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OBSESSED: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EROSION OF
ETHICS AND THE PROLIFERATION OF COMBAT
CULTURE IN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES**

Buckley, Seth A.

Monterey, CA; Naval Postgraduate School

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**NAVAL
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MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA

THESIS

**UNDERMINED, OVERUSED, AND MISSION OBSESSED: AN
ANALYSIS OF THE EROSION OF ETHICS AND THE
PROLIFERATION OF COMBAT CULTURE IN SPECIAL
OPERATIONS FORCES**

by

Seth A. Buckley

June 2021

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503.				
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (Leave blank)		2. REPORT DATE June 2021		3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED Master's thesis
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE UNDERMINED, OVERUSED, AND MISSION OBSESSED: AN ANALYSIS OF THE EROSION OF ETHICS AND THE PROLIFERATION OF COMBAT CULTURE IN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES			5. FUNDING NUMBERS	
6. AUTHOR(S) Seth A. Buckley				
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) N/A			10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government.				
12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.			12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE A	
13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words) Special operations forces (SOF) have not stepped off the battlefield in twenty years, and the strains of war are beginning to show. This thesis analyzes the culture and ethical foundation of Special Operations Command (SOCOM) by examining the internal and external factors influencing the force. A once prestigious reputation has been marred with accounts of ethical misconduct and war crimes. In response, SOCOM conducted a force-wide comprehensive ethics review in 2019. While SOCOM's own report admitted that problems within the organization exist, it did not identify the causal factors involved, let alone offer a remedy to address them. Drawing on theories from the fields of social psychology, anthropology, moral philosophy, and organizational management reveals the impact of internal and external influences on human behavior. Analysis of these factors suggests that SOCOM does have an ethics problem and that the problem is intrinsically linked to the misaligned culture. A culture shaped by combat. Overdemand and overreliance on SOF has resulted in unsustainable growth, a mismanaged force, and identity issues within SOCOM. The organizational issues are further influenced by the ideals of American exceptionalism and complicated by changing social values and norms. SOCOM is a complex organization. Understanding the influences that contribute to unethical behavior is critical for SOCOM to regain the trust of the American public and refocus the force.				
14. SUBJECT TERMS special operations forces, SOF, ethics, Special Operations Command, SOCOM, organizational management, profession of arms, social identity theory, leadership, misconduct			15. NUMBER OF PAGES 119	
			16. PRICE CODE	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT Unclassified	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE Unclassified	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT Unclassified	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU	

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THE EROSION OF ETHICS AND THE PROLIFERATION OF COMBAT
CULTURE IN SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DEFENSE ANALYSIS
(OPERATIONS ANALYSIS)**

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ABSTRACT

Special operations forces (SOF) have not stepped off the battlefield in twenty years, and the strains of war are beginning to show. This thesis analyzes the culture and ethical foundation of Special Operations Command (SOCOM) by examining the internal and external factors influencing the force. A once prestigious reputation has been marred with accounts of ethical misconduct and war crimes. In response, SOCOM conducted a force-wide comprehensive ethics review in 2019. While SOCOM's own report admitted that problems within the organization exist, it did not identify the causal factors involved let alone offer a remedy to address them. Drawing on theories from the fields of social psychology, anthropology, moral philosophy, and organizational management reveals the impact of internal and external influences on human behavior. Analysis of these factors suggests that SOCOM does have an ethics problem and that the problem is intrinsically linked to the misaligned culture. A culture shaped by combat. Overdemand and overreliance on SOF has resulted in unsustainable growth, a mismanaged force, and identity issues within SOCOM. The organizational issues are further influenced by the ideals of American exceptionalism and complicated by changing social values and norms. SOCOM is a complex organization. Understanding the influences that contribute to unethical behavior is critical for SOCOM to regain the trust of the American public and refocus the force.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AAS	American Association of Suicidology
ASD SO/LIC	Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict
AFSOC	Air Force Special Operations Command
ARSOF	Army Special Operations Forces
BPC	Building Partner Capacity
CG	Commanding General
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CNI	Chronic-Neuro Inflammation
COIN	Counter Insurgency
CR	Comprehensive Review
CT	Counterterrorism
CVEO	Countering Violent Extremist Organizations
DA	Direct Action
DOD	Department of Defense
EQ	Emotional Intelligence
FID	Foreign Internal Defense
FORGEN	Force Generation
GAO	Government Accountability Office
GCC	Geographic Combatant Commander
GPC	Great Power Competition
IDE	Intermediate Developmental Education
GWOT	Global War on Terror
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
NDAA	National Defense Authorization Act
OPSEC	Operational Security
OSS	Office of Strategic Studies
Perstempo	Personnel Tempo
PME	Professional Military Education
POTFF	Preservation of the Force and Family

POTFF	Pressure on the Force and Family
PTSD	Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome
ROE	Rules of Engagement
SDE	Senior Developmental Education
SEAL	Sea, Air, Land
SECDEF	Secretary of Defense
SF	Special Forces
SIS	Special Intelligence Service
SOCOM	Special Operations Command
SOF	Special Operations Forces
UDT	Underwater Demolition Team
USASOC	U.S. Army Special Operations Command
USSOCOM	U.S. Special Operations Command
VC	Vietcong
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction
WWII	World War II

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to personally thank my advisors, Dr. Naficy, Dr. Houck, and Dr. Strawser, for their continued support and guidance throughout writing this thesis. This paper would not be possible without their contributions, knowledge, and expertise. I would also like to thank my family for being patient and providing me the support to complete this thesis.

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE IMPACT OF INFLUENCE ON AMERICA'S ELITE WARRIORS

A. SOCOM COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW

Nearly two decades of war have proven costly for America's elite fighting force, the United States Special Operation Command (USSOCOM). A prestigious organization once thought to be "frayed at the seams" now seems to be unravelling.¹ Multiple allegations of ethical misconduct and war crimes have overshadowed the professional dedication of the special operations community, threatening the trust of the very people they swore to protect. The missteps have caused civilian leaders to question their faith in special operations forces (SOF) moral fabric and ethical culture. In response, a 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2018 called on SOCOM leadership to conduct a thorough assessment of the SOF culture, prompting the USSOCOM directed "Comprehensive Review (CR) of professionalism and ethics programs for special operations forces" completed in 2019.² This was not the first assessment of this kind ordered by congressional leaders in response to ethical violations. A similar 2011 review of SOF titled *Pressure on the Forces and Family* (POTFF) was conducted amidst allegations of misconduct and misuse of SOF troops finding multiple factors, such as continuous deployments, compressed training cycles, and force management were negatively affecting the force and their families.³

It would appear as though the 2011 POTFF report would have little effect in changing future behavior. Many of the findings from the 2011 report were repeated in the 2019 CR; both reports indicate a culture that revolved around mission accomplishment to the detriment of developing SOF leaders, and an over extended force struggling to balance the needs of the mission with the needs of their families. These findings should come as no

¹ William McRaven, *Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) Review* (Tampa Bay, FL: USSOCOM, 2012). 1.

² USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review* (Tampa Bay, FL: USSOCOM, 2019).

³ McRaven, *Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) Review*.

surprise as special operators have borne much of the burden of the global war on terror (GWOT). Remaining on the battlefield for twenty years has exhausted the force and been a contributor to the erosion of moral and ethical decision-making. The 2019 CR asserted that SOCOM did not have a systemic ethics problem, but that cracks in the cultural foundation existed.⁴

To better understand how the CR panel came to this assessment, thorough analysis of the current SOCOM climate and culture is needed. Examining SOCOM through the lens of moral philosophy, social psychology, and organizational culture may provide a useful analytical framework necessary to better understand the complex issues within the SOF community. The CR found multiple factors that affect the force and provided ample actions items for SOCOM leadership. Certain recommendations were clear, such as “conduct an internal audit of currently deployed SOF against current valid requirements” and “recoup SOF forward deployed not under a valid requirement or part of a validated contingency sourcing solution.”⁵ However, much of the analysis seemed to be only topical results and produced thinly supported recommendations. One action item stated, “codify, establish measures of effectiveness, and subsequently enforce operational FORGEN cycles across all SOF Components in order to provide fully ready, validated and sustainable SOF to the Joint Force.”⁶ Many units already have measures of effectiveness, so why are they not following them? Other actions items stated “Publish SOF enterprise-wide leadership and accountability leadership lessons learned analogous to U.S. Navy’s *Approach* magazine (aviation community’s lessons learned) in order to identify, analyze and share leadership and management situations.”⁷ While this may be beneficial to addressing some of the *symptoms* within SOCOM, it does not address the *underlying root* of the problem. Though the CR was thorough in addressing observations from their research, many of the findings and recommendations fell short of identifying the causal factors. American author and inspirational speaker Simon Sinek insists the best path to understanding is to “start with

⁴ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*.

⁵ 27–29.

⁶ USSOCOM, 33.

⁷ USSOCOM, 37.

why.”⁸ The CR arguably answered what was happening within SOCOM and how these events potentially led to unethical behavior but failed to accurately determine *why* these events persist.

This thesis analyzes both the internal and external influences that can affect the ethical behavior of special ops forces. This assessment provides evidence that SOCOM does indeed have an ethics problem and it directly correlates with their misaligned culture. A complex situational environment has negatively contributed to the erosion of intrinsic core values and strict adherence to an ethical culture. The internal and external influences on the force are perhaps stronger than many previously understood. Inability to understand, recognize, or adjust to the influences that shape an organizational culture can significantly alter the professional ethic upon which it is built.

Any recognized profession requires a solid ethical foundation that underpins the cultural identity of what is socially and morally right and wrong. The professional ethic is the maintaining function of any organization to ensure it operates as intended and within the context of society. The “profession of arms” is no different; in fact, as one of the last organizations that defend our democracy both in a moral sense and constitutionally, a strong sense of ethics is paramount.⁹ Some may even argue the military, and SOF specifically, are held to a higher moral standard simply due to the nature of their profession.¹⁰ The demands of combat can test the will and moral fortitude of any human being. Critical decision-making under extreme duress can surpass the bounds of even the most highly trained individuals’ moral development. SOF operators are not immune to this. The situational environment many SOF find themselves operating within exacerbate the vulnerabilities to unethical misconduct, thus highlighting the need for SOF to be attuned to their own moral compass.

⁸ TEDx Talks, *Start with Why—How Great Leaders Inspire Action*, video, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4ZoJKF_VuA.

⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Press, 1957), 11.

¹⁰ J. Carl Ficarrotta, “Are Military Professionals Bound by a Higher Moral Standard?,” *Armed Forces & Society* 24, no. 1 (October 1997): 59–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X9702400103>.

B. FORMING THE WARRIOR ETHOS

Humans' internal values and beliefs construct the framework from which we base our behavior and decisions on. At times unethical behavior is glaringly obvious, while other situations are ambiguous. To better understand what is right and why we act, we work to define the issues, "systemizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior."¹¹ We continue to categorize behavior and actions in the effort to determine why individuals act in a certain way while also analyzing what is acceptable moral behavior and what is not.¹² Philosophers, while studying normative theory and applied ethics cases, still do not fully agree on all facets of human behavior, of course. Psychological theories on human cognition are continually evolving. Anthropologists continue to expand their research studying human behavior through both cross-cultural studies and evolutionary biology. Determining exactly why humans behave in the ethical and unethical ways they do, or delivering a final, exhaustive answer as to why certain SOF operators will/can act unethically in particular, will not be possible to unpack given these vagaries and uncertainties. However, this does not mean we should simply write off any issues of misconduct as a bad apple situation or even as part of human nature—failing to acknowledge a problem does not make it go away. Rather, one should use the tools of science to better understand the problem. Utilizing theories from different fields that study human behavior will provide the framework to understand the complex individual and organizational challenges within SOF. Building a deeper understanding may not result in absolute truths but will provide the systematic approach to philosophical thinking and thus offer a more detailed understanding of the professional ethic.¹³

Understanding our ethical norms and behaviors is one thing, but effective application of scientific theory within social systems and organizations is another. In any

¹¹ *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v "ethics," accessed March 16, 2021, <https://iep.utm.edu/ethics/>.

¹² Bernard Gert and Joshua Gert, "The Definition of Morality," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020 (Stanford University Press, 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/morality-definition/>.

