,000 German civilians (with 800,000 wounded), and brought about the displacement of around five million people in the country. The remarkable feature of these appalling statistics is that Germany only gave up the fight after its political leader, Adolf Hitler, the architect of World War II, committed suicide on April 30, 1945, and before the Allies, using a combination of annihilation and attrition strategies, could gain access to him. What the German case demonstrated was the increasing limitations of traditional models that place emphasis on the material destruction, degradation, or annihilation of enemy forces to achieve political aims in the face of the innate power and resilience of modern nation-states with large populations and an established industrial base.

The anaphylaxis model

Theory development offers the possibility to think about warfare in a different way. Putting to one side the annihilation/attrition models as the strategic reality and the traditional concepts and theories derived from them (based on conventional forces) provides an open intellectual space to imagine warfare from an alternative perspective. If special forces were the basis of a future model of warfare, then what would such a model look like? This research puts forward the idea of anaphylaxis as a possible model of warfare. Anaphylaxis represents emancipated thinking about warfare in a non-confluent way and perceiving the battlespace beyond the front lines and the clash of conventional forces in order to grasp the potential of applying state action via special forces in a markedly different way. It exploits a dimension of modern war that became obvious to some participants in the Second World War, that linear warfare was now over and war was about depth, which today extends well beyond the battlefield into the opposing nation-state. The focus of anaphylaxis is not material destruction or victory over the armed forces (tactical or strategic success as is the case with annihilation/attrition), but rather on the opposing political establishment and the vital foundations of its social support from its people. The anaphylaxis model can
be simply defined as paralysis and its concepts are derived from that strategic reality based on special forces as the primary means with conventional forces in a support role. This model (strategic reality) and concepts drawn from it provide the basis for theory development on how this application of force could be empowered.

Classical strategic theory informs that, at its heart, “war is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”\(^\text{100}\) It was the great master of war, Napoleon Bonaparte, who once stated that “everything is opinion in war, opinions about the enemy, opinions about one’s own soldiers.”\(^\text{101}\) Napoleon firmly believed that war was dominated by “moral factors” and his most famous saying was that “three-quarters of war is about moral factors; the balance of real forces only accounts for one-quarter.”\(^\text{102}\) The question is, How can SF, in the light of this classical wisdom, affect or influence opinions within the high-level decision making of a powerful nation-state? One of the big questions that comes out of the recent wars in the twenty-first century (Libya, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen, for example) is, Had people in these devastated countries understood the misery that war inevitably provokes, then would they have been so willing to support the “war option”? Taken more broadly, How many wars in history would not have started if the people fighting them had a glimpse of the social disruption, chaos, and misery that state-based warfare inevitably ensues between powerful actors? Think of the iconic photos of people in Europe celebrating the declaration of war in 1914 in the hopeless expectation that it would be over by Christmas or, in more recent times, the unrealistic faith-based hopes of the proponents of the Iraq War in 2003 that plunged an entire region into instability, insurgency, and a medieval nightmare entity in the form of the so-called Islamic State. Had these nations, their populations, and political elites glimpsed or, even better, experienced a snapshot of the unpromising future where daily lives would be painfully disrupted and futures interrupted, then the prosecution of war would have been socially harder, if not impossible, to promote and sustain. The remarkable feature of the wars of the early twenty-first century is that the massive material and social destruction occurred against very weak enemies. Neither the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2001 or Saddam Hussein’s Iraq in 2003 was much of a match for the United States. In an imagined future conflict with a peer competitor state, the levels of damage, destruction, and cost to the participants, logic suggests, would be vastly higher.

This is at the root of the anaphylaxis model: it is about interrupting powerful political momentum to go to war and to disrupt what Clausewitz described as the trinity between the government, people, and the armed forces\(^\text{103}\) that is vital for war to occur. It is easy to forget that this trinity is not an equal one and the real power within a nation-state that sustains the armed forces and maintains the government in power is its people. In the pre-digital age, gaining access to a population was technological challenging but today this is quite different. Nevertheless, it is perhaps easy to think that the idea of an anaphylaxis strategy is some kind of curative military “snake oil” in the same vein as the discredited concept of “shock and awe,” which is often erroneously perceived as being fully implemented during the invasion of Iraq in 2003.\(^\text{104}\) Shock and awe is a conventional warfighting strategy implemented primarily through air power to achieve “rapid dominance” in a material sense over an enemy. It is a continuation of annihilation (material destruction of the enemy or its vital assets) by other means. The aim of anaphylaxis is not military defeat of the enemy, but rather to create a moment of intense political, military, and social vulnerability of a paralyzing kind that opens space for a third outcome on the peace/war continuum: not victory or defeat, but accommodation. Accommodation does happen between hostile nation-states and opposing military forces during a confrontation and it is best encapsulated by the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 when the United States and the Soviet Union almost tipped into a nuclear war.

