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Does The United States Still Need a U.S. Special Operations Command?

How Effective Has USSOCOM Been in Fighting the Long War?

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The establishment of United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in 1987 with the passage of the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the Defense Reorganization Act of 1987 was designed to fix the problems with Special Operations that were brought to light after the failed Iranian hostage rescue attempt at Desert One in 1980. Congress did what the military establishment would not. This legislation provided unity of command and control for Special Operations Forces and elevated Special Operations to a near peer with the Services giving it “service-like” responsibilities as well as a little used Combatant Command authority.

However, in 2009, perhaps it is time for Congress to review their handiwork. Of course many outside the military establishment are enamored with the myth and romanticism of Special Operations. There are so many “groupies” among staffers and in academia that it is hard to see Special Operations for what it really is and what it has become. And within the military, Special Operations has been “hijacked” by a group of hyper-conventional Ranger types and other supporting elements that Special Operations and most important, its heart and soul – Special Forces - has lost its way. There are so many in and out of the military who claim ties to Special Operations that it is unlikely that there will ever be a critical look at USSOCOM and what it has become.

There is no doubt that Special Operations Forces, including from across the spectrum: the hyper-conventional Special Mission Units including the Rangers and Special Operations Aviation, as well the SEALs, the Air Commandos, the MARSOC Marines and the intellectual, indirect approach experts in Special Forces such as Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations, have made tremendous contributions to the United States’ fight against terrorists and insurgents. However, it is important to note that they have done this working for the Combatant Commanders (formerly regional Commander in Chiefs) and Ambassadors and not under USSOCOM.

So let’s take a broad look at USSOCOM and specifically focus on its headquarters and what it has done for our nation since 9-11 and what it has become. Congress might want to delve into some of these issues and ask some hard questions.

- It has spent millions of dollars on building state of the art facilities and an organization to command and control the War on Terrorism by establishing the Center for Special Operations (CSO) charged with synchronizing the War on terror worldwide. It has increased the size of its headquarters manning more than doubling it since 9-11. Despite this investment, it has never commanded and controlled any significant operation. What this investment produced was an organization that hamstrung the employment of Special Operations world-wide, and as a result, on October 1, 2009, the USSOCOM Commander disbanded the CSO and reorganized the HQ back to a conventional “J-staff” model. Millions and millions of dollars have been wasted on this organization and its facilities with no return on the investment for the American people. Note while the USSOCOM Taj Majal facilities were being constructed for no real contribution to the war on terror, the SOF service components (Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps) remain hundreds of millions of dollars short in military construction funding.
- USSOCOM- Service relationships are at an all time low. There is probably less regard for SOF among the Services than prior to 1987. This is not a problem with the operational forces – they are respected and even protected by the Services. The problem is at the headquarters level. USSOCOM continually tells the Services they are not adequately supporting SOF with intelligence, communications, sustainment and aviation. USSOCOM recently revitalized the lost 5th SOF Truth that says “most special operations require non-SOF assistance.” Unfortunately 20 years of telling the Services to leave SOF alone has left a bad taste.
- USSOCOM asked Congress to change the law regarding SOF promotions and assignments - seeking “coordination” by the Services vice the previously granted USSOCOM “monitoring” of such promotions. The Services agreed to change the policy and allow coordination vice monitoring but non-concurred with the recommendation to go to Congress to change the law. However, USSOCOM asked Congress anyway and it may be in the 2011 legislative process.
- USSOCOM, over Navy objections, put in command of the Navy Special Mission Unit a retired Captain despite more qualified active duty SEALs available.
- USSOCOM has told the Services that all the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) should be commanded by SOF officers; however, the Services will still be required to provide the manpower less the senior leadership positions.
- USSOCOM is directing that SEALs, Air Force and Marine Special Operations officers take command of the CJSOTFs so they can have their fair share of commands in combat despite the fact that the majority of Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force (CJSOTF) forces are Special Forces and Army SOF. A SEAL will take command of CJSOTF Philippines in 2010 and USSOCOM has forced the removal of this Army Special Forces command position from the Centralized Selection List thus depriving a Special Forces officer command.

- USSOCOM is putting a former Special Mission Unit (SMU) commander in command of the Combined Force Special Operations Component Command Afghanistan (CFSOCC-A) replacing a Special Forces one star general in what is clearly a Special Forces position. This can perpetuate the problem of using CJSOTF Special Forces for counterterrorism direct action missions vice the more effective *by, through, and with* indirect operations with indigenous forces.
- USSOCOM has continued to attempt to minimize the importance of Psychological Operations (PSYOP) to our nation and has become so “politically correct” that it changed the name of the USSOCOM Joint PSYOP Support Element (JPSE) to the Joint Military Information Support Command (JMISC) as a spurious attempt to hide the fact that they conduct PSYOP.
- USSOCOM, at the behest of Secretary Rumsfeld, drove the removal from Special Operations the reserve component Civil Affairs (CA) and PSYOP forces during wartime when these capabilities are in most demand and critical to the war on terror. This significantly hinders the ability to effectively synchronize the training, organization, manning, and resourcing of the entire CA and PSYOP force and reduces overall effectiveness in providing these capabilities to the warfighting Combatant Commanders.
- USSOCOM has succeeded in developing a most inefficient resourcing processes – one that is major platform centric - to support the procurement of maritime and air platforms and while leaving the individual special operator woefully underequipped through its efforts - while the services, and in particular, the Army through its rapid fielding initiative, are providing better equipment in a more timely manner. USSOCOM also fosters a “not invented here” mindset – if it does not come from the headquarters it is not a priority. USSOCOM headquarters has become so top heavy and bureaucratic that all the innovations it was known for in terms of equipment procurement and research and development have been eclipsed by the Services.
- USSOCOM has allowed itself to become dominated by the hyper-conventional side of SOF with domination by the so-called direct action forces to the detriment of Special Forces, Civil Affairs, and Psychological Operations. The cultures of these two types of forces hinder effective cooperation and coordination. There is probably more disdain between the direct and indirect forces of SOF than there is between SOF and conventional forces.
- It is allowing and encouraging the hyper conventional Special Mission Units to develop “Special Forces like” advise and assist capabilities to provide the façade for partner operations rather than properly employing existing SOF capabilities to accomplish the mission. USSOCOM is encouraging and resourcing these special mission units to develop unconventional warfare capabilities that already exist in Special Forces and for which special mission units were not chartered nor trained.
- It has demanded to become the Joint Proponent for all the Services for Civil Affairs, Psychological Operations, and Security Force Assistance yet has not been able to