¹³ John Haldane and John Arthur, *Practical Philosophy: Ethics, Society and Culture* (Luton, UK: Andrews UK Ltd., 2011), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=744333>.

profession potential for ethical dilemmas exist. Understanding the loyalties, responsibilities, and goals of the organization one can utilize the traditional frameworks of normative theory to inform the behavior and decision-making processes of the system, to some extent.¹⁴ SOCOM is a particularly unique and challenging organization to analyze on this front, however, given the contentious ethical claims surrounding its very mission. Take, for instance, the act of killing. Most humans would agree that killing of another human is morally wrong. But, what if that other human was going to kill you, however, or perhaps what if that other human was going to kill ten people if you did not kill them first?¹⁵ Some non-consequentialist views may insist killing the other human is wrong, in all cases, regardless of other humans potentially dying.¹⁶ Other non-consequentialist approaches, however, will contend that people can be responsible for an unjust harm such that they make themselves morally liable to be killed justifiably. Or a consequentialist approach may insist that by killing one you have saved the other ten, therefore in this case the act was morally permissible—in fact, most consequentialists will argue it would be wrong to *not* kill in order to save the ten.¹⁷ Do our moral obligations towards others change if the organization itself has a duty to kill in the execution of its very mission? The relationship of one's organization, and our role within it, play on our ethical analysis of such cases and is complex. This does not mean ethical restraint and deliberation cannot not be applied to SOF operators, of course. Rather, it indicates by virtue of their employment ethical and moral judgement might be that much more important.

C. THE CHALLENGES OF WAR

SOF operate in the potential gray zone of ethical dilemmas. The moral high ground may change dramatically depending on the situation operators find themselves in. In part

¹⁴ Haldane and Arthur.

¹⁵ Shannon C. Houck and Meredith A. Repke, "When and Why We Torture: A Review of Psychology Research," *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 (2017): 272–83, <https://doi.org/10.1037/tps0000120>.

¹⁶ William Wallace, *Kant* (Kitchener, Canada: Batoche Books, 1999), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=3117741>.

¹⁷ Seven Pillars Institute, "Normative Ethics," Seven Pillars Institute, August 2016, <https://sevenpillarsinstitute.org/glossary/normative-ethics/>.

to help mitigate these uncertainties, we have international laws and rules of engagement to better define what is and what is not acceptable in war. These laws establish the acceptable norms of war for society but do little in developing moral judgment of individuals at the root level. Simply telling people what they can or cannot do may make them obedient, but not virtuous. Individuals gain virtue when they not only understand *why* they cannot or should not do certain acts, but place value in those reasons and act on those right reasons—that is, they have the moral motivation to do what they determine is right through moral deliberation.

The rules of war define acceptable and legal acts for war, but war is hell and does not fit neatly into a nicely packaged box. What if our adversary is unbound by rules? What if the case could be made that the rules do not apply to specific adversaries? What about the many vague, uncertain, chaotic, ambiguous scenarios that often arise in the fog of war that are not covered by a specific rule of engagement (ROE) or international law? Some may argue the internal moral judgement of the individual should take over in these cases and they will inherently know what is right or wrong. Yet others may suggest anyone who believes that has never felt the fog of war. In this instance, the situation has an ability to dictate behavior. Acknowledging our environment can impact moral judgment as explained by cognitive ethology, which further complicates the analysis of SOF ethics.¹⁸ However, difficult and extreme situational environments are not the only negative influences acting upon the SOF professional ethic; there are also internal influences at an individual level.

Human psychology is complex. Not only is it a challenge for scholars to understand the individual-level factors that influence human behavior, but this is further complicated when accounting for the social influences on individuals. Humans are social beings,

¹⁸ Cognitive ethology explains “the fact that cognitive process can change with the situational context in which a subject is embedded presents serious challenge to researchers hoping to generalize their work to our everyday cognitive lives. Michel Tibayrenc and Francisco J. Ayala, *On Human Nature: Biology, Psychology, Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (San Diego, CA: Elsevier Science & Technology, 2016), 368, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=4683580>.

evolved to organize and order themselves within social groups.¹⁹ Social groups can alter the individual ethic and create their own values and norms.²⁰ Social groups function through their own principles and beliefs developing unique cultures to form to sustain effective cooperation amongst the group.

D. CULTURAL EVOLUTION

It is natural for social groups to create their own unique culture. As the group forms, individuals begin to assimilate to the group approved values, beliefs, and acceptable actions. We see this daily yet think little about how or why they form, and often members among cultures take for granted how similar their actions become. Anthropologists would suggest that many of the mannerisms, group roles and actions, and behavioral functions of today are the product of cultural evolution by way of natural selection.²¹

“Culture is reality’s playbook. It is a pattern of shared basic assumptions and norms learned by a group as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration. It is also ideology in the sense that our cultural lens relies on core notions, reflexive suppositions, assumed beliefs, and implicit expectations about the world and our place in it.”²² Emile Durkheim describes this as “conscience collective” or “those collective representations which bind society together” and create shared practices throughout mundane life.²³ Culture establishes values and norms, regulates action and behavior through rules and laws, and create the unifying function of any group to provide a collective identity. To date, anthropologists and sociologists have proposed a myriad of definitions

¹⁹ Gavin Kendall and Gary M Wickham, *Understanding Culture: Cultural Studies, Order, Ordering* (London, UK: SAGE Publications, 2001), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=254724>.

²⁰ Daphna Oyserman, “Culture Three Ways: Culture and Subcultures Within Countries,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 68, no. 1 (January 3, 2017): 435–63, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-psych-122414-033617>.

²¹ William M. Baum, *Understanding Behaviorism: Behavior, Culture, and Evolution* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2017), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=4774511>.

²² Siamak Naficy, “Feared and Revered Toward an Anthropology of Delinquency,” *CTX Journal* In Press (2021).

²³ Kendall and Wickham, *Understanding Culture*, 7.

for culture; for this thesis, culture should be considered as a “constellation of shared beliefs, values, behaviors, and practices” that are “organized around a central theme such as individualism, collectivism, or honor.”²⁴ Culture shapes our moral beliefs and influences what we think to be our individual identities.²⁵ Culture establishes rules, both written and unwritten, to foster cooperation and implant obedience.²⁶ Humans are internally guided through their moral beliefs and values, yet these same internal values are in effect shaped by the culture they are surrounded by.²⁷ Individual cognition assimilates and adapts to group norms, which is important in the practical application of ethics. Groups form their own ideals and provide a purpose and significance to the individual enabling cooperation which in turn creates function. This leads to the question: if culture can establish acceptable behavior and manipulate the individual ethic, what is the culture of SOCOM and how has it influenced those within it? The answer is again complex as there are arguably multiple cultures in competition within SOCOM.²⁸

SOCOM should be analyzed as a multi-cultural organization. Although, SOCOM could be argued to have *a* culture, it is comprised of multiple sub-units each with their own culture and identity. Navy SEAL culture is arguably different than Army Special Forces; both are drastically different than Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), which in fact has multiple cultures between Air Force Special Warfare and AFSOC commando aircrew. To further complicate the idea of influence, each sub-unit shares a relationship with their parent service command and SOCOM. Identifying a singular

²⁴ Angela K.-Y. Leung and Dov Cohen, “Within- and between-Culture Variation: Individual Differences and the Cultural Logics of Honor, Face, and Dignity Cultures,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 3 (March 2011): 2, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1037/a0022151>.

²⁵ Peter Revay and Claudio Cioffi-Revilla, “Modeling the Co-Evolution of Culture, Signs and Network Structure,” in *Social, Cultural, and Behavioral Modeling*, ed. Dongwon Lee et al., Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Springer International Publishing, 2017), 162–71, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60240-0_20.

²⁶ Ann Weatherall and Matthew M. Hollander, *Using Discursive Psychology and Conversation Analysis to Study “Obedience” and “Defiance” in Milgram’s Experiments* (London, UK: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526449160>.

²⁷ Ágnes Melinda Kovács, Ernő Téglás, and Ansgar Denis Endress, “The Social Sense: Susceptibility to Others’ Beliefs in Human Infants and Adults,” *Science* 330, no. 6012 (December 24, 2010): 1830–34, <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1190792>.

²⁸ Oyserman, “Culture Three Ways.”

cultural identity to formulate and establish a concrete professional ethic can be a challenging process for those within SOCOM. Although, a true analysis of the cultural identity is not complete without accounting for social norms and values that act upon individuals. Although SOF operators relate to their fellow operators, SOCOM is, of course, not insulated from society. Social norms and values of the broader society also heavily influence the moral foundation of SOF.²⁹

The beliefs and values many of these operators hold true are in fact a product of the society that raised them. Social identity theory suggests the “social category (e.g., nationality, political affiliation, sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is a part of the self-concept.”³⁰ In other words, one’s behavior within a group is as much a function of social identity as it is individual identity. The idea that an individual can simply change all moral beliefs and values due to joining a new group or culture defies logic and science.³¹ Research suggests the best indicator for organizational behavior within smaller social groups is related to the individual commitment to group norms and values.³² Merely adopting the values and morals of the culture does not make an individual ethical; however, without them there will be no development of ethics in the practical sense.³³

²⁹ Deborah J. Terry, Michael A. Hogg, and Katherine M. White, “The Theory of Planned Behavior: Self-Identity, Social Identity and Group Norms,” *The British Journal of Social Psychology* 38 (September 1999): 225–44.

³⁰ Michael A. Hogg, Deborah J. Terry, and Katherine M. White, “A Tale of Two Theories: A Critical Comparison of Identity Theory with Social Identity Theory*,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (December 1995): 5.

³¹ Naomi Ellemers and Floor Rink, “Identity in Work Groups: The Beneficial and Detrimental Consequences of Multiple Identities and Group Norms for Collaboration and Group Performance,” in *Social Identification in Groups*, ed. Shane R. Thye and Edward J. Lawler, vol. 22, *Advances in Group Processes* (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2005), 1–41, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0882-6145\(05\)22001-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0882-6145(05)22001-5).

³² Henri Tajfel, “Social Identity and Intergroup Behavior,” *Social Science Information* 13, no. 2 (April 1, 1974): 65–93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/053901847401300204>.

³³ Th. A. Van Baarda and D. E. M. Verweij, *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare: Counterterrorism, Democratic Values and Military Ethics* (Martinus Nijhoff, 2009), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=489388>.

Acknowledging the role of social identity within cultures is critical for leaders to develop functioning identities within any organization. An effective and successful culture requires strong leadership, accountability, self-assessment, and constant reflection.³⁴ Leaders set the standard of conduct through their own ethical behavior, strengthening interpersonal relationships amongst their followers, and reinforcing the mechanisms of acceptable behavior.³⁵ Individuals must accept the values as their own, believe in the purpose of the organization, and be willing to live by the code. As leaders hold subordinates accountable, the standard of conduct permeates through the organization and solidifies the shared values and assumptions for ethical conduct. Individuals must constantly reassess and reflect on their own morals and values, when all individuals hold the shared norms of the group higher than their own personal beliefs a collective organizational identity is developed creating an effective function for the group.³⁶ Assessing and reflecting on cultural performance and effectiveness is important as values and assumptions can change over time, this a process of symbolic interactionism.³⁷ Change can result from internal influence, such as new leader or commander, or could be from external influence. In all aspects of culture, the individual ethic is thought to be influenced by multiple factors, both internal and external.

When attempting to understand ethical challenges within an organization, one must first assess the culture. Terry et al. suggest “to understand and predict behavior, it is necessary to conceive of the self and the wider social structure as being inextricably linked. As well as being influenced by the wider social structure, the self is conceived as an active creator of social behavior.”³⁸ Thus, when analyzing ethical misconduct within SOCOM

³⁴ Leanne Atwater et al., “Relevance of Culture in Studies of Leadership: Ignored or Dismissed?,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, July 2019, 1–22, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1007/s10490-019-09678-w>.

³⁵ Peter J. Reiley and Rick R. Jacobs, “Ethics Matter: Moderating Leaders’ Power Use and Followers’ Citizenship Behaviors,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 134, no. 1 (2016): 69–81.

³⁶ Tajfel, “Social Identity and Intergroup Behavior.”

³⁷ Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969).

³⁸ Deborah J. Terry, Michael A. Hogg, and Katherine M. White, “The Theory of Planned Behavior: Self-Identity, Social Identity and Group Norms,” *The British Journal of Social Psychology* 38 (September 1999): 225–44.

the cultural norms and values become seemingly as important as the individual ethical development of each operator. The links between culture and ethics should not be ignored, as they are intrinsically linked.

E. SOCOM: REACTING TO CHANGE

The complexities of analyzing origins of ethical behavior within a multi-cultural organization, such as SOCOM, are extremely challenging. SOCOM is unlike any other professional entity in the world. From early uses of special operators in World War II to the GWOT, Americans have relied on SOF to execute some of the most daring and complex missions to ensure U.S. National Security. Upon its official designation as a U.S. Combatant Command in 1987 USSOCOM has remained dedicated to recruiting, assessing, selecting, and developing the most elite special operators in the world poised for global execution on behalf of U.S. national interests, policy, and security.³⁹ The priorities are absolute for SOF operators. As a strategic arm of competition and deterrence for the U.S. Government, healthy civilian-military relationships are vital. These relationships share reciprocal responsibilities by virtue. Just as SOF has been entrusted by the American people to faithfully execute their duties upholding American values, so too has the civilian control been entrusted to execute proper control and authority to include the proper use, employment, and management of the force. The inability to properly maintain these relationships has negatively affected SOCOM in multiple areas.

