



US Special Operations Forces: An Interview with Mark Moyar

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Acclaimed military historian Dr. Mark Moyar discusses the history and current use of US special operations forces, America's most elite soldiers.

This interview was originally conducted for the [Remote Control](#) project.

Q. Your book *Oppose Any Foe* was recently published. The book examines the history of U.S. special operations forces. What are the origins of America's special operations forces and why were they created?

Most of America's special operations forces trace their roots to World War II. The Army Rangers were created in 1942 as a means of collaborating with the British Commandos, at a time when the Commandos were a central element of Winston Churchill's raiding strategy. The Rangers were disbanded after World War II and again after the Korean War, but they were reincarnated in the 1970s and have been a part of the US Army ever since. President Franklin Roosevelt created the US Marine Corps Raiders in 1942 because his son, who was enamored with commando-type forces, convinced him to form Marine special operations forces despite objections from the head of the Marine Corps. Marine special operations forces were dissolved in 1944, not to be reconstituted until 2006, and eventually the new organization took on the Raider name.

The US Navy fielded Frogmen in WWII as a means of clearing channels for amphibious landings, and retained some of the units after the war. In 1961, some of the Frogmen were converted into members of Sea, Air, Land Teams (SEALs). The Office of Strategic Services, the primary US intelligence agency during World War II, created special operations forces such as the Jedburghs

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and Operational Groups, which in the 1950s became the model for the US Army Special Forces.

Q. In the early years, how strategically effective were US special operations forces?

During both World War II and the Korean War, the United States formed special operations forces for the purpose of raids on enemy “soft spots.” In both cases, the Americans soon discovered that opportunities for such missions were few and far between. Given the need for regular infantry in these wars of grinding attrition, the special operations units were routinely employed in conventional infantry missions. For the purposes of stealth and speed, these units carried less heavy equipment than other line units, which proved to be a major handicap in conventional combat.

The heavy losses sustained in battle led to the dissolution of most special operations units prior to the ends of both World War II and the Korean War. The special units of the Office of Strategic Services were somewhat more effective in their role of supporting resistance movements behind enemy lines, but for the most part they had little impact on the tide of battle, and they too were disbanded after the war. The US Navy Frogmen were a notable exception to the general trend, as their performance in clearing obstacles prior to amphibious landings was deemed so successful that they were retained after war’s end.

Q. In your book, you describe how the future of special operations forces at the end of the 1950s looked bleak, but that the Vietnam War seemed to mark a turning point. What roles were US special operations forces used for during the Vietnam campaign and how did this experience effect their organisational structure and future use?

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President John F. Kennedy was more interested in special operations forces than any other US President, before or since. He enlarged the Army Special Forces and created new units in order to counter insurgencies in Vietnam and other third-world countries. The largest Special Forces program, the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs), performed both guerrilla and counterinsurgency missions, as they shifted from defending their villages to attacking infiltrating North Vietnamese Army units.

In addition, the Special Forces attempted to insert intelligence collectors and saboteurs into North Vietnam, but most of the people they sent were compromised or killed. Special operations units also carried out reconnaissance missions in Laos and Cambodia, advised paramilitary forces, and conducted raids. After the war, conventional forces and special operations forces blamed each other for failures in Vietnam, based largely on inaccurate perceptions of the war, and those accusations would remain a source of friction for decades to come. Because conventional officers had greater clout, the special operations forces suffered the greater loss in resources after the war.

Q. In the post-Vietnam era, there was a rise in hostage taking by Islamic terrorists which created the need for soldiers who could take out terrorists quickly and effectively without harm coming to hostages. How did this demand change U.S. special operations forces?

In the post-Vietnam era, as in other post-conflict eras, special operations forces sought new missions to keep them occupied and demonstrate their worth. An upsurge in hostage taking by Islamic terrorists in the early 1970s led to the reconstitution of the US Army Rangers in 1974 and the formation of Delta Force in 1977 and SEAL Team Six in 1980. The Delta Force mission to rescue

US hostages in Tehran in April 1980 failed spectacularly, but it led to a series of reforms with far-reaching implications for special operations forces.

In the aftermath of the abortive raid, the US government formed the Joint Special Operations Command to alleviate the command problems that arose during the operation, as well as the 160th Special Operations Aviation Battalion to prevent recurrence of aviation mishaps. The Iran calamity also gave impetus to the reforms of 1986, which included creation of Special Operations Command, appointment of an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations, and authorization of a separate funding line for special operations forces. The inception of Delta Force and SEAL Team Six gave special operations forces permanent raiding capabilities, which would be used for different ends in the early twenty-first century.

