



## Why Does Special Forces Train and Educate for Unconventional Warfare?

### Why is it Important?

### A Quick Response to Robert Haddick<sup>1</sup>

David S. Maxwell

There is tremendous emotion, misunderstanding and just plain baggage surrounding Unconventional Warfare (UW). Most discussions revolve around the definition itself with little understanding of the breadth and scope of what UW entails. However, since most who discuss UW are only concerned with the words in the definition and do not delve into the intellectual foundation of UW, this short paper will seek to explain and interpret the words in the definition and answer the questions in the title. The USSOCOM approved definition for UW is:

"Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force in a denied area."

Since this will be a discussion of a doctrinal definition it may be instructive to recall the words of LTG (RET) John H. Cushman writing in his 1993 pamphlet "Thoughts for Joint Commanders" in which he recalls some historical admonitions on doctrine:

"A 1950 definition called doctrine 'the compilation of principles and theories applicable to a subject, which have been developed through experience or by theory, that represent the best available thought and **indicate and guide but do not bind in practice.**'"  
(emphasis added)

"Doctrine is basically a truth, a fact, or a theory that can be defended by reason."

"Doctrine cannot replace clear thinking...under the circumstances prevailing."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Robert Haddick, "This Week at War: Do We Still Need Special Ops?," *Small Wars Journal*, 23 April 2010. <http://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/2010/04/this-week-at-war-do-we-still-n/>

<sup>2</sup> LTG (RET) John H. Cushman, "Thoughts for Joint Commanders," (1993 Copyright John H. Cushman)

This is wise counsel for anyone who wants to narrowly interpret doctrine. Doctrinal “purism” is unhelpful particularly when faced with the complex, ever evolving characteristics of war in the 21st Century. Doctrine can be used to train, prepare, and guide but it is effective strategy with campaign plans for implementation that are required to achieve objectives in the national interest.

To begin to answer the above questions it is instructive to remember the words in a speech by Secretary Gates when he was the Director of Central Intelligence:

Unconventional Warfare (UW) ... remains uniquely Special Forces'. It is the soul of Special Forces: the willingness to accept its isolation and hardships defines the Special Forces soldier. **Its training is both the keystone and standard of Special Forces Training: it has long been an article of faith, confirmed in over forty years of worldwide operations, that "If you can do the UW missions, you can do all others."** The objective of UW and Special Forces' dedication to it is expressed in Special Forces' motto: De Oppresso Liber (to free the oppressed).<sup>3</sup> (emphasis added)

The most important words are “If you can the UW missions, you can do all others”. Most importantly, the UW mission provides the foundation to be able to “do all others”, whether Foreign Internal Defense or Counterinsurgency or provide unconventional or indirect means and methods to conduct Counterterrorism and Counter-proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction and even Direct Action and Special Reconnaissance. Of course Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations are critical enablers in most Special Operations and Unconventional Warfare.

Some people reading the approved USSOCOM definition default to the words “overthrow” and “guerrilla” and do look deep enough at the simple words in the definition to see the essence of UW. They recall the OSS in World War II or Cold War era plans for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. Those are of course legacy UW missions. However, it should be remembered that there is significant intellectual and doctrinal depth to the nature of UW that cannot be understood simply by reading only the definition or remembering the legacy missions. For those that think that the UW definition is only about overthrowing governments, it is imperative that they think deeper on this subject. In order to understand the definition it may be useful to look at each part of the definition and look at it from an enemy perspective, from a strategic and operational level, and the tactical perspective and determine who is responsible for each part, why it is an important mission for the US. and why Special Forces trains and educates to be able to conduct this mission so that it can conduct all other SOF missions.

### **Breaking down the Definition**

The first thing that should jump out from this definition is that it does not mention the United States or Special Forces. Unconventional Warfare consists of activities to enable a resistance movement or insurgency. These activities can be conducted unilaterally by a resistance movement or insurgency or can be enabled by external sources. There are myriad examples of

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<sup>3</sup> Robert M. Gates, Remarks at the dedication of the OSS Memorial, Langley, VA, 12 June 1992, quoted in The Special Forces History Society's The Special Forces Regimental History Calendar, 1994, (Fort Bragg, NC: Office of the Command Historian, U.S. Army Special Operations Command).

resistance movements or insurgencies, in essence *unconventional warfare*, in existence and being conducted around the world in, just to name a few, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, by Hezbollah and Hamas in Lebanon and Israel, by the FARC in Colombia, by multiple organizations in the Philippines, in a number of areas of Africa as well as Iran supporting activities in Iraq through its Quds Force. Is Al Qaeda conducting UW? It certainly is if one looks closely at the words “coerce and disrupt” and when you consider the establishment of a global caliphate that must imply overthrow of governments or occupying powers. This is especially illustrated by the stated objective to rid the Middle East of the “occupying” powers of the US and Israel.