Two decades of war have led to an unsustainable demand and growth of a force designed to be light and lethal. As SOF has carried the weight of GWOT, they have gone from a traditional supporting force to a supported force. The heavy demand has resulted in a drastically larger force that struggles to maintain its identity. A once-light mobile force now resembles that of their conventional counterparts—overly bureaucratic with a narrow focus. Units that once identified with their specially assigned mission now seem to only speak counterterrorism (CT). Lost in the shuffle of growth and expansion are those

³⁹ USSOCOM, “About USSOCOM,” USSOCOM, 2021, <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>.

individuals that do not know who or what they belong to anymore; cultural identity is a collective mixture and, in some cases, creates a void for sub-cultures to form and persist.

A combat culture that favors combat tours and global presence over all else has seemingly taken over SOCOM.⁴⁰ Anyone and everyone within the command is entangled in an evolving culture that recognizes only one thing: war. Although combat is SOCOM's purpose, it has stifled the development of future human capital to the point a culture without it could not be envisioned. Officers and leaders are promoted on their combat prowess, regardless of leadership attributes. The devotion to tactical skills has led to leaders lacking in strategic thought.⁴¹ These sentiments are not merely opinion, but supported by findings of the SOCOM CR. The demands of war have challenged leaders' abilities to balance the priorities of the mission over their individuals. Arguably, these leaders are caught in their own ethical dilemmas; understanding their decisions could possibly contribute to the misuse of their own force while simultaneously failing to identify a suitable alternative. This thesis is not to suggest SOCOM leaders knowingly or willingly put undue strain on their subordinates, but rather that the culture led many to believe it was the only thing and the right thing to do. The organizational culture has promoted the combat culture at the expense of properly educating and training down to the team level. The stress on the force has been tremendous. A SOF force that has never left the battlefield is starting to show the organizational trauma of war.

The seemingly never-ending war has altered American culture and created a society reliant on its military might. Socially, Americans have become attuned to war; it is background music that people barely recognize. Social boundaries delineating war and peace have become blurry. Americans desire for global prominence has led to the military, specifically SOCOM, becoming the international answer to retain American exceptionalism regardless of the cost.⁴² Rosa Brooks, Georgetown law professor and

⁴⁰ Gina Harkins, "Spec Ops Culture Sets Conditions 'Favorable for Inappropriate Behavior,' 4-Star Says," *Military.Com*, January 28, 2020, sec. Daily News, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2020/01/28/spec-ops-culture-sets-conditions-favorable-inappropriate-behavior-4-star-says.html>.

⁴¹ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*.

⁴² Rosa Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016).

former counselor to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, articulates the change in society through her book pointedly called *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, suggesting American society is more comfortable with military action than state diplomacy.⁴³ The societal pressure of American exceptionalism has led to increased risk, exposure, and reliance on SOF as the new scalpel of foreign policy.⁴⁴ American societies demand for prominence has not only increased SOF exposure on the battlefield, but within the public spotlight as well.

SOCOM involvement in the public sphere may be in part of their own doing as some SOF seek to capitalize on their brand. Movies, books, podcasts, political pundits all clamor for their chance to commodify a force that once believed in the motto “quiet professional”.⁴⁵ SOF individuals’ desire to sell their stories may be a driving force to the public demanding it. The increased public notoriety has created identity conflicts within some SOCOM units as well as increased public exposure to public scrutiny.⁴⁶ A once renowned organization known through stories of heroism in combat has recently found itself defending a reputation against stories of war crimes and unethical conduct. The increased public scrutiny should lead some to wonder if there is an ethics problem in SOF, or a perception problem with SOF? The answer is likely both, and both can arguably be attributed to a misguided culture. A culture that will need to realign not only to regain public trust, but to ensure a transition to future conflicts.

The assumption of future conflict for U.S. forces will likely see a departure from CT focus and a steadfast focus on great powers competition (GPC).⁴⁷ The rise of nation

⁴³ Brooks, 102.

⁴⁴ Siamak Naficy, “American Exceptionalism and the Myth of Abandoned Victory,” *Lobe Log*, October 11, 2019, <https://lobelog.com/american-exceptionalism-and-the-myth-of-abandoned-victory/>.

⁴⁵ Forrest S Crowell, “Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional” (Master’s Thesis, Monterey, Ca, Naval Postgraduate School, 2015).

⁴⁶ David Brennan, “Pentagon to Probe Middle East, Special Forces Law of War Violations amid Biden Review,” *Newsweek*, January 26, 2021, sec. U.S., <https://www.newsweek.com/pentagon-probe-middle-east-special-forces-law-war-violations-biden-review-1564410>.

⁴⁷ John Taft et al., “SOF Culture Is the Mission: Culture Is Key to Special Operations’ Transition to Great Powers Competition,” *Deloitte Insights*, July 15, 2020, <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/industry/public-sector/ethics-in-military-leadership.html>.

states such as China and Russia have forced political and SOCOM leaders to reassess SOF focus for future capability. The transition will likely require a shift in mindset as well as capability. An organization that has been entrenched in the CT fight for twenty years will likely take some time to retrofit a force for a completely new battlefield. The transition will force SOCOM to realign their culture to one focused on the future and away from the past.

A shifting force for tomorrow should understand the affects from the force of yesterday. As the culture of SOF has changed, so too has its ethical foundation. As these two factors are undoubtedly linked, it is unlikely the force can definitively state there are no ethical issues within SOCOM will admitting to cultural issues. This thesis will not definitively determine all the causal reasons why individuals act unethically but will demonstrate there are multiple factors of influence that can contribute to unethical behavior. The future of SOF is not lost. In fact, many SOF operators still live by a higher moral code that many could ever truly understand. Their legacy should not be tarnished by the acts of few; however, unless SOCOM can refocus an eroding culture and realign the values of their operators a stained legacy may inevitably become a reality.

II. A GROWING FANTASY: HOW SPECIAL OPS BECAME THE WEAPON OF CHOICE FOR THE POLITICAL ELITE

A. EARLY COMMANDOS

Wars have existed in society for centuries as a means for political ends.⁴⁸ Wars have reduced empires, toppled governments, and shifted the dominance of power throughout the world. The battlefield is ever evolving and complex, it is the “province of uncertainty,” according to Clausewitz.⁴⁹ Those that seek the advantage in war must first be able to reduce the fog and friction of war. This is accomplished not by might but by intellect, courage, temperament, and character.⁵⁰ It is the embodiment of these talents with a degree of virtuosity that mark a highly developed warrior, Clausewitz refers to this as “military genius”.⁵¹ The incessant desire to develop such military genius is much like the battlefield, ever evolving. A force that quickly and easily adapts to the changing environments is ascendant in the eyes of the political elite. The pursuit of such highly developed and intellectual military genius has come in the way of special operations forces. A specifically tailored and selected group of military professionals designed and developed to operate in extreme and undefined environments. As noted by Admiral William McRaven in his book *Spec Ops*, “spec ops reduce warfare to the simplest level and limit negative effects of chance and uncertainty, whereas large conventional forces are more susceptible to the friction of war.”⁵² Precisely trained, SOF skill sets are niche; the embrace of intellect and innovation enables their combat advantage.

⁴⁸ Richard C. Hall, *Consumed by War: European Conflict in the 20th Century* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=1915145>; Kimberly Hutchings, “Negotiating the Lines between War and Politics: Machiavelli’s Gendering of War and Peace,” *International Politics* 53, no. 4 (July 2016): 519–33, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1057/ip.2016.13>; Carl Boggs, *Origins of the Warfare State: World War II and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315469539>.

⁴⁹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 46, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=4964682>.

⁵⁰ Von Clausewitz, 44.

⁵¹ Von Clausewitz, 44–48.

⁵² William McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York, NY: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1996), 12.

Seeking any advantage in a highly complex war, World War II was the catalyst that prodded U.S. leaders to embrace a specialized method of combat. The U.S. Office of Strategic Studies (OSS) began assessing the development of a special corps of men specifically trained for clandestine and covert operations. The initial assessment found intelligence along with “responsibility, initiative, and common sense” as core traits of a successful operator.⁵³ The OSS initiated their training program modeled after the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). The process was physically demanding and included selective training for specialized skills to include weapons training, espionage, sabotage, and ordinance disposal.⁵⁴ The OSS operators were highly successful throughout WWII and continued to be a national strategic asset utilized by the U.S. Government for years to come until it would formally become known as the Central Intelligence Agency in 1947.⁵⁵ However, the use of special tactics was not exclusive to the OSS in WWII. Political and military leaders alike recognized the strategic advantage to employing conventional assets to conduct specialized missions.

The U.S. began to envision the strategic advantage to empowering unconstrained innovation down to individual tactical units. A bold new concept to support British troops deep into Japanese held territory in the China-Burma-India theatre of WWII was developed and executed by the first Air Commando Group.⁵⁶ The U.S. air groups objective was to covertly penetrate deep behind Japanese lines in order to cut off Japanese communication routes, resupply British soldiers, and fortify strategic locations.⁵⁷ Operation Thursday, as it came to be known, boasted many firsts in combat: it was the first time wounded had been evacuated by aircraft from enemy territory, first night glider assault landing, first use of

⁵³ Office of Strategic Studies, *Assessment of Men: Selection of Personnel for Clandestine Operations* (Laguna Hills, CA: Aegean Park Press, 1948), 12.

⁵⁴ Office of Strategic Studies, *Assessment of Men: Selection of Personnel for Clandestine Operations*.

⁵⁵ John Whiteclaw Chambers, “Office of Strategic Services Training During World War II,” *Studies in Intelligence* 54 (2010).

⁵⁶ Herbert Mason, Randy Bergeron, and James Renfrow, *Operation Thursday: Birth of Air Commandos* (Wright Patterson AFB, OH: Air Force History Museum Project, 1994).

⁵⁷ Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow.

helicopters in combat, first air invasion into enemy territory to name only a few.⁵⁸ Operation Thursday illustrated the strategic advantage to empowering autonomous innovation within a unit. The success of the air commando group not only established what is now AFSOC, but directly influenced the use of special operations for future combat operations.⁵⁹ The innovative solution to a strategic problem verified the potential for success in WWII. Politicians recognized the untapped potential and sought to capitalize on its value and Vietnam provided the ideal environment to promote a future with SOF.

Vietnam was a vastly different war than WWII. U.S. forces, structured to engage in conventional combat, were again faced with strategic problems in a protracted unconventional war. Conventional armies were replaced with guerrilla fighters hidden in the jungle; the environment had adapted. Conventional forces were cumbersome, lacked flexibility, and carried large logistical and bureaucratic burdens, a direct contrast to the guerrilla force they were facing. Again, political leaders turned to special operations to provide solutions. President John F. Kennedy was convinced a smaller, elite force specifically tailored for unconventional warfare was the answer, thus the Army Special Forces (SF) were born.⁶⁰ Bred from OSS tactics and training, Army SF played a pivotal role in targeting guerrilla fighters deep in enemy territory. Land forces were not the only combat capability, however; U.S. leaders understood they must regain the advantage in all domains including water.

Marine maritime assault failures early in the war highlighted the need for specialized maritime units. Navy Underwater Demolition Teams (UDT) had been established in WWII, but rarely used in the tactical environment. UDTs lacked experience and training to precisely execute a special mission set. A greater level of selection and specialized training would be required to fulfill President Kennedy's need in Vietnam, thus

⁵⁸ Hurlburt Field, "Operation THURSDAY" (Hurlburt Field, 2008), <https://www.hurlburt.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/Fact-Sheets/Article/204577/operation-thursday/>.

⁵⁹ Mason, Bergeron, and Renfrow, *Operation Thursday: Birth of Air Commandos*.

⁶⁰ Thomas Adams, U.S. *Special Operations Forces in Action* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishing, 1998).

the Navy SEALs were officially established in 1962.⁶¹ SEAL training was physically and mentally challenging, accessing and accepting only the best of those suited to conduct maritime warfare.⁶² SEALs trained Vietnamese forces for clandestine maritime ops, then transitioned to scouting and recon for U.S. forces, inevitably by 1964 due to war escalation SEALs were conducting maritime assaults on their own.⁶³ The transformation signified the value of stringent selection and training. The pursuit of the *military genius* had taken shape in the form of SOF providing the political elite a new solution to their toughest problems.

SOF generated a new concept of foreign diplomacy for political leaders, perceptually becoming the easy button to solve any foreign issue. Special operations troops found themselves spread out executing anything that resembled counter insurgency (COIN), from the Philippines to training Bolivian soldiers that would later defeat Che Guevara's army of insurgents.⁶⁴ Clear and defined mission sets along with transparency of standards and expectations were key to initial success. However, integrating SOF into a joint force proved to be the biggest challenge, one that would culminate in one of the worst failures by special operations forces to date.