The question is, How can SF, in the light of this classical wisdom, affect or influence opinions within the high-level decision making of a powerful nation-state? The ability to deploy and coordinate secret military forces behind enemy lines and within its homeland offers rich
opportunities to conduct an anaphylaxis strategy to influence and disrupt critical systems (political, economic/social, and military) that are vital to prosecuting warfare. Unlike traditional conventional and nuclear state-cracking strategies that rely on massive amounts of military force to compel surrender, an anaphylaxis strategy offers a more precise application with deliberate limitations. It is not about breaking a state and its armed forces or destroying its will to fight but rather creating internal political and social space for a realignment away from military action. It is in theory similar to the effect of an antigen on a much larger body. A single miniscule bee sting, for example, has the ability in some cases to temporarily paralyze a human. The antigen analogy captures well how much smaller military forces can also generate a mass paralysis impact on a state, its people, and political representatives before outright hostilities occur. It would be akin to generating a large-scale “pause for reflection” through a cascading disruptive mass effect on a society, its citizens, and political/military elites to generate conditions for accommodation.

To achieve this impact, precisely targeted special forces would be utilized to disrupt and paralyze vital political, economic/social, and military decision-making systems of an opposing state in a severe political crisis. The extraordinary pace of technological change in the last twenty-five years, such as digital networks, drones, and modern transport, means that SF now can be deployed and sustained anywhere in the world at short notice, often within a matter of hours. Advanced penetration capabilities in the form of stealth helicopters, HALO and HAHO parachute techniques, underwater entry technologies, and the benefits of globalization mean that no nation-state on Earth is unreachable. The strategic reality of the anaphylaxis model is about using unconventional forces (special forces) to apply military power to paralyze an opposing nation-state, not to create tactical or strategic success to defeat it or its armed forces, but to create the conditions for a state of political and social accommodation to emerge before outright hostilities.

The political system

It seems obvious that the political system is the key power arena in nation-states and the recent nefarious social media campaigns in the U.S. and UK by hostile external actors underline its central importance. From classical understandings of warfare, the primacy of politics is undisputed. As Clausewitz always stressed, “war is merely the continuation of policy [politics] by other means.” In sympathy with this interpretation, it is clear to see that the realm of politics is the vital decision-making node in a modern state. It is often surprisingly overlooked that wars throughout history have been fought by the masses, but the outbreak and resolution of them has often been determined by the actions of the few or individuals who hold highest political leadership positions. For nation-states whose political leadership possesses tight control of the military organizations and the direction of the overall campaign, the role of the leader is crucial. In a recent major work on the history of violence and humanity, the psychologist Steven Pinker suggests that “many of the bloodiest wars in history owe their destructiveness to leaders on one or both sides pursuing a blatantly irrational loss-aversion strategy.” In mature states, a political leader is not just the impetus of the major decisions and policies, but also heads up a network of patronage across the entire strata of society and not least within the military itself.

Targeting a political figure in wartime seems a fantasy derived from a Hollywood script, but it has been successfully conducted by SF in forgotten times. In 1944, German SF under the leadership of Otto Skorzeny were tasked with keeping Hungary within the German war effort. Hungary at this time was providing assistance to Germany in the form of five divisions, but its geographical position and critical resources such as oil made it vital to the sustenance of the German war effort. With the unending advance of Soviet forces in the east, Germany faced a genuine danger of a rapid enemy advance through Hungary if it changed sides that could provoke a quick entry into the homeland while other German forces contended with Soviet troops in
East Prussia. It all depended on the continued loyalty of the Hungarian leadership under Admiral Horthy, whose affiliation was now in doubt due to intense activities in persuasion by the Soviet Union. Having made an appreciation of the situation, German SF came to conclusion that the key to keeping Hungary with Germany was its top leadership in the form of Admiral Horthy, but most importantly, his influential son and successor, Nicholas.\textsuperscript{113} Notwithstanding enhanced Hungarian security measures, German forces kidnapped Nicholas in Budapest, who was unceremoniously bundled in a Persian carpet and flown to Germany.\textsuperscript{114} Then, in a daring strike mission called Operation Panzerfaust,\textsuperscript{115} Skorzeny, with a mixture of SF and conventional units, bluffed his way into the regent’s heavily fortified headquarters, prompting Admiral Horthy to quickly abdicate. The entire operation cost the Germans four dead and twelve wounded.\textsuperscript{116} Consequently, under a new regime Hungary remained a loyal ally of Germany until the bitter end of the war in 1945. It could be argued in a rather pedantic way that this is a poor example because it was an “easy” win for Germany against a friendly ally that allowed it much space to maneuver special forces into position. The point here, however, is not the ease of the operation, though that aspect is highly contestable (successful missions always look easy after the event), but rather that 75 years ago special forces successfully targeted a political leader of a militarily powerful state and set an important precedent.