articulate to the Services how it will execute its responsibilities and how it will better support the missions of the warfighters.

- It has allowed Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) to further separate itself from the forces it was supposed to support by authorizing AFSOC to pursue Cannon AFB in Curry County, New Mexico, as an AFSOC base. Furthermore it has removed all rotary wing aviation from AFSOC thus depriving it of an effective rescue capability that cannot be replaced with the CV-22.
- Has political correctness run amok in USSOCOM? re: The “SEAL three” being prosecuted for alleged acts in Iraq and the treatment of the MARSOC company in Afghanistan and finally the allegation and later exoneration of the Special Forces soldiers for killing a high value target? And of course who can forget the late CPL Tillman?
- The Services and Department of State are appalled at the arrogance of USSOCOM as it has taken to calling its personnel “3D warriors” – defense, development, and diplomacy – two of the 3 disciplines clearly belong to the United States Agency for International Development and the Department of State.
- USSOCOM continues to meddle in theater operations where it has no authority: e.g., it has been enamored with Major Jim Gant’s paper on tribal engagement (but at the same time not understanding that it is basic Special Forces operations and has been going on for some time) - USSOCOM is now proposing sending its own specially designed “unconventional warfare teams” to Afghanistan to conduct tribal engagement, in effect telling the CENTCOM Combatant Commander, the JTF Commander, the CFSOCC-A Commander and the CJSOTF-A Commander how they are going to conduct their campaign with SOF.
- Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) is effectively “uncontrollable” by USSOCOM because it is superior in every respect to USSOCOM’s ability to command. It is a de facto stand alone direct reporting organization with no need for USSOCOM and has in fact become much more efficient and politically powerful than USSOCOM.
- Are the “hybrid” USSOCOM responsibilities still required (service-like and limited warfighting command)? Is it now possible to return SOF to their parent Service but keep separate funding lines through the Services for SOF? Surely the Service SOF components are mature enough and sufficiently accepted that the past “deprioritization” of SOF is unlikely to occur and in any event can be prevented by Congress authorizing direct P11 funding lines to the Service SOF. The Services and Combatant Commanders understand, recognize, and appreciate the contributions of SOF and they will continue to support because of the value to the mission.
- Note also that there are very few SOF professionals assigned to USSOCOM headquarters. The majority of senior SOF decision makers have little real operational experience or only of managing their small Service SOF contributions. In fact the

Marines have far more assigned to USSOCOM headquarters than the size of MARSOC would warrant.

Given the above critical questions and review of many of the shortcomings and the wartime ineffectiveness of USSOCOM, what should be done? Congress should consider the following:

1. Conduct a thorough review of USSOCOM history of the past 22 years with particular emphasis on what has happened in the post 9-11 era. This study should be conducted by an independent blue ribbon panel and not a “SOF-friendly” think tank. The study should result in answering the question: Does the US still need a US Special Operations Command?
2. Establish JSOC as a separate stand alone command and direct it to have a very narrow and specific counter-terrorism direct action mission to allow it to remain the premier special mission force. Assign to it Rangers, Special Operations Aviation, SEALs, Air Commandos, and appropriate MARSOC capabilities and provide it with the Service like responsibilities to administratively as well as operationally control all its forces because it has proven more capable than USSOCOM of doing so. Keep JSOC in the box.
3. Return AFSOC, NAVSPECWARCOM, and MARSOC to their parent Services so they can execute their traditional air, maritime, and Force Reconnaissance missions in support of their Service forces. Charter USASOC, under the Army, as the IW focal point for DoD allowing it to be the masters of the indirect approach with two primary missions of Unconventional Warfare and Foreign Internal Defense. Assigned Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs forces will have the primary missions of supporting UW and FID using their unique capabilities and USASOC will have as its secondary mission support to conventional forces in major combat operations.
4. The Theater Special Operations Commands (TSOC) are already assigned to the Theater Combatant Commander. They should remain as the Special Operations integrator for the Combatant Commanders and be fully resourced by the assigned theater executive agent. The TSOCs have no need for a USSOCOM.

The capabilities that US Special Operations Forces bring to the warfighters are a critical part of any campaign. The tactical and operational forces have demonstrated their value to our nation over and over again; there is no question that these forces are a significant part of the joint team.

However, after 22 years perhaps USSOCOM has outlived its usefulness. Congress saved SOF from the Services in 1987 with the creation of USSOOCM. Now it may be time for Congress to save SOF from USSOCOM.

Yasotay was a Mongol Warlord and fierce fighter who marauded all over Asia aggressively vanquishing any foe by any means. The author is a patriotic American who has been associated with Special Operations in Tampa for more than 20 years. The views he expresses are as a frequent observer of SOF and they are a distillation as a result of numerous conversations with SOF operators at all levels.

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