B. BIRTH OF SOCOM

The need to utilize a special mission force quickly emerged when fifty-two Americans were taken from the U.S. Embassy in Iran and held hostage by Iranian Revolutionary supporters. Delta Force, a new unit of elite soldiers had recently been created. Specially selected and trained to combat the growing threat of terrorism with a niche for hostage rescue, Delta was a unit unmatched by its SOF counterparts.⁶⁵ The

⁶¹ T.L. Bosiljevac, *SEALS: UDT/SEAL Operations in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Ivy Books, 1990); Michael Haas, *In the Devil's Shadow: UN Special Operations during the Korean War*. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000).

⁶² Bosiljevac, *SEALS: UDT/SEAL Operations in Vietnam*.

⁶³ Bosiljevac, 27–29.

⁶⁴ Kenneth Finlayson, "Turning the Tables on Che: The Training at La Esperanza," *Veritas* 4, no. 4 (2008).

⁶⁵ Charlie Beckwith and Donald Knox, *Delta Force* (New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., 1985).

hostage rescue, named Operation Eagle Claw would be their first real combat experience, and joint interoperability their first real challenge.

Operation Eagle Claw was one of the most complex and daring rescue attempts ever conducted by U.S. SOF. Due to operation security (OPSEC) reasons initial planning was convoluted and compartmentalized; of all service components involved only a few handpicked staff planners knew of the upcoming mission. Execution would be overly complex, encompassing SOF and conventional forces from every service branch. The distance covered, operating environment, necessity of multiple air, ground, and sea assets, along with the dynamic nature of combat and friction of war proved too much for the force. While refueling at a desert laager site, a maneuvering helicopter hit a static C-130 refueler killing eight people and leaving carnage in the Desert. The mission was aborted with no Americans rescued. The mission attempt is to this day one of the biggest failures the SOF community has endured. The causal factor for the failure was pinned on the inoperability of the joint forces.⁶⁶

The need for a joint service command was abundantly clear. A 1985 staff report to the Committee on Armed Services United States Senate stated “the integration inside the Department of Defense (DOD) needs changed, this due to an internal review of all DOD components. Integration due to multiple factors is strained, a need for a joint service command is necessary.”⁶⁷ Interservice rivalry and competition for budgets and resources resulted in service chiefs wielding their power to create a hostile bureaucratic process.⁶⁸ The DOD had underwent minimal changes in the past century, the system to ensure oversight and compliance was dysfunctional and inadequate.⁶⁹ The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 was enacted, a DOD reorganization that would focus priorities on

⁶⁶ James Kyle and Robert Eidson, *The Guts to Try: The Untold Story of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission By The On-Scene Desert Commander* (New York, NY: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1995).

⁶⁷ Defense Organization: The Need for Change, “Defense Organization: The Need for Change,” 99 Stat. 1969 § AE 2.111 (1985).

⁶⁸ James R. III Locher, *Victory on the Potomac: Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon*. (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2002); Defense Organization: The Need For Change, Defense Organization: The Need For Change.

⁶⁹ Locher, *Victory on the Potomac: Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon*.

interoperability and joint functions and create the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) in April of 1987.⁷⁰ This reorganization would lead to one of the most dominant and lethal special operations organizations in the world; an organization that may have inevitably grown to be a victim of their own success.

Operation Eagle Claw was a stain on the SOF community's reputation and potentially a bigger stain on the political careers of those that ordered it. President Jimmy Carter lost his reelection the following year, many including President Carter insinuating that the failed rescue attempt and the inability to bring Americans home as the main reason.⁷¹ Arguably, many believe had the mission been a success President Jimmy Carter would have been easily reelected. Thus, recognizing an intrinsic link between the political elite and elite warriors exists. Not simply through combat application, but also through public perception and approval. Since the conceptual idea of employing special units in combat, political leaders have been drawn to the conceivable advantage. As SOCOM matured as an organization, their successes grew, and failures were arguably eliminated. Politicians demand for more naturally increased. The relationship appeared to be mutually beneficial; politicians could garner support from their base for having the courage to execute such daring missions and SOF's reputation and influence expanded both in and out of the DOD.⁷² However, the relationship is intricate and requires reciprocity; misaligned values or motives could have adverse effects when the relationship is not properly managed.

C. CIVIL MILITARY AFFAIRS: THE FANTASY OF SPECIAL OPERATIONS

USSOCOM exists as a means to provide national security to the citizens of the United States as an instrument of policy; this relationship is simple in its terms as SOCOM and other services in the DOD are obedient to the needs of the society in which it serves

⁷⁰ Locher.

⁷¹ Kyle and Eidson, *The Guts to Try: The Untold Story of the Iran Hostage Rescue Mission By The On-Scene Desert Commander*.

⁷² Elliot Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (MA: Harvard Center for International Affairs, 1978).

and that the society reciprocates their obligation to the military members themselves.⁷³ The principle reason for the U.S. DOD remaining under civilian control is simple: to ensure the military adheres to the needs of the people and not the other way around. Samuel Huntington, an American political scientist, described this relationship in detail with his book *The Soldier and the State*.⁷⁴ Huntington believed the true and only professionals, the officers, have multiple obligations and responsibilities to maintaining the relationship with the state, one of them prescribed is the ethical conduct of war.⁷⁵ This obligation is key to maintaining the trust of the American people.

Trust of the American public is critical to SOF's survival. This trust starts with honest and transparent advice provided to civilian leaders and ends with the ethical conduct of war.⁷⁶ Trust, loyalty, and obedience are imperative, as Huntington states, to ensure the professional ethic is upheld.⁷⁷ Americans want to know highly influential military leaders are accurately assessing and advising political leaders on the proper use of the force. They want to know the military leaders are advocating a path away from conflict and not war mongers trying to find it.⁷⁸ If war is unavoidable, the American public expects those representing them to act ethically; avoiding atrocities or savage acts that would reflect poorly on American values and culture. Without trust, there is no relationship. Trust must also be reciprocated. Civic leaders also have a duty to the American public and SOCOM leaders to ensure the employment of troops is ethical and calculated.

Politicians should carefully examine their urge to utilize SOF in combat; the decision to conduct special warfare should only be made out of necessity and not out of romantic desires. Although Americans want to believe any decision to engage SOF in

⁷³ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 73.

⁷⁴ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*.

⁷⁵ Huntington, 59–63.

⁷⁶ Nathan K. Finney and Tyrell O. Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2018).

⁷⁷ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 63.

⁷⁸ Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford University Press USA, 2013), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=1154805>.

combat is made purely out of necessity, this may not always be true. Political scientist Elliot Cohen warned of this in 1978 in his book *Politicians and Commandos* stating “elite units of guerrilla, counter guerrilla, and commando type offer politicians in democracies both a tool of policy and source of fantasy.”⁷⁹ Cohen insists the political elite form a romantic connection between themselves and the warrior; the glory and honor displayed by the warrior is reflected in the elitist actions.⁸⁰ The instant gratification of employing special operators brings about success for the politician and the American people all while SOF becomes the American hero.⁸¹ The idea of fantasy is rooted not only in the employment, but creation. President Kennedy is believed to have officially created Army Special Forces and Navy SEALs in Vietnam as a reflection of his own prestigious reputation.⁸² This form of engagement is not only irresponsible but leads to the potential of overuse and over reliance on SOF.

The biggest danger to SOF culture is the misuse of SOF.⁸³ Special operations forces are unique, purpose-built organizations specialized in niche mission sets. SOF provide politicians with unique capabilities to achieve “military, political, economic, or psychological objectives by unconventional means.”⁸⁴ Overextending these assets to cover missions or policy initiatives that could be accomplished by a larger conventional force should be considered misuse of SOF. A 1997 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report to congress on the ‘Opportunities to Preclude the Misuse of SOF’ stated over 60% of the Army, 56% of the Navy, and 86% of the Air Force felt “readiness has been, or

⁷⁹ Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies*, 101.

⁸⁰ Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies*.

⁸¹ Research by psychoanalysts support the idea politicians’ motivations to utilize SOF could be traced to their own cognitive preference. Michel Tibayrenc and Francisco Ayala discuss their research of psychosocial dimensions stating, “the third dimension is hierarchy by the qualities of the person.”⁸¹ These dimensions break into the understanding that people have two internal self’s, the psycho self, and the social self, each driven by different motivations and desires. In this case, people relate to and are drawn to the special operators as they find their qualities to relate to their own psycho self. Tibayrenc and Ayala, *On Human Nature*, 421.

⁸² Adams, U.S. *Special Operations Forces in Action*, 64–67.

⁸³ Susan Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1997), 251.

⁸⁴ *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities to Preclude Overuse and Misuse*, GAO-97-85 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 1997), 1. <https://fas.org/irp/gao/nsi97085.htm>.

threatens to be, adversely affected by the current level of unit deployments.”⁸⁵ There were multiple disparities cited to include utilizing conventional forces in many of the roles SOF were currently being deployed to fill such as embassy support or combat search and rescue.⁸⁶ The report concluded the pace of “SOF operations needed to be measured and assessed relative to national security objectives” along with “identification of the factors that cause SOF personnel to be deployed in excess of established deployment goals.”⁸⁷ Civilian leaders should have recognized at that time the need for an educated consumer that would deliberately request and or employ special operations forces in the exact roles upon which they were designed.⁸⁸

D. THE CRUX OF CONGRESSIONAL OVERSIGHT

Elliot Cohen may have foreseen the future in 1978 when he stated “The future of elite units should be built on the understanding for their existence strict need and use. They should not be used for every solution, a scalpel and not a chainsaw.”⁸⁹ U.S. politicians have arguably done exactly the opposite. The warnings from 1978 have seemingly been ignored, the impact of a congressional body that misunderstood the proper use of a national asset has placed a heavy demand on a force designed to be light and flexible. The increased demand has caused SOF to balloon in size while oversight remains convoluted.

SOCOM was never intended to be its own service command. So, what happens when it grows to become one? A healthy balance of advocacy and oversight are critical to organizational effectiveness. U.S. Government organizations are not the exception to this, rather the rule. Yet, SOCOM lacks in both advocacy and oversight. Why might this be?

The relationship is complicated. SOCOM, a Unified Combatant Command, is unlike any other service branch, developed as a supporting force to conduct only select

⁸⁵ *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities to Preclude Overuse and Misuse*, 8.

⁸⁶ *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities to Preclude Overuse and Misuse*.

⁸⁷ *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities to Preclude Overuse and Misuse*, 10.

⁸⁸ Collin S. Gary, “Handfuls of Heroes on Desperate Ventures: When Do Special Operations Succeed?,” *Parameters* 29, no. Spring (Spring 1999): 2–24.

⁸⁹ Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies*, 99–100.

mission sets. Service components (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps) have a defined command structure. All services report to a civilian secretary that is subordinate to the Secretary of Defense (SECDEF). Civilian secretaries are instrumental in providing policy advice, oversight, and a direct advocate for their service regarding resources and readiness.⁹⁰ SOCOM's command structure is fundamentally different as they are not a component command. There is no service secretary to advocate and advise policy or assign appropriate oversight. Instead, SOCOM reports to the SECDEF for tasking authority while their civilian oversight is established through the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC), who reports to the undersecretary of defense for policy.⁹¹ This may have been sufficient upon SOCOM's inception serving as a much smaller Combatant Command, but is this sufficient for a force that is operating much like a service component today? Undoubtedly the answer was no, and the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) set out to change the reporting structure to realign SOCOM.⁹² The issue, however, has been in the challenges of implementation.

The inability to fully enact the changes of the 2017 NDAA approving the ASD SO/LIC to directly report to the SECDEF has prolonged appropriate oversight issues of SOCOM. A 2019 GAO report for improved congressional oversight found the recommended oversight improvements listed in National Defense Authorization Act of 2017 had yet to be completed, no timelines to implement the recommendations had been established, and roles and responsibilities were unclear.⁹³ Fulfillment of most actions were completed, however, by 2020 appointing the ASD SO/LIC with direct reporting to the Secretary of Defense; this action would make reporting in line with other service

⁹⁰ Meghann Myers and Howard Altman, "Pentagon Shakeup Means More Civilian Oversight for Special Operations," *Military Times*, November 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/11/18/pentagon-shakeup-means-more-civilian-oversight-for-special-operations/>.

⁹¹ Myers and Altman.

⁹² National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 201, Pub. L. No. 114-328 (2016), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/2943/text>.