The definition of UW is important in that it is not limited to describing US and Special Forces actions, activities or operations. It describes the essence of UW and recognizes and describes what is happening in many areas of the world by very diverse organizations, groups, and nation states. The argument can be made that in order to counter these activities there must be a clear understanding of the operations they are conducting and the strategies they are employing as well as their objectives. While it is fashionable to talk about the War on Terrorism and in particular, the War against Al Qaeda and Violent Extremists as a counterinsurgency on a global scale, perhaps it is more descriptive to view it in terms of countering Unconventional Warfare on a global scale.

From a US perspective there may be a requirement to coerce and disrupt a government or occupying power but *not necessarily* overthrow them. UW provides policy makers with options for coercion and disruption against nation states or occupying powers.

Which brings up the definition of what is an occupying power? The strictest definition might be found in West’s Encyclopedia of Legal Terms:

“Military occupation occurs when a belligerent state invades the territory of another state with the intention of holding the territory at least temporarily. While hostilities continue, the occupying state is prohibited by International Law from annexing the territory or creating another state out of it, but the occupying state may establish some form of military administration over the territory and the population.”<sup>4</sup>

While this narrowly describes traditional state-on-state military conflict with one state occupying another with its military, this does not adequately describe the reality of the 21st Century. Today there are “occupying powers” that take on state like characteristics and responsibilities with some of them already listed above such as Hezbollah and Hamas or the FARC. They have in fact annexed territories and are occupying them in ways that are nearly identical to states. This can also describe the actions of the Taliban in Afghanistan and certainly in areas of the Northwest Frontier Provinces in Pakistan. A strategic option available to policy makers who determine coercion, disruption or overthrow is in the national interest is to conduct unconventional warfare or at least unconventional warfare related activities to counter these occupying powers or quasi-states.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Occupying+power>

## **Strategic and Operational Responsibilities**

Strategic level decision makers and operational level campaign planners are responsible for developing the strategy “to coerce, disrupt or overthrow a government or occupying power” and designing the campaign plan to execute the strategy and achieve the stated objectives and desired end state. However, coercion, disruption and overthrow are not exclusive in and of themselves to unconventional warfare. The methods and resources to coerce, disrupt and overthrow are available in nearly infinite combinations when designed creatively in strategies and campaign plans. Nearly every operation will have as an objective some or all elements of coercion, disruption, or overthrow (or in other words defeat and destruction). Strategists and operational planners must be able to design strategies and campaigns using all the elements of National Power to coerce, disrupt or overthrow (or defeat or destroy) the opposition. Large scale or surgical land, sea, and air operations may be required to achieve the objectives or perhaps a combination of political or economic pressure may be required.

If strategists determine that there is the potential to exploit an indigenous element to assist in coercing, disrupting, or overthrowing (or defeating or destroying) a government or occupying power then they may consider the use of Special Forces tactical operations to work through and with an underground, auxiliary, or guerilla force in a denied area.

## **Tactical Execution and Relevance for Special Forces**

There are detailed doctrinal descriptions of the underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force; however, it is important to grasp just a few of them to understand how important these three entities are as well as why it is so important for Special Forces to be able to not only advise and assist them but also to organize, train, equip, and develop them.

First and foremost the underground provides the necessary intelligence support to the resistance movement or insurgency that must underpin all operations. This can be a network or cellular organizations that provide intelligence and information but also can support a myriad of operations to include subversion, sabotage, and psychological operations. It can also provide the nucleus of a shadow government which can become support the reestablishment of a legitimate government once the hostile government or occupying power is overthrown (or defeated or destroyed). Note that subversion in and of itself can be a very complex undertaking using components of sabotage and psychological operations to undermine the legitimacy of the hostile government or occupying power. It is imperative that Special Forces continue to train to develop and assist underground organizations because the same techniques (***unconventional warfare related activities***) have application in Foreign Internal Defense, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism operations. Most importantly as COL (RET) John J. McCuen says in his seminal work, The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War, the ability to ***counter-organize*** against the enemy is critical to success for countering revolutions and insurgencies.<sup>5</sup> Special Forces must possess the skills to organize and operate undergrounds.