Throughout history, battles have been fought not to just destroy the enemy’s armed forces, but to access its political leadership. The upper echelons of a political class and its top leadership in the form of a king/queen/emperor would traditionally be located in close proximity, if not actually on, the battlefield. A successful decision in fighting could determine the military and political outcome of the war in a matter of hours. With the onset of the modern age, political figures have moved further and further away from the battlefield to the point that today they reside in their respective capitals far removed from the bloody sounds of combat, but due to modern technology they are no longer out of reach. However, returning the politics/strategy nexus to the forefront of military efforts is imaginatively challenging for the West. For the last three decades, the application of war has become profoundly bureaucratized in conventional military and alliance structures to such a degree that it has been distilled down to a purely operational-level focus aimed at the space between strategy and tactics. War has been reduced to a series of operations and the ongoing campaigns in Afghanistan (now in its eighteenth year) and Iraq (sixteen years) perhaps capture its limitations. In contrast, SF have the ability to go to the wellspring of war, bring the political back to the battlefield and directly influence the highest realms of decision making and their supporters.

The economic/social system

Contemporary economic and social systems in nation-states are highly fragile. They possess far less resilience than in previous times due to, among other things, embedded dependency on centralized energy provision and digital networks. In the early twentieth century, the impact of military efforts such as strategic bombing on national homelands was reduced because most homes and apartments had independent means, usually coal or wood-powered technologies, for providing heat sources for warmth and cooking. In some cases, they even had access to non-centralized water provision. The shift in the latter part of the century toward centralized provision of heat (predominantly gas, electricity, and hot water) has occurred across many societies in the West and beyond. It has made some nation-states such as the United Kingdom, to take one example, very vulnerable to energy interdiction, which at particular times of the year, such as a very cold winter, is even more acute. Around “85% of the UK’s heating comes from natural gas” alone.\textsuperscript{117} In the past, military bombing could only at most affect tens of thousands of people in a specific location. High levels of energy dependency on single sources means that potentially millions could be affected simultaneously and in extreme temperatures, allied with natural human frailty,
the consequences for support provision in the form of hospitals and welfare facilities could be socially overwhelming. An SF campaign targeting key energy facilities at critical distributions points within a nation-state is no longer a speculative venture and has the potential to cause an exponential societal effect well beyond the means of a government to quickly resolve. It would divert huge amounts of political resources to attempt to maintain social cohesion while taking critical attention away from military activities.

Twenty-first century life is by definition a digitally informed one. Digital networks are marvels of our time and provide levels of interconnectivity that are unparalleled in human existence. From relationships, personal and professional, to services across every aspect of life, digital connectivity is the lifeblood of a highly developed society. To the younger generation, increasingly less young, life without digital access to friends (Facebook, WhatsApp), news, gossip, movies, and directions (GPS) to name a few services is unthinkable and there are unexplored social/mass psychology questions about how this generation would cope with a total digital blackout. Equally, without digital provision, how would a government communicate with its people? In 2017, Norway turned off its FM service and, if the digital radio service was stopped along with other dependent services such as television, then there is a question of what is Plan B to disseminate information to citizens in times of emergency. It is not widely known that over 95% of global communications travel via a little over 200 undersea submarine cables that connect nations at certain land-based choke points.118 It is a vital yet highly vulnerable architecture. Digital provision is a critical target node because vital aspects of power within a state in the form of communications, energy, food, water, and logistics are physically and virtually located within the IT warp and weft. Today, a modern state without Internet access, online banking, cash machines, and digital transactions is inconceivable and even brief interruptions cause misery and often chaos for millions of people. This is an ideal target set for SF that could digitally isolate and create a dark information time for a nation-state with profound economic, military, social, and political consequences for relatively little effort.