⁹³ Cary Russell, *Special Operations Forces: Additional Actions Are Needed to Effectively Expand Management Oversight*, GAO-19-386 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2019), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-386>.

branches.⁹⁴ The shift remains convoluted. For example, the issue of SOCOM command relationship was still lingering in a March 2021 congressional hearing on *SOF Culture and Climate: The Future of the Force*. Witnesses testified the structural changes were yet to be fully implemented and without these changes SOCOM civilian leadership was still inadequate to advocate for SOCOM policy initiatives, oversight issues, or overall readiness concerns.⁹⁵ To further complicate the relationship, newly appointed SECDEF Lloyd Austin reversed previous moves to elevate the ASD SO/LIC reporting and repositioned it back within the policy shop. The ASD SO/LIC would report directly to Austin “on administrative issues such as manning, training, and equipping the force” only.⁹⁶ The recent move has been viewed by critics as a way to reduce civilian oversight of SOCOM and preclude SOCOM from becoming a component service command; avoiding the bureaucratic and civilian control that would come with it.⁹⁷

Oversight is not a welcomed term within a SOCOM community that values autonomy and innovation to secure the advantage. Arguably, within the last twenty years SOCOM has enjoyed a degree of autonomy with regards to congressional oversight. Autonomy in execution is not a bad thing for SOF. Navy SEAL Lieutenant Commander William McRaven (subsequently Admiral McRaven, commander of USSOCOM) recounted Army SF units sent to fight the guerrilla resistance in North Luzon Philippines, finding initial bureaucracy and oversight rendered the unit ineffective.⁹⁸ However, once granted autonomy with the access to resources, the unit flourished.⁹⁹ Conversely, limited oversight with absolute autonomy can create adverse organizational affects. Oversight is the function to maintain accountability. A driving mechanism that spurs continued self-

⁹⁴ Russell.

⁹⁵ House of Representative, Congress, *SOF Culture and Climate: The Future of the Force*,” video, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMB2hN49v3U>.

⁹⁶ Betsy Woodruff Swan and Lara Seligman, “Internal Study Highlights Struggle over Control of America’s Special Ops Forces,” *POLITICO*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/05/07/internal-study-defense-special-operations-forces-485825>.

⁹⁷ Swan and Seligman.

⁹⁸ McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, 258–260.

⁹⁹ McRaven, 258–260.

regulation, something the SOCOM CR indicated was lacking within SOCOM. Accountability is healthy for an organization, one of Huntington's notable attributes of a professional organization.¹⁰⁰ Accountability and self-regulation is much like trust, however, in that it must go both ways.

Inability to hold civilian leaders accountable, or a lacking perception of self-regulation within the government erodes the trust of the American public and the military forces they govern equally. Politicians seemingly have transformed from being official's representative of their constituents to a perceived elite social class. "With great power comes great responsibility."¹⁰¹ Overextending SOF forces, mishandling forces, or failing to provide adequate oversight to include managing the health of the force are all examples of irresponsibility. Failing to hold individuals accountable for known issues of irresponsibility will not endow accountability at the lower levels, in fact the opposite is likely. The political elite have a great amount of influence on those they command, should we believe their subordinates will behave differently than those appointed over them?

In both congressional mandated reviews of SOCOM, analysts stated they examined the factors internal and external to the force, yet none of them have mentioned a link between civilian leaders and commandos. Perhaps, this was an attempt to avoid conflict with the very people that requested the review, or previous researchers did not believe a link existed. Regardless, the internal influence of politicians should be acknowledged when addressing the culture of SOF. A power-based relationship requires abundant trust and responsibility to be truly affective.¹⁰² Politicians have placed heavy demands on SOF over the past two decades, arguably more than the organization was designed to take. Obedient to the cause, SOF continued to meet the demand with success. It could be said, SOF has been their own worst enemy. A tradition of success has only brought more work to the force that is already frayed at every seam. Civilian leaders over reliance on SOF, stemming

¹⁰⁰ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*.

¹⁰¹ Stan Lee, "Amazing Fantasy: Spider Man," *Marvel Comics*, August 10, 1962.

¹⁰² Bertram H. Raven and John R. P. French, "Group Support, Legitimate Power, and Social Influence1," *Journal of Personality* 26, no. 3 (1958): 400–409, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1958.tb01595.x>.

from either necessity or fantasy, coupled with dysfunctional command relationships, deficient oversight, and lack of self-regulation has directly influenced the growth and demand on SOF today. These factors directly contribute to a fractured SOCOM culture, one in which the professional ethic should be built upon.

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III. ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH

A. A COST BENEFIT ANALYSIS

USSOCOM has predominantly carried the weight of fighting the War on Terror. U.S. Army Special Forces were among the first U.S. troops into Afghanistan in 2001, working alongside CIA officers to track down the Taliban leadership. The flexibility of SOF and their adaptability to unconventional means proved initially successful in hunting down and defeating Taliban leaders. As U.S. strategy began to shift, however, U.S. political leaders turned their attention to eradicating Al Qaeda and the continued hunt for Osama Bin Laden. Their weapon of choice was again U.S. SOF. The weight and responsibility of the war since that time has only increased and resulted in a substantially larger special ops force today.

As the demand increases and troop numbers rise, many questioned whether SOCOM leaders even believe their own *truths* anymore; one being that “Special Operations Force cannot be mass produced.”¹⁰³ Since 2001, the growth of SOF has ballooned to arguably unsustainable levels. SOCOM manpower has nearly doubled, increasing from 42,800 in 2001 to over 70,000 troops today.¹⁰⁴ The budget has tripled—an increase from \$3 billion in 2001 to over \$9 billion today.¹⁰⁵ SOF deployments have increased dramatically, quadrupling in the past twenty years as SOF now has a footprint in over 90 countries throughout the world.¹⁰⁶ The increase in both manning and funding do nothing to deter the over use or over reliance on SOF, rather, they lead to the expectation of doing more. In 2006, a Quadrennial Defense Review Report ordered USSOCOM to

¹⁰³ “USSOCOM: SOF Truths,” *USSOCOM*, 2021, <https://www.socom.mil/about/sof-truths>.

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Feickert and T.K. Livingston, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report No. RS21048 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2011); USSOCOM, “About USSOCOM.”

¹⁰⁵ Feickert and Livingston, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*; John Pendleton, *Special Operations Forces: Opportunities Exist to Improve Transparency of Funding and Assess Potential to Lessen Some Deployments*, GAO-15-571 (Washington, DC: Government Accountability Office, 2015), <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-15-571>.

¹⁰⁶ Feickert and Livingston, *U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF): Background and Issues for Congress*; USSOCOM, “About USSOCOM.”

grow by 15% to meet global demand and requirements.¹⁰⁷ General J.F. Mulholland, commander of U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) from 2008–2012 stated his command “could only satisfy about 50% of the demand out there.”¹⁰⁸ The demand to grow the force comes at a cost. James Kiras points out “when special operations forces have been used tactically against numerically superior foes, the response historically has been to expand the organizations at the expense of overall quality.”¹⁰⁹ Diminished quality, in the case of SOCOM, has manifested in the bureaucratic processes and organizational management. USSOCOM has grown into an organization it was never intended to be.

Special operations forces provide a flexible option to policy makers, enabling adaptable maneuverability throughout the spectrum of combat operations. An organization bogged down with bureaucracy restricts the freedom of movement and diminishes the innovative employment of special tactics.¹¹⁰ Edward Luttwak argued in his article, *Notes on Low-Intensity Warfare*, that while SOF forces require a certain level of autonomy to be effective, reduced bureaucracy was the advantage to employing special operations over conventional forces.¹¹¹ In its inception, SOCOM was focused on the joint integration of small-scale forces designed for agile employment and quick results. Much of SOF’s initial success is attributed to its small size and a culture focused on specialized core mission sets, something that would change in the post 9/11 era.¹¹²

Since 9/11, SOF seems to be the answer to most all foreign policy problems. Edgar Schein, MIT Sloan School of Management professor, describes this as the basic underlying assumptions of the organization: “when a solution works repeatedly we take it for granted”

¹⁰⁷ Crowell, “Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional.”

¹⁰⁸ Jim Thomas and Chris Dougherty, *Beyond the Ramparts: The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013), 44.

¹⁰⁹ J.D. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy: From World War II to the War on Terrorism* (London, UK: Routledge, 2006), 67.

¹¹⁰ McRaven, *Spec Ops: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*.

¹¹¹ Edward Luttwak, “Notes on Low-Intensity Warfare,” *Parameters*, 1983, 340–41.

¹¹² Locher, *Victory on the Potomac: Goldwater-Nichols Act Unifies the Pentagon*.

and the solution simply becomes “dominant value orientations.”¹¹³ However, the dominant orientations of SOCOM has had dramatic effects on the culture as SOF grew the expectations and mission sets grew as well. Susan Marquis warned of this in her book *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces* (1997) stating that one of the biggest threats to SOF was “over broadening, losing flexibility, losing responsiveness” and that once SOF broadens the focus to other missions it will lose focus on the unifying command.¹¹⁴ SOF requires institutional autonomy, yet must be controlled and specifically employed only for their niche, avoiding unnecessary missions.¹¹⁵ However, within the past five years, USSOCOM has absorbed additional responsibilities as the DOD’s main authority countering violent extremist organizations (CVEO), countering weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and transregional military information support operations.¹¹⁶ A force that was once the master of the niche has become more of the jack of all trades. The focus has begun to depart from specially suited units for specific missions.¹¹⁷ The creation and addition of mission sets combined with unsustainable growth has resulted in lacking operational management and inadequate bureaucratic processes, further affecting the cultural foundation of SOF.

B. LOSING IDENTITY

Bureaucratic processes to manage the larger force and additional mission sets have become overly cumbersome and ineffective. The 2011 *Pressure on the Force and Family* study found SOCOM did not have an appropriate process to monitor its troops personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO).¹¹⁸ Although special operators had been relied on heavily and

¹¹³ Edgar Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 31.

¹¹⁴ Marquis, *Unconventional Warfare: Rebuilding U.S. Special Operations Forces*, 262–64.

¹¹⁵ Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies*.

¹¹⁶ Mark Cancian, “U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020: SOF, Civilians, Contractors, and Nukes,” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*, October 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-military-forces-fy-2020-sof-civilians-contractors-and-nukes>.

¹¹⁷ Iver Johansen, “Special Operations Forces: A Weapon of Choice for Future Operations?,” in *International Military Operations in the 21st Century*, 1st ed. (London, UK: Routledge, 2015).

¹¹⁸ McRaven, *Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) Review*, 1.

deployed in record levels for over ten years, the command was found to be inadequate in appropriately monitoring how often and for how long each individual spent away from their home station. In a 2016 congressional hearing before the House Armed Services Committee, then SOCOM commander, General Joseph Votel stated, “we have continued to pay a lot of attention to our PERSTEMPO of our deployed members, and we, over the last couple of years, with the support of Congress, have been able to get a good process in place where we can manage our PERSTEMPO much better now, so we understand what the deployment tempo of our people are.”¹¹⁹ USSOCOM appeared to be improving its processes until a 2018 GAO report found the DOD along with USSOCOM “did not have complete and reliable data to monitor PERSTEMPO.”¹²⁰ Two years later, the USSOCOM CR indicated the process still was not fixed citing “accountability of force employment are insufficient to accurately account for valid requirements, commitments, actual deployed forces, and define sustainable capacity.”¹²¹

The inability to appropriately manage the force after twenty years of constant deployments does little to build trust amongst organizational leaders with their civilian superiors and subordinates alike. The mismanagement may also indicate other organizational issues. Schein describes culture is built around multiple factors called primary embedding mechanisms, one such factor is “what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control (or what leader do not pay attention to).”¹²² If SOF operators have been constantly deployed for twenty years and the DOD had still not found a way to measure or track the data, this may indicate it was something leaders chose not to pay attention to. The mismanagement of people is not only apparent in its deployment tracking at the organizational level, mismanagement of missions and teams have also impacted the

¹¹⁹ H.R., *Special Operations Forces in an Uncertain Threat Environment*, House of Representatives, 114 Congress (2015), 2015, pt. Statement of General Votel, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-114hhrg94226/html/CHRG-114hhrg94226.htm>.

¹²⁰ Kristy N Kamarek, *Defense Primer: Personnel Tempo (PERSTEMPO)*, CRS Report No. IF11007 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 3.

¹²¹ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*.

¹²² Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 252.

special ops community. The bifurcation of missions and roles without concrete community focus has resulted in an identity crisis and fractured culture.