Auxiliaries provide support to the resistance movement. This can be in the form of logistics, information, and a source of recruits for both the underground and the guerrilla force. The

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<sup>5</sup> John J. McCuen, The Art of Counter-Revolutionary War, (Hailer Publishing, 2005), P. 85

auxiliary, like the underground, comes from and lives among the population. The organization of the auxiliary, while critical to successful underground and guerrilla operations, is also an important element for post hostilities when the shadow government comes to power. The political support of the mobilized auxiliary will be instrumental in determining the legitimacy of the new government.

Finally, the most visible and well-known aspect of UW is the guerrilla. This can be termed variously as an irregular, indigenous element, or any other such term that has been seen over the years as in militia, freedom fighter, paramilitary, partisan, insurgent and unfortunately even terrorist.

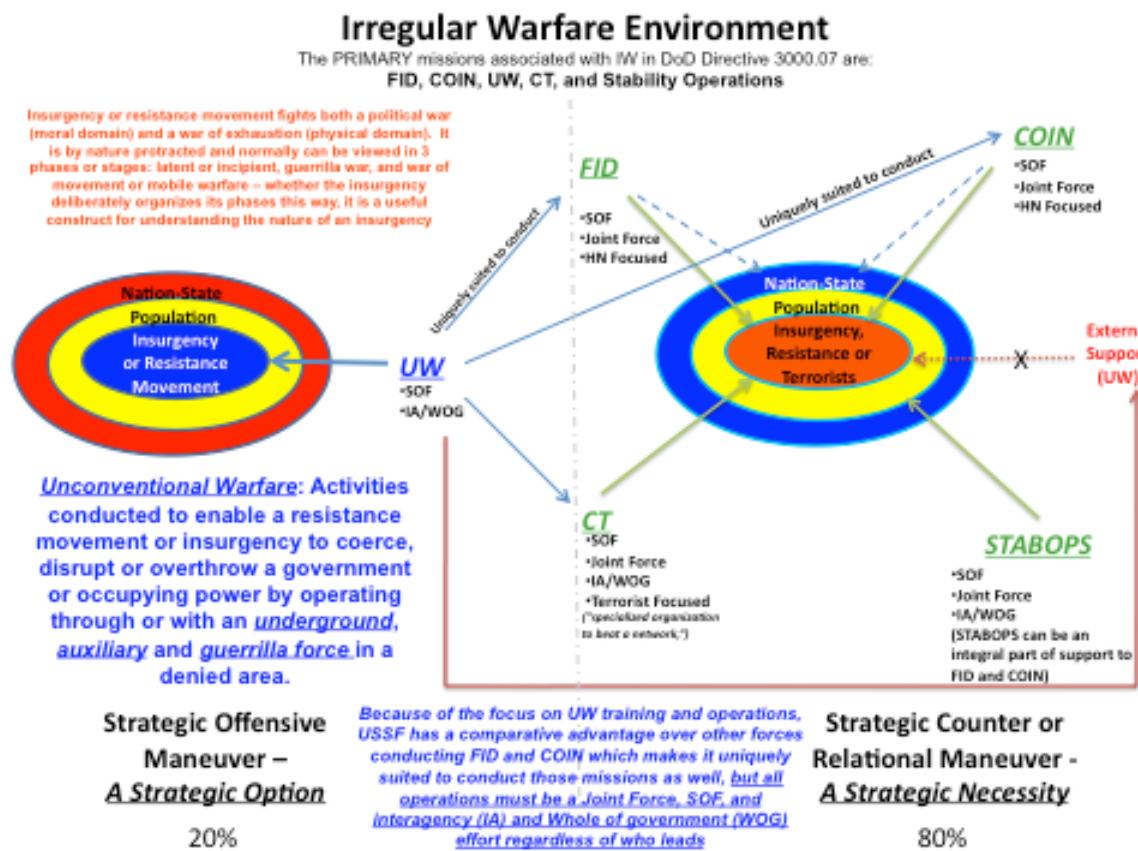
However, it is the ability of the Special Forces Solider to be able to organize, equip, train, advise, assist, employ, and if necessary lead not only a guerrilla force but also the underground and auxiliary, that provides the foundational skill set for everything that the SF Solider must be capable of doing in any operation from UW to FID to COIN to CT as well as being able to, when necessary, conduct Direct Action and Special Reconnaissance though or with an indigenous element. It is the UW mission that provides the foundation for all others. It is the UW mission that provides the intellectual framework for thinking through the complexities of dealing with indigenous populations.