The military system

Military systems away from the battlefield and behind the front lines are surprisingly vulnerable to interdiction by unorthodox forces because defenses are geared outward and not inward. This was the key lesson of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Despite the outlay of trillions of dollars on defense after the Second World War, the United States simply could not effectively deal with a handful of terrorists operating within their homeland on that fateful morning in September. The first age of SF in World War II showed a glimpse of the true potential of these units in being able to affect the military balance of conventional forces by targeting an inherent weakness of all major fighting technologies: away from their natural operating environment or the battlefield, they possess exploitable vulnerability. The SAS under David Stirling’s inspired leadership showed that aircraft behind enemy lines on seemingly safe airfields were much easier to destroy in large numbers by small parties of determined soldiers than for the Royal Air Force to attempt to do from the air. In 1941, a small team of Italian naval SF changed the actual balance of naval forces for a brief time in the Mediterranean when it sank two British battleships in the naval base at Alexandria in Egypt. A little-known fact about the success of the D-Day landings in June 1944 was that the German strategy to quickly push the allies back into the sea using a powerful formation, the 2nd SS Panzer Division, positioned north of Toulouse, was stymied by SOE. SOE agents sabotaged its rail transport system and then engaged in hit-and-run actions as the division slowly moved by road to Normandy. The 450-mile journey should have taken three days, but delays caused by blown bridges, fallen trees, mines, and constant harassment by guerrillas augmented by SOE agents meant that it was seventeen days before elements of the division reached the fighting in the north.119 Today, major military technologies in the form of warships, fifth-generation aircraft,
and tanks have a far greater value to a nation-state because of the sheer economic investment that they represent and the fact that they exist in far smaller numbers. They are literally precious military assets that are hard to replace quickly. A good example are the two new British aircraft carriers. At 3.1 billion pounds each with a ten-year production process, from contract to commission, the destruction or disabling of these behemoths of the ocean in their home ports would effectively neutralize the most important component of British naval strategy for the foreseeable future.

The other major target set for SF is military leadership. Most major military operations today are directed from national homelands. In conventional military organizations, all power and decision-making lines flow in a top-down matrix centered on a single individual in the form of a senior army commander or general. This configuration has remained the basis of success and failure in warfare for thousands of years and its perpetuation and universal adoption in international relations reveals a level of functional robustness that has yet to find a substitute. As one of the most successful and experienced military leaders in the last 200 years, Napoleon once argued that “in war, men are nothing; it is one man who is everything. The general’s presence is indispensable: he is the head, the whole of an army.”121 The loss of a general at an inopportune moment in combat can have a dramatic impact on the direction of opportunity or setback during a battle or a campaign. The wounding of the Confederate General James Longstreet, for example, by his own troops at the Battle of the Wilderness in 1864 had an instant chilling effect on the unfolding tactical success of the engagement.122 For armies with long-standing commanders, the effect is akin to an extreme paralyzing effect whose symptoms last as long as it takes the organization to get a replacement in place. The concentration of senior military leadership in national command centers directing operations home and abroad using digital networks creates an opportunity for an SF campaign to target the most important military command network of a nation-state in an unprecedented way. How modern armed forces, perhaps deployed in hostile environments overseas and far from the home base, would react without any access to senior leadership is open to speculation.

Conclusion

This article suggests that the development of a theory of special forces is not a dangerous pathway, but instead offers an emancipatory route toward fresh thinking about these units of choice for political leaders in the twenty-first century. Bringing the study of special forces into alignment with traditional approaches in social sciences, such as theory development, has genuine benefits for our understanding of how models, concepts, and theories of war affect how nations imagine warfare and use special forces. Nevertheless, it is perhaps important to be clear about what this article is not advocating: it is not suggesting that conventional forces should be replaced by special forces nor is it arguing that anaphylaxis should be adopted—it is purely an exercise in theory development (informed by historical practice and classical strategic theory) to explore one potential application of special forces with systemic effects at the nation-state level. Instead, it has tried to show how applying a theoretical lens can help understand the potential of special forces and that altering the parameters of models, concepts, and theories can cast a different light on the application of force. The rise to prominence of SF in contemporary warfare in the twenty-first century is unlikely to diminish for the foreseeable future and this research makes the case that it is important to acknowledge and mind the conceptual gaps between the terms SF and SOF and how they encompass a variety of units with very different capabilities and potential.

In the East, there has been evidence of evolving thinking about SF that was apparent in a sublime military operation in Crimea just five years ago. In late February 2014, so-called “little green men,”123 or soldiers in full military uniform and equipped for war but without any form of identification, suddenly appeared in Crimea and seized key military and political sites. The lack of
Insignia created ambiguity, confusion, and deniability, especially concerning who was conducting these very professional operations. In other words, it bought time for these forces to complete their mission. The sheer speed, tempo, and relative peacefulness of the seizures paralyzed the government in Ukraine as well as the international community. A devastating combination of surprise, shock, and military imagination allowed the Crimea to be annexed by Russia with effortless ease. The “little green men” were Russian naval SF or Spetsnaz\footnote{This research hopes to contribute to the development of a body of theory for encouraging innovative and fresh thinking about special forces.} working in concert with other forces and they orchestrated a near bloodless seizure of valuable strategic territory for the Russian state in full glare of the global media. Critics may say it was another easy win because Russia had all the military advantages (more forces, geographical proximity, and surprise), but to informed commentators no military operation is particularly “easy” in that the orchestration of military forces always involves risk (that is why so many troops are killed in training accidents each year). However, putting criticism to one side, it was a window on an innovative way of applying force in international relations with spectacular success. Special forces played a very important role in seizing the Crimea and did so very effectively in conjunction with other Russian conventional forces.