Q. Moving into the twenty-first century, the post-9/11 era has seen a significant increase in the use and numbers of US special operations forces. During the Afghanistan campaign, U.S. special operations forces played an important role in the overthrow of the Taliban. How much did the Afghanistan experience and its perceived successes influence the strategic thinking behind the U.S. military campaigns which would follow?

The Northern Alliance militias defeated the much larger Taliban armed forces in 2001 thanks to US Special Forces advisers, whose chief task was the guiding of precision munitions onto Taliban targets. It was the first time that American SOF played a role that could be characterized as strategically decisive, and thus encouraged the view that SOF were a strategic instrument. That view in turn fueled decisions to enlarge SOF and employ them in isolation from conventional forces. Efforts to rely primarily or solely on SOF, however, did not yield the anticipated successes.

The use of SOF to support local actors failed twice in Afghanistan shortly after the fall of the Taliban- at Tora Bora at the end of 2001 and in Operation Anaconda in early 2002. SOF would also come up short when the Obama administration charged them with the task of building an army of Syrian rebels. Both George W. Bush and Barack Obama attempted to achieve strategic success through SOF surgical strike operations against the leaders of insurgent and terrorist organizations, but the elimination of large numbers of leaders failed to destroy these organizations.

Q. What were some of the reasons for these failures you mention?

SOF did not achieve their objectives at Tora Bora because their Afghan partners were not as competent or reliable as the Northern Alliance had been. The Afghan militiamen at Tora Bora failed to pursue Bin Laden aggressively, ensuring that he would escape. In Operation Anaconda, the Afghan partners panicked at the first setback and abandoned the battlefield. In the case of Syria, American special operators were unable to recruit substantial numbers of rebels because the White House put unrealistic constraints on recruitment and because most of the moderate rebels had been wiped out by the time the United States was prepared to back them.

The many tactical achievements of surgical strike operations did not produce strategic success because the enemy was able to replace lost personnel with competent individuals, in part as the result of popular dissatisfaction with the surgical strikes.

Q. As you previously mentioned, US special operations forces have expanded much since 9/11. Do you think the US is over-reliant on special operations forces and, if so, why has the US become so dependent on them?

After 9/11, the Bush administration built up special operations forces for “manhunting” operations against extremist leaders, in the hope that extremist organizations could be destroyed through decapitation. Those organizations proved capable of withstanding the precision strikes, which led the United States to the use of special operations forces against lower levels of insurgent groups. Whereas the Bush administration sought to employ the special operators in concert with conventional forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration began seeking ways to use them as low-cost substitutes for large conventional forces.

The Obama administration also decided to send more special operations forces into failed and failing states such as Somalia, Yemen, and Iraq to support friendly governments or insurgents. There is now general recognition in the US SOF community that the operators have more work than they can handle with their existing manpower base, and hence some of their work must be shifted to other military forces or civilian agencies.

Since 9/11, the demands for SOF have exceeded the supply, which explains why the stresses on the forces have become unsustainable. Rectifying the problem will require reducing the deployment pace of special operations forces, which means that some tasks will either have to be performed by other forces, or not performed at all. US conventional forces have the capacity to perform some of those tasks, so the best solution is to shift duties to the conventional forces.

Q. How much transparency and accountability has there been regarding the use of special operations forces in the US?

From their inception, US special operations forces have functioned under conditions of greater secrecy than other military forces. The primary reason has been the need to conceal their activities from the enemy—the more that was known about them, the better the enemy could combat them. Secrecy, though, has also shielded special operations forces from the scrutiny of the American public, media, and Congress

Lack of transparency has at times made it more difficult to hold special operations forces accountable. Congress, which for decades held special operations forces in high esteem, turned against Special Operations Command in the latter part of the Obama administration as a result of the command's unwillingness to share information with Congress. Ultimately, Congress used its authority over funding to compel greater transparency.

Q. One of the many interesting things about your book is that it highlights how important certain presidents were in deciding the types of roles that special operations forces were used for. Thus far, has the use of special operations forces under Trump differed from their use under Obama?

It is too early to tell how the use of special operations forces will differ under the Trump administration. The Defense Department is still fleshing out strategy, and has yet to fill key positions. Given the heavy involvement of special operations forces in a multitude of pressing tasks, a certain amount of continuity is inevitable.

About the interviewee

Mark Moyar is director of the Project on Military and Diplomatic History at CSIS. The author of six books and dozens of articles, he has worked in and



out of government on national security affairs, international development, foreign aid, and capacity building. Dr. Moyar's newest book is *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces* (Basic Books, 2017), the first comprehensive history of U.S. special operations forces. He is currently writing the sequel to his book *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. Moyar has served as a professor at the US Marine Corps

University and a senior fellow at the Joint Special Operations University and has advised the senior leadership of several US military commands. He holds a BA *summa cum laude* from Harvard and a PhD from Cambridge.

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