It is also true that UW, in its strictest application of the definition, has rarely been conducted. It is by nature complex and a long-term endeavor and normally takes long-term preparation of the environment and assessment of the potential for UW operations. Even the two most recent UW operations in Afghanistan and Iraq benefited from long-term interagency and military preparation of the environment. The relationships developed by the CIA over time with indigenous Afghans of various tribes allowed the CIA and Special Forces, with support from US air power to bring down the Taliban government fairly quickly. In Iraq, successful operations by the Kurdish forces were the result of years of engagement by Special Forces and the CIA following Desert Storm. UW is hard to understand by those who do not study and practice it and thus it is difficult to get the required approvals or have UW written into campaign plans in order to conduct the advanced preparation necessary for UW to be a viable strategic option. National level policy makers, Geographic Combatant Commanders and their staffs and the Theater Special Operations Commands have to realize the potential for UW to be an important strategic option that they have to plan for and seek the approval for the necessary preparatory activities to be executed.

If UW cannot be conducted or is not appropriate to support the US strategy or campaign, it is likely that ***UW related activities*** can and should be applied. It is because of the UW training of Special Forces that Iraqi Special Operations Forces have become such a potent force and the Afghan Commandos are the premier Afghan Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency force. Programs such as the Afghan Public Protection Program, the Community Defense Initiative, the Local Defense Initiative and Jim Gant's Tribal Engagement monograph, as well as operations in Colombia against the FARC, activities in the Horn of Africa and the Trans Sahel and successful support to the Philippines' counterinsurgency and counterterrorism campaigns are all the result of Special Forces training and examples of ***UW related activities*** that can effectively support Foreign Internal Defense and Counterinsurgency campaigns.

## UW as part of Irregular Warfare

It is instructive to consider the Department of Defense Directive 3000.07 on Irregular Warfare (IW) and note that IW activities consist of UW, Foreign Internal Defense (FID), Counterinsurgency (COIN), Counterterrorism (CT), and Stability Operations (STABOPS). A way to view the relationship among these activities is illustrated in the chart below:



This chart illustrates the offensive nature of UW on the left side, recognizing the fact that UW enables a resistance movement or insurgency that is among a population within a hostile nation-state or occupying power's control. As mentioned above, this is an operation rarely executed or supported by the US at least publicly. But it must remain a strategic option.

The right side of the chart illustrates the other four missions associated with IW. These are strategic counters to challenges that are in the US national interest to defeat. Note however, that there is a “mirror effect” between the right and left side. In UW the elements that are being supported are friendly to US interests but within a population ruled by a government of occupying power hostile to the US. On the right side the insurgents or terrorists are within a population that is ruled by a government friendly to the US. The US may enable a friend, partner, or ally to defend against lawless, subversion, insurgency, or terrorism through FID and COIN, or capture or kill terrorists through CT operations. It may also assist in eliminating or

reducing the conditions or mitigating the civil vulnerabilities that give rise to terrorism and insurgency, particularly in under-governed or ungoverned spaces where sanctuaries for terrorists and insurgents may exist. The combination of these four mission areas provides a counter to threats and conditions in nation states that left unchecked by the host nation make spread and threaten other nations and the US.

The chart also illustrates that although the missions on the right are traditionally Special Operations focused they are not inherently SOF or SOF exclusive. The DoD Directive 3000.07 recognizes that operations in the IW environment require effective integration and application of the Joint Force as well as the Interagency or “whole of government.” Although SOF has a comparative advantage in training and preparing for operations in this environment, when large scale expeditionary COIN or FID operations are required such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, SOF does not have the capacity and depth to conduct them unilaterally. And even if it did, the 5th SOF truth states that most Special Operations require non-SOF assistance.

In the end, UW should be understood by policy makers, strategists and campaign planners as a strategic option for the US requiring long term preparation to maximize the potential effectiveness. However, in the event that UW is not a viable option, those same planners should understand that there are critical ***UW related activities*** that can and will successfully contribute to strategies and campaigns to achieve US national objectives.

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