This study underlines the necessity of developing a theory of SF to fully appreciate the potential of these extraordinary military assets, not only in their third age, but also in the wars to come. It does so by laying the groundwork for a theory by expressing a number of propositions. The first of these is that SF are unique and different from previous categories of soldiers that have emerged throughout history and need to be recognized as such. They are far more than just enhanced tactical solutions with greater firepower, skill, and mobility than standard units, but rather a new type of soldier entirely with often-unrecognized game-changing potential. SF challenge traditional ways of making war derived from models that have formed the bedrock of military practice in the form of annihilation and attrition for thousands of years. While these units can contribute to timeworn approaches to war, their defining relationship with a combination of modern technologies—in fusion—make them not only stand apart from soldiers of old, but also offer a new way or anaphylaxis for executing force in global affairs. In the twenty-first century, it is now feasible to move away from state cracking as the primary means to influencing opposing political elites toward state paralysis, if nation-states and their military organizations possess the imagination to do so. As a famous (and controversial) soldier/scholar once remarked, “imagination is the telescope of our minds. It gives us distant glimpses of great things which can be handed over to the reason to analyse.”\footnote{This research hopes to contribute to the development of a body of theory for encouraging innovative and fresh thinking about special forces.} This research hopes to contribute to the development of a body of theory for encouraging innovative and fresh thinking about special forces.

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**Notes**

1. This is best captured by an elegant and relatively recent article by James Kiras entitled “A Theory of Special Operations: ‘These Ideas Are Dangerous,’” *Special Operations Journal* 1, no.2 (2015): 75–88, that typifies a particular intellectual orientation toward theory and special forces/special operations forces in general.

2. In a recent article, this predisposition toward choosing special forces/special operations forces has been described as “pushing the easy button.” See Russell A. Burgos, “Pushing the Easy Button: Special Operations Forces, International Security and the Use of Force,” *Special Operations Journal* 4, no.2 (2018): 109–128.
3. This concept of the state as a “unit” within the system of international politics is taken from Kenneth Waltz and his extraordinary contribution entitled, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*, Kindle ed. (NY: Columbia University Press, 2001), 119.

4. David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, Kindle ed. (London: Sage, 2017), 153.

5. John Arquilla and James Kiras are prominent insiders.

6. See Kiras, “A Theory of Special Operations,” 75–88.

7. Scholars who would fall broadly under this label include Colin S. Gray, the Oxford Research Group, and the author of this article.

8. Liam Walpole and Megan Karlshoej-Pedersen, *Britain’s Shadow Army: Policy Options for External Oversight of UK Special Forces* (London, UK: Oxford Research Group, Remote Warfare Programme, 2018), 1–44.

9. Thomas Hammes, in his book, *The Sling and The Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2004) sparked a wide-ranging debate about the character of war in the twenty-first century.

10. See Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and Its Crisis in Iraq* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005) captures well the debate about the changing character of war by the West from a sociological perspective. So too Colin McInnes from a security studies angle in his book, *Spectator-Sport War: The West and Contemporary Conflict* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

11. Perhaps the most influential intellectual sponsor of hybrid warfare has been Frank Hoffman and his article “Hybrid Warfare and Challenges,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 52, no.1 (2009): 34–39, which sets out its parameters very clearly.

12. J. W. Hackett, “The Employment of Special Forces,” *Royal United Services Institution Journal* 97, no. 1 (1952): 26–41.

13. There is a growing interest in developing a theory for special operations more broadly. See, for example, Robert Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations: The Origin, Qualities and Use of SOF* (Hurlburt Field, FL: Joint Special Operations University, 2007) and, more recently, Christopher Marsh, Mike Kenny, and Nathanael Joslyn, “SO What? The Value of Scientific Inquiry and Theory Building in Special Operations Research,” *Special Operations Journal*, 1, no.2 (2015): 89–104. The most recent work is by Richard W. Rubright, *A Unified Theory for Special Operations*, JSOU Report 17-1 (MacDill Airforce Base: The JSOU Press, 2017).

14. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans., *Carl Von Clausewitz: On War*, Kindle ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

15. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport: Praeger, 2006).

16. This is not to suggest that major works have not been produced in the area of special operations, but the early works tended to be fleeting incursions into this area with authors moving rapidly on to other areas of interest. Two prominent examples are Eliot Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (Harvard: Harvard University Centre for International Affairs, 1978) and Edward Luttwak et al., *A Systematic Review of ‘Commando’ (Special) Operations 1939–1980* (Potomac, MD: C & L Associates, 1982).