Cultural identity is created through clearly defined roles and responsibilities with shared goals and established standards of conduct and behavior. As USSOCOM has continued to broaden its mission and method of employment, a fractured identity is appearing throughout the command down to the team level. The shift of identity is directly correlated with the changing culture of SOF operators. Colonel Edward Croot, an Army Special Forces officer, noted the impacts of mission drift in his master's thesis titled *There is an identity crisis in Special Forces: Who are the Green Berets supposed to be?*¹²³ Croot conducted a survey of over 1,200 active-duty SF members to “measure misalignment between established and actual organizational identity” within SF.¹²⁴ Croot found “strategic shifts over the last two decades have changed expectations of SF, and these changes are influencing the culture, behavior, and employment of Green Berets.”¹²⁵ Green Berets, traditionally focused on foreign internal defense (FID), have been used in various roles throughout the GWOT. The broadening of roles caused uncertainty and confusion amongst SF members. Croot's data demonstrated there are three distinct subgroups within SF: those that identify with a direct action (DA) identity, those with a legacy identity, and almost half that have formed their own modern identity.¹²⁶ The concept of sub-identities is consistent with Schein's cultural models explaining “with growth will come differentiation into various subgroups, which will, over time, evolve in their own cultures requiring new responses from the organization.”¹²⁷ The fragmentation within SF has caused subsets of values and shared assumptions amongst individuals without a guiding mechanism to center the organization. The cultural issues seem to be consistent with the

¹²³ Edward Croot, “There Is an Identity Crisis in Special Forces: Who Are the Green Berets Supposed to Be?” (Masters Thesis, Duke University, 2020).

¹²⁴ Croot, 24.

¹²⁵ Croot, 1.

¹²⁶ Croot.

¹²⁷ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 273.

latest CR as well, and likely not secluded to SF.¹²⁸ Many of the cultural issues SOCOM is experiencing have their roots in the recruitment, selection, and assessment of special operators.

Identifying the right people is essential to any high functioning organization. Recruiting, selecting, and assessing individuals to fill special operator roles is a necessity for SOCOM and one of the most important aspects to building a unified culture. Assessment and selection reinforce and define the groups boundaries, becomes a consensus among the group of who is in and who is out.¹²⁹ The clear delineation of what is expected to enter the group implants the defined values of the group and culture collectively. However, what happens when a group is forced to grow beyond the means of adequately assessing and selecting the individuals? This was the focus of recent congressional research when they posed the question to USSOCOM how much larger the organization could grow before modifying standards to account for the larger force?¹³⁰

Pressure to produce additional special operators can have detrimental effects on the organizational culture. Much like what the Green Berets are currently experiencing, when individuals are allowed to enter the group with prior assumptions and beliefs inconsistent with the organizational core values, then smaller subgroups will appear.¹³¹ As more subgroups exist within an organization, the collective identity shared amongst members begins to shift, allowing norms and values to permeate the organization that are incongruent with overall organizational espoused values.¹³² The mass production of SOF, however, has resulted in multiple organizational issues that erode the identity and culture of today's special operators.

¹²⁸ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*.

¹²⁹ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

¹³⁰ Cancian, "U.S. Military Forces in FY 2020."

¹³¹ Croot, "There Is an Identity Crisis in Special Forces: Who Are the Green Berets Supposed to Be?"

¹³² Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 310.

IV. PROMOTING A CULTURE OF WAR

A. AN ORGANIZATION STUCK IN WAR

Organizational culture is shaped and cultivated by the shared beliefs and assumptions of the group. It is what leaders pay attention to, what they communicate and promote both verbally and non-verbally.¹³³ Shared values and beliefs create the group identity and influence the ethical foundation of the entire organization. Edgar Schein believed “culture begins with leaders who impose their own values and assumptions on a group.”¹³⁴ Simply put, the shared values and ethical culture of the operators at the bottom of the chain, or team level, are a direct reflection of the commanding officers and civil leaders imposing their own values and assumptions over them. Therefore, to better understand the cultural issues within SOCOM it is important to first examine what SOCOM leaders’ values are and how they shape a culture within SOF.

“Humans are more important than hardware” and “quality is better than quantity” - two SOF truths that prescribe institutional values and assumptions for SOCOM.¹³⁵ Senior leaders often quote these truths; posture statements, speeches, and even congressional testimony regularly emphasize these values as concrete. Gen Joseph Votel, Commander USSOCOM from 2014–2016, reinforced these sentiments when he stated before the House Armed Services Committee in 2015 the top priority of SOCOM: “First, we must ensure SOF readiness by developing the right people, skills, and capabilities to meet future—current and future requirements. To this end, we want to ensure effectiveness now and into the future with the very best SOF operators and support personnel enabled by the best technology and capabilities we can field.”¹³⁶ Developing and retaining human capital has been and remains at the forefront of many SOF leaders’ minds as it is the direct link to future readiness and combat effectiveness. Current SOCOM commander, Army General

¹³³ Schein.

¹³⁴ Schein, 2.

¹³⁵ “USSOCOM: SOF Truths.”

¹³⁶ H.R., pt. Statement of General Votel.

Richard Clark, recently re-emphasized the importance of human capital stating “the foundations of SOCOM readiness is our superior assessment, selection, training, education and talent management.”¹³⁷ The expressed emphasis on operator health and readiness is positive. Thus, the issue within SOF culture is not what is said in principle, but rather what is done (or not done) in practice.

Organizations that focus solely on the ends tends to neglect the means; the product becomes more important than the process. Corporations have understood this concept for some time. Focusing only on profit can erode the culture of the organization and lead to reduced workforce morale while bleeding organizational talent to other competitors.¹³⁸ In the case of SOCOM, war is the product and a narrow focus on this has caused the organizational process of developing those that conduct it to suffer. Deployments and combat experience became the benchmark upon which individuals were measured and promoted. The broadening and development of human capital was impeded by a disproportionate focus on combat. Mismanaged processes increased the bureaucratic thrash and pushed many operators out.¹³⁹ The misguided focus resulted in a force that overvalued a culture of combat while failing to recognize the impact on its own people.

War became the culture for special operators. Growth to the potential detriment of foundational truths, or values, became the norm, combat the standard, and number of deployments the measurement criteria. An institutional bias towards combat was created. Those with tactical skill and combat experience formed the in-group while those officers and leaders that wished to accept career broadening opportunities away from the battlefield were largely cast to the out-group.¹⁴⁰ Senior leaders accentuated the bias both by action and inaction; either creating additional deployment billets themselves or failing to vet

¹³⁷ Mandy Mayfield, “NEWS FROM SOFIC: New SOCOM Leader Lays Out Command Priorities,” National Defense Magazine, May 2019, <https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2019/5/21/new-socom-leaders-lays-out-command-priorities>.

¹³⁸ Ladan Nikravan, “Focus on the Means, Not the Ends,” *Chief Learning Officer*, October 22, 2015, <https://www.chieflearningofficer.com/2015/10/22/focus-on-the-means-not-the-ends/>.

¹³⁹ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales From the Pentagon*, 327.

¹⁴⁰ Brooks; USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*; Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

current SOF deployment billets.¹⁴¹ Deployment taskings were specifically written to gain or retain SOF forces regardless of necessity.¹⁴² Requirements specified a SOF activity (e.g. CT), knowing that the ultimate intent upon deployment into theatre was to use that force as either presence, or for another SOF activity (e.g. FID).¹⁴³ Deployment billets were not validated between cycles to confirm the continued need or use.¹⁴⁴ High operations tempo became normalized behavior, lending to the underlying assumption that it is just what SOF does and what they signed up for. Arguably, senior leaders did not knowingly or intentionally mismanage their organizations operations tempo. However, as demands increased perhaps the combat culture was the natural reaction to a force that does not say no. Regardless, combat culture has had cascading effects throughout the force. Implementing the commands main priorities of human capital development has been challenging in part due to promoting the combat culture that disrupts it.

In a recent Pew Research Poll 61% of officers and 57% of non-commissioned officers believed deployments were a positive factor in their advancement in the military.¹⁴⁵ If group members can correlate career advancement and promotion with combat experience, whether the phenomenon be real or perceived, then a categorical assessment is made that the two are inter-related. The relationship provides the motivation to promote a continued combat culture. The motivation may also explain the willingness to create and fill additional deployment billets while justifying the cost to the force out of

¹⁴¹ *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 26.

¹⁴² USSOCOM, 26.

¹⁴³ USSOCOM, 26.

¹⁴⁴ USSOCOM, 26.

¹⁴⁵ Kim Parker et al., “Views of Post-9/11 Military Veterans,” *Pew Research Center*, September 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/09/10/the-american-veteran-experience-and-the-post-9-11-generation/>.

necessity regardless of futility.¹⁴⁶ The CR stated “USSOCOM must manage the institutional bias towards employment, and reclaim resources for investment in other key areas, by applying leadership, discipline and accountability to force employment processes and business rules.”¹⁴⁷ This statement is critical as it potentially defines exactly what SOCOM is not doing that led to the combat culture; SOCOM not only motivates leaders to promote the culture, it discourages them to challenge it.

To counter a motivation SOCOM leaders need to reinforce the behavior they do want. Reinforcement, both positive and negative, tends to be most effective method to encourage acceptable behavior.¹⁴⁸ The SOCOM CR found, to some degree, the opposite was happening. Leaders were not held accountable for failing to develop their human capital at the expense of countless deployments, they were positively rewarded with promotions. On the contrary, a perception exists that if you do go against the current culture you will be punished or reprimanded. Rosa Brooks refers to this as a “zero defect culture,” insinuating SOCOM has created a culture that rewards conformity and punishes creativity.¹⁴⁹ Although leaders’ “campaign on flexibility and innovation, nothing changes.”¹⁵⁰ Readiness and combat became the absolutes. Any perceived obstacles or barriers to these priorities should be remedied at the lowest levels, if not those leaders responsible may then be held accountable. Accountability in this case negatively reinforces the behavior SOCOM leaders do want. Meghann Meyers supports this idea in her Military

¹⁴⁶ In their book *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare: Counterterrorism, Democratic Values, and Military Ethics* authors Th.A. van Baarda and D.E.M. Verweij discuss command responsibilities to their troops to ensure ethical decision making on and off the battlefield. In the book they state, commanders have multiple responsibilities “to include that commanders base their O plans on reasonable assumptions, adequately provide for likely contingencies, and that soldiers will not be placed needlessly in untenable situation.” Needlessly placing troops on the battlefield is not only irresponsible it neglects the obligations of officers to ensuring the basic needs of their subordinates are met. Van Baarda and Verweij, *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare*, 215.

¹⁴⁷ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 6.

¹⁴⁸ Sotiris Papadopoulos et al., “Behavior Selection Using Utility-Based Reinforcement Learning in Irregular Warfare Simulation Models;,” *International Journal of Operations Research and Information Systems* 4, no. 3 (July 2013): 61–78, <https://doi.org/10.4018/joris.2013070105>.

¹⁴⁹ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, 323–24.

¹⁵⁰ Brooks, 323–24.

Times article *Special Operations Has an Entitlement Problem, Here's how they intend to fix it* claiming, “in practice, leaders often hesitate to deal with a problem, either because they are afraid of punching a hole in their formation and blowing their readiness for combat, or because they are afraid that misconduct in their formation will be a black mark on their career advancement.”¹⁵¹ The behavior SOCOM leaders have positively reinforced created a culture prone to combat. However, the counter to this idea is that society should want SOCOM focused on war, it is their job. Why not promote a combat culture? If SOCOM is not focused on tactical prowess and lethality then what should it be focused on?

Promoting combat proven leaders is not the measurement criteria out of fantasy, but a matter of necessity. To effectively fight and win on the battlefield, you select and promote leaders that are capable of fighting and winning wars. Leaders begin to be chosen or promoted based on their tactical prowess and combat experience regardless of their overall leadership ability.¹⁵² SOF operators want to be surrounded by the best and if combat is the only thing valued then the person with the most experience is highly sought after. Combat is a struggle for survival, you fight or face cultural extinction. The evolutionary forces favoring heroism in combat is the reason combat proven leaders are essential to the combat culture—they provide the reassurance of survival.¹⁵³ To a degree, this evidence all supports promoting combat leaders and war culture is not to the detriment of SOCOM; however, if not properly managed the culture has potential to extend beyond the bounds of altruistic motivations into a culture of unethical misconduct. SOF should be focused on tactical excellence, but not to the detriment of developing future human capital. The success of SOCOM relies on a holistic approach to the force development, how SOCOM develops leaders is just as important as who.

¹⁵¹ Meghann Myers, “Special Operations Has an Entitlement Problem. Here’s How They Intend to Fix It,” *Military Times*, January 30, 2020, sec. Breaking the Cycle, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/01/28/special-operations-has-an-entitlement-problem-heres-how-they-intend-to-fix-it/>.

¹⁵² Myers, “Special Operations Has an Entitlement Problem. Here’s How They Intend to Fix It.”

¹⁵³ Oleg Smirnov et al., *Heroism in Warfare* (Hendricks Symposium-Department of Political Science: Paper 3, 2006).

B. LEADERSHIP TO PROMOTION, OR PROMOTING LEADERSHIP

The development of future officers and leaders is potentially the most important element to restoring the cultural ethic of SOCOM. Paradoxically, the evolution of developing former and current leaders has also been one of the largest contributors to the erosion of the culture. The challenge, like others when addressing cultural issues within SOCOM, is complex and in part a by-product of two decades of war. Traditional values such as professional military education (PME) or career broadening outside combat roles has been neglected and at time discouraged, which only exacerbates a combat culture. The biggest hurdle SOCOM must contend with in developing future leaders is defeating its own self-fulfilling prophecy, a war only focus creates only war focused leaders.