17. Ulrica Pettersson and Eyal Ben-Ari, “‘Kill and Tell’: The Cultural Resonance and Reverberation of Creative Nonfiction on Special Operations Forces,” *Special Operations Journal* 4, no.2 (2018): 232–242.

18. Doctrine manuals are often hard to access for outsiders and are deliberately excluded here.

19. William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, Kindle ed. (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

20. John Arquilla has been a prominent part of this center for many years. See John Arquilla, ed., *From Troy to Entebbe: Special Operations in Ancient and Modern Times* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996).

21. In recent years, a great deal of innovative scholarship on special operations forces has been steadily produced in Canada, especially at the Royal Military College of Canada.

22. Emily Spencer, ed., *The Difficult War: Perspectives on Insurgency and Special Operations Forces* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2009); Emily Spencer, *Solving the People Puzzle: Cultural Intelligence and Special Operations Forces* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2010).

23. J. Paul de B. Taillon, *The Evolution of Special Forces in Counter-Terrorism: The British and American Experiences* (Westport: Praeger, 2001); J. Paul de B. Taillon et al., eds., *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004).

24. Bernd Horn et al., eds., *Force of Choice: Perspectives on Special Operations* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004); Bernd Horn and Tony Balasevicius, eds., * Casting Light on the Shadows: Canadian Perspectives on Special Operations Forces* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2007); Bernd Horn, *A Most Ungentlemanly Way of War: The SOE and the Canadian Connection* (Toronto: Dundurn, 2016).

25. David Last et al., *Force of Choice*.

26. Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport: Praeger, 1996); Colin S. Gray, “Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?” *Parameters* 29, no.1 (Spring 1999): 2–24.
27. James Kiras, Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism (London: Routledge, 2006) and Kiras, “A Theory of Special Operations.” James is also the Associate Editor of the recently created Special Operations Journal that started in 2015.

28. Alastair MacKenzie, Special Force: The Untold Story of 22nd Special Air Service Regiment (SAS) (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

29. Adam Leong Kok Wey, Killing the Enemy: Assassination Operations During World War II (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); Adam Leong Kok Wey, “Principles of Special Operations: Learning from Sun Tzu and Frontinus,” Comparative Strategy 33, no.2 (2014): 131–144.

30. Anthony King, “The Special Air Service and the Concentration of Military Power,” Armed Forces and Society 35, no.4 (July 2009): 646–666.

31. See Rory Cormac, “Disruption and Deniable Interventionism: Explaining the Appeal of Covert Action and Special Forces in Contemporary British Policy,” International Relations 31, no.2 (July 2016): 169–191.

32. See Adam D. M. Svendsen, “Sharpening SOF Tools, Their Strategic Use and Direction: Optimising the Command of Special Operations amid Wider Contemporary Defence Transformation and Military Cuts,” Defence Studies 14, no. 3 (2014): 284–309; Rene Toomse, “Small States’ Special Operations Forces in Preemptive Strategic Development Operations: Proposed Doctrine for Estonian Special Operations Forces,” Special Operations Journal 1, no.1 (2015), 44–61; and Gunilla Eriksson and Ulrica Pettersson, eds., Special Operations from a Small State Perspective: Future Security Challenges (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

33. RAND has a long interest in SOF/special forces and periodically produces some highly insightful academic reports on their activities.

34. Perhaps the most significant contribution was the seminal article on the so-called Afghan Model of Warfare. See Richard B. Andres, Craig Wills, and Thomas E. Griffith Jr., “Winning with Allies: The Strategic Value of the Afghan Model,” International Security 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/2006): 124–160; Richard B. Andres, “The Afghan Model in Northern Iraq,” Journal of Strategic Studies 29, no. 3 (2006): 395–422. A useful counterpoint to this air-force perspective is offered by Stephen Biddle, “Allies, Airdpower and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq,” International Security 30, no. 3 (Winter 2005/2006), 161–176.

35. Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, Perilous Options: Special Operations as an Instrument of US Policy (Oxford: OUP, 1993).

36. Arquilla, From Troy to Entebbe.

37. Susan L. Marquis, Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press 1997).

38. Thomas K. Adams, US Special Operations Forces in Action: The Challenge of Unconventional Warfare (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

39. Anna J. Simons, The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces (New York: Avon Books, 1997).

40. Michael Fitzsimmons, “The Importance of Being Special: Planning for the Future of US Special Operations Forces,” Defense and Security Analysis 19. no.3 (September 2003): 203–218.

41. David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb, United States Special Operations Forces (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

42. Sean Naylor, Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda (New York: Berkley Books, 2005); Sean Naylor, Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2015).

43. Mark Bowden, Black Hawk Down (London: Corgi Books, 2000); Mark Bowden, The Finish: The Killing of Osama Bin Laden (London: Grove Press, 2012).