Commanders at all levels are at the forefront of developing and maintaining an effective culture that upholds the professional military values. Military professionals have a far more complex problem set that distinguishes them from other professions within society, violence is their craft.¹⁵⁴ The management of violence requires a high level of expertise, as Huntington points out “it is not a skill which can be mastered simply by learning existing techniques, it is in a continuous process of development, and it is necessary for the officer to be aware of his development and be aware of its main tendencies and trends.”¹⁵⁵

Officers have two obligations they must fulfill. First, officers are responsible for the ethical conduct of war and ensuring their subordinates are held accountable to the same.¹⁵⁶ Failure to properly develop leaders to discharge these duties on behalf of the society will threaten the public trust of those they are charged to serve. The second obligation is to their subordinates. Officers are entrusted with the care of those they lead,

¹⁵⁴ Samuel Huntington stated in his book *The Soldier and the State* (1957) “the direction, operation, and control of human organization whose primary function is the application of violence is a peculiar skill of the officer.” The book was one of the first to address the military as a profession, in which Huntington prescribed the attributes that constituted being labeled as such. The book is still relevant today, as it distinguishes the professional conduct of the military officer. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 11.

¹⁵⁵ Huntington, 13–14.

¹⁵⁶ Van Baarda and Verweij, *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare*, 214.

ensuring the basic needs of their subordinates are met to include physical well-being, mental health, and moral development.¹⁵⁷ The challenge many officers face is how to balance these two obligations. The report assessed “SOCOM’s cultural focus on SOF employment and mission accomplishment is to the detriment of leadership, discipline, and accountability.”¹⁵⁸ At multiple levels, leadership within SOCOM has been compromised by two generations of war.

The demands of war have caused a myopic leadership culture within SOCOM, there are those that are in and essentially those that are forced out. Officers that accepted career opportunities away from the battlefield are removed and placed in the out-group. The in-group, or combat proven leaders, gain influence within the organization and naturally pick those most like them to mentor. Over time, those that rebuffed the combat culture are forced out and only those with cooperating behavior remain. In effect, creating an evolutionary cycle of convergent thought processes, or similar mindsets that rarely disagree with acceptable solutions or outcomes. Convergent thought stifles the innovation from external ideas and only allows the in-group identity to become stronger.¹⁵⁹ An organization that embraces innovation slowly succumbs to an insular thought paradigm. The bureaucratic process naturally takes over and you begin to see a cycle of similar leadership models.

Selective retention of combat-minded folk lead to retention and bias towards more like-minded junior officers. Senior officers develop an unconscious bias towards combat leaders based on their own life experience.¹⁶⁰ Senior leaders pick and promote junior officers that share similar markers to their own careers, in affect creating a prestige bias within the organization.¹⁶¹ This idea is part of human psychology. People are drawn to

¹⁵⁷ Van Baarda and Verweij, 214.

¹⁵⁸ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 7.

¹⁵⁹ Think JSOU, *The “Jaws Exercise”- What SOCOM Design Students Experience in the First Hour of Design Education*, Video, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kf_IQ5uCS8g.

¹⁶⁰ Steve Cranford, “The Pursued, the Pursuing, and Unconscious Prestige Bias,” *Matter* 2, no. 5 (May 6, 2020): 1065–67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.matt.2020.04.008>.

¹⁶¹ Maciej Chudek et al., “Prestige-Biased Cultural Learning: Bystander’s Differential Attention to Potential Models Influences Children’s Learning,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 33, no. 1 (January 2012): 46–56, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evolhumbehav.2011.05.005>.

others that they believe share similar traits.¹⁶² In a sense, we see a reflection of ourselves and by promoting that we are therefore justifying and promoting our own values throughout the organization.¹⁶³ Edgar Schein suggests the promotion of similar mindsets within an organization is normal, but warns it leads to special treatment rules forming within the organization. Schein suggested “insiders (combat proven leaders as it applies to SOCOM) get special benefits, are trusted more, get higher basic rewards, and most important get a sense of identity for belonging to a defined organization. Outsiders get labeled and treated with indifference and hostility.”¹⁶⁴ The SOCOM CR cited multiple instances where SOF leaders valued and promoted combat experience above all else, “from accession pipelines to their first SOF units, SOF personnel are encouraged to emulate those who have tactical deployment experience,” “in return, those who did deploy forward, specifically in some degree of combat, are held as almost an infallible standard bearer for the rest of the organization to emulate, seemingly regardless if it is a positive or negative standard.”¹⁶⁵ The institutional bias towards combat experience is evident within SOCOM. The challenge for SOCOM, however, will be balance. SOF should have a bias towards combat, but not to the detriment of its future human capital.

Simply placing someone in a position of authority or telling them they are a leader does not constitute leadership. Developing leaders to understand how their use of influence and power can create or change an organization is crucial to fostering a healthy organizational climate. A 1959 research project conducted by social psychologist Bertram Raven and John French set to distinguish how leaders use of power could influence subordinate’s behavior within the group. French and Raven’s results suggest leaders use of

¹⁶² The University of Kansas, “Study Finds Our Desire for ‘like-Minded Others’ Is Hard-Wired,” *The University of Kansas*, February 19, 2016, <https://news.ku.edu/2016/02/19/new-study-finds-our-desire-minded-others-hard-wired-controls-friend-and-partner>.

¹⁶³ Miao-Kun Sun, ed., *Cognitive Sciences Research Progress* (New York, NY: Nova Science Publishers, Incorporated, 2008), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=3018403>; Viren Swami, “Most of Us Tend to Be Attracted to People Who Are Similar to Ourselves,” *PsyPost*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.psypost.org/2017/03/us-tend-attracted-people-similar-48596>; “Study Finds Our Desire for ‘like-Minded Others’ Is Hard-Wired.”

¹⁶⁴ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 118; Tajfel, “Social Identity and Intergroup Behavior.”

¹⁶⁵ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 34.

expert (task-relevant knowledge), referent (admiration and attraction to the leader), or reward (rewarding obedience) positively impacted followers ethical behavior when the followers perceived these leaders to be more ethical.”¹⁶⁶ The study demonstrates that the ethical actions of leaders play a large role not only in the effectiveness of the organization, but the ethical conduct of subordinates as well.¹⁶⁷ Perceived ethical conduct of leaders is established through their actions to both superiors and subordinates. Their actions and perceived motivations for action are as important as their form of power utilized to gain obedience of followers.

Openness, transparency, and honesty are among the key attributes of effective leaders. To be effective, a leader must not only analyze the subordinates within his authority but his own behavior openly and honestly. Establishing a higher level of emotional intelligence (EQ) has shown to positively impact leadership effectiveness and job performance.¹⁶⁸ Higher levels of EQ among leaders not only increased effectiveness, it improved followers’ perceptions of their leaders ethical behavior.¹⁶⁹ Applied to the French and Raven study, increasing perceived ethical conduct of leaders will have a positive impact on ethical conduct of followers, thus training leaders to better understand their own EQ will positively impact the ethical conduct of the organization. Leaders with higher levels of EQ also exhibit more openness and transparency when dealing with problems.¹⁷⁰ Leaders more likely to be open and transparent of internal issues could reduce

¹⁶⁶ Reiley and Jacobs, “Ethics Matter,” 2; Bertram H. Raven, “The Bases of Power and the Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence,” *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* 8, no. 1 (2008): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1530-2415.2008.00159.x>.

¹⁶⁷ Raven, “The Bases of Power and the Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence.”

¹⁶⁸ Jacob Joseph, Kevin Berry, and Satish Deshpande, “Impact of Emotional Intelligence and Other Factors on Perception of Ethical Behavior of Peers,” *Journal of Business Ethics*, no. 89 (2009): 539–46.

¹⁶⁹ Joseph, Berry, and Deshpande.

¹⁷⁰ Huntington notes of a German officer that presented egotism at all levels. Egotism, or the inability to recognize one’s fault rather believe their own way of thinking superior, “is beyond all doubt the most bitter enemy of the qualities essential to the officer-corps” according to Huntington. EQ should be viewed as the emotional self-awareness that could ensure egotism is not apparent within officer conduct. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 64.

disciplinary problems within their organization some social experts believe.¹⁷¹ Transparency when dealing with issues can build the trust of followers in their leaders' decisions and establish a healthy culture of self-regulation and accountability.¹⁷²

A close-minded approach to issues reduces internal trust and promotes a culture of apathy to specific problems. Open recognition of today's challenges has the potential to empower future leaders and embrace divergent thought to collectively provide solutions in a growing complex environment. Future SOCOM leaders should be capable of conducting critical decisions in dynamic environments, cautious of over valuing competing priorities, and humble in their use of authority. Twenty years of unconventional war has altered our traditional command and control (C2) structures. Critical decisions with strategic impacts have been forced down too much lower levels; younger officers and NCO's now shoulder more of the responsibility to ensure our national policy objectives are executed within the bounds of acceptable ethical conduct.¹⁷³ Commanders and senior non-commissioned officers should focus more on institutional issues. Their ability to relate to military values over specialized experience should function as the foundation of the professional military ethic to their subordinates.¹⁷⁴ Modern warfare requires more of officers and leaders than just being managers of violence, as the landscape of future conflict appears to be a much broader concept of innovation through competition.¹⁷⁵ Future operating environments require officers that encompasses analytical skill in a myriad of situations, capable of mentoring and building subordinates below them. Such efforts to address officer development are currently underway in the Army.

¹⁷¹ Gina Harkins, "SOCOM Must Make These Changes as It Reviews Ethics Problems, Operators and Experts Say," *Military.Com*, August 16, 2019, sec. Daily News, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/08/16/socom-must-make-these-changes-it-reviews-ethics-problems-operators-and-experts-say.html>.

¹⁷² Andrew Bibb, "It's Not Coddling to Care: Why 'Engaged Leadership' Creates Stronger Military Units," *Modern War Institute*, April 9, 2021, </its-not-coddling-to-care-why-engaged-leadership-creates-stronger-military-units/>.

¹⁷³ Finney and Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics*, 49.

¹⁷⁴ Morris Janowitz, *The New Military: Changing Patterns of Organization* (Chicago, IL: Russel Sage Foundation, 1967).

¹⁷⁵ Finney and Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics*.

The Army has taken a step forward in their promotion of leaders with the Army capstone concept which empowers operational adaptability. The concept has changed the way in which battalion commanders are selected and promoted, adding subordinate statements as qualifiers for potential promotion.¹⁷⁶ The concept still draws on written performance reviews, but now leaders must contend with how well their leadership was perceived at lower levels. The idea of accepting subordinate comments not only adds a layer of accountability for the officer candidate but demonstrates the Army's value of subordinate input. AFSOC has progressed as well in their talent management of senior officers, offering their best talent up to other major commands within the Air Force. AFSOC command leaders believe it provides opportunity to broaden their top officers and subsequently place remaining officers in leadership positions that otherwise would not have been granted leadership opportunities.¹⁷⁷ AFSOC's initiative reinforces the importance of developing future officers for a broader context within the military, Although many of these high-powered officers (HPO) have been raised in the combat culture the best way to balance their desires and cultural bias is to expose them to the other institutional operating environments. The changes within specific SOCOM communities should be viewed as necessary change based on past assessment. Although changes in officer development have begun, the future of human capital will be short sighted without a thorough emphasis on a key element of development—education.

C. TRAINING AND EDUCATION: DEVELOPING HUMAN CAPITAL THROUGH COMBAT

The human capital within SOCOM is what provides the competitive advantage over our nation's adversaries.¹⁷⁸ How that human capital is developed can be the difference between winning and losing; in essence it is what makes SOCOM special. Developing special operators starts with education and training. For many, it is the first glimpse into an elite organization they have longed to be a part of. Initial training should be the cornerstone

¹⁷⁶ Benjamin Ordiway, "Fixing the Problem: Integrating Virtue Ethics into U.S. Special Operations Forces Selection, Education, and Training.," *Small Wars Journal*, July 2020.

¹⁷⁷ *AFSOC Strategic Guidance 2020* (Hurlburt Field, Fl: AFSOC, 2020).

¹⁷⁸ AFSOC

of SOF development establishing the value of high standards and professional conduct. Yet for many, this may be the origins of a SOF culture that is overly focused on combat.

Many SOF units disproportionately value force employment over force generation (FORGEN).¹⁷⁹ The FORGEN process is the training environment that prepares operators for combat and broadens career opportunities. It is the initial pipeline training, the tactical skills training, and developmental education that broadens and develops the human capital of the force. Yet, in large part SOCOM has undervalued the FORGEN process. Critical instructor manning for FORGEN institutions has been stripped in order to fill additional deployment billets. The lack of highly experienced or even highly distributed training staff establishes an organizational assumption to initial trainees; employment is more important than development. Comparing the process to that of AFSOC's talent management of officers, in which commanders believe allowing top talent to grow from abroad creating positions for other officers to step in to, the same logic could be applied to talent within the FORGEN process. A resolute process that stipulates training instructors would not be removed would not only reinforce the importance of training but would enable SOF operators to gain experience and responsibility on the battlefield. Restoring discipline to the FORGEN process not only emphasizes its value, but it reinforces a culture that values human development from the start of SOF operator's career.