44. Linda Robinson, Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces (New York: Public Affairs, 2004); Linda Robinson, One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare (New York: Public Affairs, 2014).

45. Others use similar descriptions, for example, Jackson and Long describe it as “a third… period era of prominence.” See Colin Jackson and Austin Long, “The Fifth Service: The Rise of Special Operations Command,” in US Military Innovation Since the Cold War: Creation Without Destruction, edited by Harvey M. Sapolsky, Benjamin H. Friedman, and Brendan Ritterhouse Green (London: Routledge, 2009), 150.

46. James Kiras highlights the case of Julian Corbett as an example of the perils of theory development.

47. Julian Corbett, Principles of Maritime Strategy, Kindle ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 1.

48. Stephanie Lawson, Theories of International Relations: Contending Approaches to World Politics, Kindle ed. (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 2.
49. Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science*, Kindle ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
50. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 145.
51. Colin S. Gray, *Theory of Strategy*, Kindle ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2018), 5.
52. Howard and Paret, *Carl von Clausewitz*, 141.
53. Corbett, *Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 6.
54. This is a classical approach to theory development in the realm of military/strategy theory that can be traced back to the work of Sun Tzu 2,500 years ago and evident in the writings of Clausewitz to Colin Gray in the twenty-first century.
55. This article draws upon the approach by Jane Ritchie, Jane Lewis, Carol McNaughton Nicholls, and Rachel Ormston, eds., *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, 2nd ed., Kindle ed. (London: Sage, 2014).
56. See Alastair Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror: Warfare by Other Means* (London: Routledge, 2008), 3.
57. Alastair Finlan, “Special Forces: Leadership, Processes and the British Special Air Service (SAS),” in, *Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Special Operations Forces*, edited by Gitte Højstrup Christensen (Copenhagen: Royal Danish Defence College, 2017), 77.
58. Arquilla, *From Troy to Entebbe*, xv–xvi.
59. Ibid., xvi.
60. Heuser uses the phrase basic strategies to describe Delbrück’s idea of them. See Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*, Kindle ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 109.
61. Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research*, 145.
62. Ibid.
63. This work fits firmly within the so-called social sciences.
64. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 50th anniversary ed., Kindle ed., 12.
65. Hans Delbrück, *Warfare in Antiquity, History of the Art of War, Volume I*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe, Jr., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 135–6.
66. Ibid., 136.
67. This is not to suggest other nations did not develop special forces during World War II. Indeed, it could be claimed that the German Brandenburgers were the first type of special forces in 1939, but SOF would be a better description of them. Originally conceived within one of the the intelligence branches of the German armed forces, they had a focus on paramilitary actions out of uniform that makes them more similar to the British Special Operations Executive in their earliest form. See Lawrence Paterson, *Hitler’s Brandenburgers: The Third Reich’s Elite Special Forces*, Kindle ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018).
68. Finlan, “Special Forces,” 77.
69. See M. R. D Foot, *SOE: An Outline History of the Special Operations Executive 1940–46*, Kindle ed. (London: Pimlico, 1999).
70. Finlan, “Special Forces,” 77.
71. See Gavin Mortimer, *Stirling’s Men: The Inside History of the SAS in World War II* (London: Cassell, 2005), 13.
72. Maurice Tugwell and David Charters, “Special Operations and the Threats to United States Interests in the 1980s,” in *Special Operations in US Strategy*, edited by Frank R. Barnett, B. Hugh Tovar, and Richard H. Shultz (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1984), 35.
73. Field Marshal Viscount Slim, in his memoirs on the Burma campaign in WWII, saw some value in the possession of SF units “on tasks beyond the normal scope of warfare.” Field Marshal Viscount Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, Kindle ed. (London: Pan, 2012).
74. See Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror*, 7; Fitzsimmons, “The Importance of Being Special,” 206; Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 149; Horn et al., *Force of Choice*, viii; Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy*, 5; and Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, 7.
75. McRaven, *Spec Ops*.
76. Hy S. Rothstein, *Afghanistan and the Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 18.
77. “Elite” and “special” are often used interchangeably, but they are not synonyms with regard to SF and SOF.
78. See Alastair Finlan, “The (Arrested) Development of UK Special Forces and the Global War on Terror,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 4 (2009): 971–982.
79. Kiras, “A Theory of Special Operations,” 84.
80. Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare*, 64.
81. Kiras, “A Theory of Special Operations,” 84.
82. The British Long Range Desert Group could send messages “over ranges” of 1,000 miles. See Julian Thompson, *The Imperial War Museum Book of War Behind Enemy Lines* (London: Pan, 1999), 18.
83. The S-phone was only 15 lbs in weight. See Foot, SOE.
84. The Thompson was popular with British Special Forces. See Damien Lewis, *Churchill’s Secret Warriors: The Explosive True Story of the Special Forces Desperadoes of WWII* (London: Quercus, 2014), Kindle Edition.
85. UK Special Forces used a variety of light machine guns attached to their jeeps in World War II that included twin Vickers K machine guns and the Browning .50-calibre machine gun.
86. Foot suggests plastic explosive appeared to have been created ‘just before the war’ at the Royal Arsenal (Woolwich). See Foot, SOE.
87. Long-range aircraft (often converted bombers) could place special forces and their equipment deep behind enemy lines using parachutes.
88. The Willys jeep was very popular with special forces because it gave them mobility and extra firepower.
89. British Commandos sent to kill General Rommel as part of Operation Flipper in 1941 were dropped off behind enemy lines by submarines.
90. Hackett, “The Employment of Special Forces,” 28.
91. Finlan, “Special Forces,” 79.
92. Ibid.
93. Non-contiguity is a challenge in itself. It needs a certain type of personality type (comfortable fighting in small groups and in isolation) and a different form of discipline. This is a major difference with conventional forces. See Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror*, 56.
94. The Long Range Desert Group was formed on July 7, 1940, under Major Ralph Bagnold. Its mission, through long-range patrols, was to gather intelligence, conduct surveys, and harass enemy communications. See H. W. Wynter, “The History of the Long Range Desert Group (June 1940 to March 1943),” in The National Archives, *Special Forces in the Desert War 1940–1943* (London: The National Archives, 2008), 14–16.
95. See H. W. Wynter, “The History of Commandos and Special Service Troops in the Middle East and North Africa (January 1941 to April 1943),” in The National Archives, *Special Forces in the Desert War 1940–1943*, 302–303.
96. Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler’s Germany 1944–45*, Kindle ed. (London: Allen Lane, 2011), 379.
97. Richard Overy, “The Air War in Europe, 1939–1945,” in *A History of Air Warfare*, edited by John Andreas Olsen (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2010), 43.
98. Kershaw, *The End*, 379.
99. Hackett, “The Employment of Special Forces,” 28.
100. Howard and Paret, *Carl von Clausewitz*, 75.
101. Bruno Colson, *Napoleon: On War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 124.
102. Ibid.
103. Howard and Paret, *Carl von Clausewitz*, 89.
104. There were numerous problems with the application of “shock and awe” during Operation Iraqi Freedom. See Alastair Finlan, *Contemporary Military Strategy and the Global War on Terror: US and UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq 2001–2012*, Kindle ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 140.
105. U.S. stealth helicopters were unwittingly unveiled to the world when one of them crashed during the Bin Laden raid in 2011. These aircraft are “designed to avoid being spotted by radar, and quieter than standard models.” See Bowden, *The Finish*, 223. Their employment in future spec ops is potentially very significant for the utility of special forces.
106. High altitude, low opening.
107. High altitude, high opening.
108. Nuclear-powered submarines and non-nuclear versions offer a quick and relatively silent means to deploy special forces around the shorelines of the world.
109. Clausewitz, *On War*, 87 (explanation added).
110. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity*, Kindle ed. (London: Penguin, 2012), 219.
111. See Krisztian Ungvary, *Battle for Budapest: 100 Days in World War II*, Kindle ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).
112. Charles Foley, *Commando Extraordinary: Otto Skorzeny* (London: Cassell, 1999), 103.
113. Ibid., 107.
114. Ibid., 110.
115. Otto Skorzeny, *Skorzeny’s Special Missions: The Memoirs of “the Most Dangerous Man in Europe,”* Kindle ed. (London: Greenhill Books, 2011).
116. Ibid.
117. Sylvia Pfeifer, “UK’s Reliance on Gas for Heating Exposed by Cold Snap,” The Financial Times, March 17, 2018.
118. Rishi Sunak, Undersea Cables: Indispensable, Insecure (London: The Policy Exchange, 2017), 5.
119. See Giles Milton, The Ministry of Ungentlemanly Warfare: Churchill’s Mavericks Plotting Hitler’s Defeat (London: John Murray, 2016) for one of the best accounts of this action.
120. David Bond, “MoD Admits UK’s £3.1bn HMS Queen Elizabeth Aircraft Carrier Leaks,” The Financial Times, December 19, 2017.
121. Colson, Napoleon, 44.
122. James Longstreet, From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1896), 564–568.
123. Vitaly Shevchenko, “‘Little Green Men’ or ‘Russian Invaders,’” BBC News, March 11, 2014 (accessed August 26, 2016).
124. Mark Galeotti, Spetsnaz: Russia’s Special Forces, Kindle ed. (Oxford: Osprey, 2015).
125. J. F. C Fuller, The Foundations of the Science of War (Fort Leavenworth: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, 1993), 45.

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