Combat culture not only interrupted the FORGEN process, but it also influenced the training priorities and contributed to a force shortsighted on CT. The CR found most all training environments focused solely on CT and direct action (DA) as core activities.¹⁸⁰ Arguably, this is largely attributable to the culture of what SOF knows and driven by current combat requirements. Regardless, the singular focus has impacted the ability for purposefully assigned teams to conduct traditional missions. The identity crisis within SF, as Col Croot suggests over 50% of SF currently identifies with a DA culture, can trace its roots back to the initial FORGEN cycle.¹⁸¹ Evidence from the CR may support Col.

¹⁷⁹ *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 29.

¹⁸⁰ USSOCOM, 39.

¹⁸¹ Croot, "There Is an Identity Crisis in Special Forces: Who Are the Green Berets Supposed to Be?"

Croot's claim, citing "while conducting FID missions to Build Partner Capacity (BPC) in support of GCC Commanders, the force exhibits-at time-high risk behavior which has contributed to some of the recent incidents of misconduct and unethical behavior."¹⁸² A SOF unit that cannot conduct one of its core tasks should be a stark warning to leaders within SOCOM of the issues within their FORGEN process. The issues within SF should also be an indicator of how much influence the FORGEN cycle can have on the force as a potential creator of alternate identities within a SOF unit. The potential for this influence to change a community should impede their willingness to continually interrupt it. The restoration of SOF core activities outside COIN and CT operations should be a priority for SOCOM commanders. Realigning a cultural focus on combat after twenty years of war will require a transformation of the force. The key to transformation may lie in reviving the emphasis on education.

Professional development of SOF is the key to producing intellectual capital within the force. Morris Janowitz, American political scientist, argues "career development of officers education thus plays a more critical role than specific training."¹⁸³ Although still true today, this statement now must include NCO's as they have become key decision makers on the battlefield. Regardless, the development of human capital relies on the education instilled in them. Arguably, no other profession promotes the importance of education more than the U.S. Military. Every officer must obtain a bachelor's degree at a minimum, and a master's degree is highly desired for field grade officers and required for colonel.¹⁸⁴ Each service has their own dedicated universities. PME is required at intermediate levels as individuals progress in rank. SOCOM has their own research and education arm in Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) that ties into most service universities. On the surface, it is hard to imagine a profession that places more emphasis

¹⁸² USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 39.

¹⁸³ Janowitz, *The New Military: Changing Patterns of Organization*, 51.

¹⁸⁴ James Joyner, "Soldier-Scholar (Pick One): Anti-Intellectualism in the American Military," *War on the Rocks*, August 25, 2020, <http://warontherocks.com/2020/08/soldier-scholar-pick-one-anti-intellectualism-in-the-american-military/>.

on education. Below the surface, we see a culture that views education more akin to checking a box, and a distraction from real military employment.¹⁸⁵

The CR found in most cases “SOF personnel who had not yet attended PME did not perceive it as being worthwhile.”¹⁸⁶ Time away from the tactical environment was a dissuading narrative as SOF personnel already spend more time on average in training pipelines. Most individuals recognize school only as an indicator for promotion, not an opportunity to broaden their intellectual capacity.¹⁸⁷ Among the officer ranks, this indicator is strongest if you are selected for in-residence intermediate developmental education (IDE) or senior developmental education (SDE). All other non-selected officers are encouraged to complete schooling in correspondence (online). The motivation to spend your nights online, when you already operate in a high ops tempo environment, is low. The motivation is lower when individuals associate the online version with not getting promoted or not on track for command. Senior leaders have even hinted that it is just a box to check—an exercise of clicking through the slides to just get it done is acceptable.¹⁸⁸ Even those selected for in-residence education are highly decorated combat veterans, simply capping off the education requirement as a promotion requirement. The sentiment has led many to question the intentions of educational requirements. Do they exist to create a more strategic focused force, or are they merely another block to be used a discriminator for promotion?

Education should be an institutional value and more than just a written requirement. Asking members to spend additional time checking a box will not instill the cultural value of education among their subordinates. In the 2018 National Defense Strategy, Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis stated, “professional military education has stagnated, focused more on the accomplishment of mandatory credit at the expense of lethality and ingenuity.”¹⁸⁹ As the future of conflict evolves, SOCOM will require strategically minded scholars with

¹⁸⁵ Joyner.

¹⁸⁶ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 35.

¹⁸⁷ Finney and Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics*.

¹⁸⁸ Joyner, “Soldier-Scholar (Pick One).”

¹⁸⁹ Joyner, para. 16.

not only the combat capacity but intellectual capacity to outthink their adversaries.¹⁹⁰ Formal PME courses cannot be just an extension of CT tactics and thought. They should provide a deeper understanding of any operating environment, provide the tools for future leaders to be innovative thinkers and decision makers. The development of intellectual capital at all levels plays an important role in not only producing strategic thinkers for future war applications but can have a direct impact on the ethical conduct of the force.

Education is not limited to PME courses and earning college credits. The decisions operators make every day are a direct reflection of their unit driven education and training. Much of the education SOF personnel get is informal or directed at the local level. Hours of computer-based training (CBT) modules are required along with face-to-face training requirements. Arguably, the restoration of the ethical foundation should start at the individual level. Huntington stressed professionals “must self-develop, be accountable, and self-regulate,” all “expectations start at the individual level.”¹⁹¹ Although leaders’ actions and decisions play a role in establishing the ethical culture of the group, the individual is inevitably responsible. The role of ethics training and education at the lowest levels could provide the additional awareness within the organization to establishing a healthy ethical culture. A focus on ethical conduct would not only develop individual character but strengthen organizational cohesion and build character amongst small groups.¹⁹² Ethical training should not only serve to better prepare SOF operators for combat but could provide additional layers of analysis for leadership roles and opportunities as individuals progress through the ranks.

There are multiple benefits to organizational ethics training, however, the most important could be the additional awareness and education to better understand situational factors that could potentially lead to unethical behavior. As evidence suggests, unethical behavior can be a result of internal values or be a reaction to social environments. An

¹⁹⁰ Linda Robinson, “The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces” (New York, NY: Council on Foreign Relations, April 2013).

¹⁹¹ Finney and Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics*, 176–78; Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*.

¹⁹² Ordiway, “Fixing the Problem: Integrating Virtue Ethics into U.S. Special Operations Forces Selection, Education, and Training.”

individual may internally believe something is immoral but feel justified to participate if the social group presents the behavior as acceptable. Cultures can heavily influence moral and ethical behavior of individuals. A combat culture with repeated exposure to violence and high stress can produce a ripe environment for unethical conduct, which is arguably the exact environment many SOF operators live in.

D. THE COST OF A HIGH STRESS ENVIRONMENT

The operating environment in which SOF conducts its missions is undoubtedly highly stressful. High stress environments have been shown to increase the potential for unethical misconduct, negatively affect individual's mental health, and reduce moral reasoning.¹⁹³ Post-traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD) expert Jonathan Shay suggests "persistent mobilization for danger and twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week vigilance in the form of mental and physical preparation for attack is a form of duress that can impact moral choice."¹⁹⁴ Knowing that SOF deployments have quadrupled in the past twenty years would also provide some insights of the extent operators are placed in a high-stress environment.¹⁹⁵ Acknowledging SOF operators have lived in a high stress environment for the past two decades also suggests the stress operators have endured has played a potential role in the mental health of the force. Notably, mental health was not mentioned once within the SOCOM CR.¹⁹⁶ The absence of such data could possibly lead to more questions than answers, as the 2011 POTFF study mentioned mental health as a specific area of concern for SOF operators.

The 2011 *Pressure on the Force and Family* (POTFF) report was initiated following a string of criminal and unethical behavior amongst SOF individuals. The report stated, "after ten years of continuous combat operations and an ever-increasing demand for SOF, we are witnessing significant physical, mental, and emotional strains on our Force and Families. This is not simply about multiple combat deployments. It is an accumulation of effects

¹⁹³ Van Baarda and Verweij, *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare*, 215–220.

¹⁹⁴ Van Baarda and Verweij, 219.

¹⁹⁵ Pendleton, *Special Operations Forces*.

¹⁹⁶ *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*.

throughout the deployment cycle that compound and already uncertain and unpredictable SOF lifestyle.”¹⁹⁷ The 2011 POTFF report echoes many of the factors discussed in this thesis, indicating a combat culture has placed heavy cost among SOF members and their families. These issues have plagued the force in a myriad of ways, all at the detriment of organizational effectiveness and personal well-being.

War has become a way of life for SOF operators. The psychological wounds of war have manifested in their daily lives. The heavy ops tempo on SOF has caused relationship problems, depression, mental health issues, and substance abuse issues. Research from 2012 suggested 20% of SOF suffer from PTSD, more than double their conventional counterparts.¹⁹⁸ The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) in 2016 revealed suicides within SOF were the highest among the military, 30% higher than conventional rates, and higher than the general population.¹⁹⁹ In a span of eight years, 2007–2015, there were 117 SOF suicides.²⁰⁰ AAS conducted psychological autopsies on 29 of the individuals and found nearly half were alcohol dependent, and 28 out of 29 had known issues such as relationship issues, financial issues, or legal issues.²⁰¹ Jonathan Schroden, Director for Center of Naval Analysis Research, along with his counterpart Marqaux Hoar studied “the effect high operational tempo had on a number of units” within SOF and found “problematic behaviors—driving under the influence or using illegal drugs—correlated positively with time.”²⁰² The cumulative affects seemingly extend through all facets of many SOF operators lives.

¹⁹⁷ McRaven, *Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) Review*, 2.

¹⁹⁸ Matthew Hing et al., “Special Operations Forces and Incidence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms,” *Journal of Special Operations Medicine: A Peer Reviewed Journal for SOF Medical Professionals* 12, no. 3 (2012): 23–35.

¹⁹⁹ American Association of Suicidology, “Psychological Autopsy Study of Suicides Among United States Special Operations Forces” (United States Army Special Operations Command, 2016).

²⁰⁰ Andrew Marr, “Study Reveals SOF Suicides Highest in Military,” SOAA, December 15, 2020, <https://soaa.org/study-sof-suicides-military/>; American Association of Suicidology, “Psychological Autopsy Study of Suicides Among United States Special Operations Forces.”

²⁰¹ Andrew Marr, “Study Reveals SOF Suicides Highest in Military.”

²⁰² Harkins, “SOCOM Must Make These Changes as It Reviews Ethics Problems, Operators and Experts Say,” para. 12.

Spouses and family members also sacrifice for the high ops tempo of SOF. Research indicates “associations between deployment frequency and duration, and decreased military spouse well-being (e.g., depression and anxiety), increased child problematic behaviors, and negative effects on parent child and member-spouse relationships.”²⁰³ A 2013 Rand report indicated cumulative months of deployment positively associated with risk of divorce, and that 97% of divorces occurred after deployment.²⁰⁴ The research supports the findings from the 2011 POTFF study, citing “a clear trend that married couple feel distanced in their relationships and the sense of “growing apart” is a major factor in the failure of marriages.²⁰⁵ While divorce is a societal reality, service members and families commented that “proxy or failed marriages are becoming more pervasive in the force.”²⁰⁶ The unpredictability and constant tempo of SOF creates a challenging environment for spouses to plan around. Marriages suffer from the inability to even talk about your day. Due to the secret nature of their profession, SOF operators cannot have casual conversations with their spouse or children about the general nature of their work.²⁰⁷ Leaving your family for extended periods of time, missing birthdays, anniversaries, children’s birth, or the feeling you are raising your kids through a computer screen can all negatively affect individual’s mental health and subsequently have negative effects on moral reasoning.

SOF forces are not just affected by mental stressor at home, they are exposed to them continually in combat. SOF has focused on CT and DA throughout much of GWOT, both of which bring small teams closer to their enemy in close quarters combat. The proximity to their combatants lends to increased exposure of repeated violent interactions among SOF. Repeated exposure to violence has been proven to negatively affect individual’s mental health over time. Studies suggest “exposure to human violence can motivate less ethical

²⁰³ Kamarck, *Defense Primer: Personnel Tempo (PERSTEMPO)*, 3).

²⁰⁴ Rand Corporation, “Lengthy Military Deployments Increase Divorce Risk for U.S. Enlisted Service Members,” *Rand Corporation*, September 3, 2013, <https://www.rand.org/news/press/2013/09/03.html>.

²⁰⁵ McRaven, *Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) Review*, 1.

²⁰⁶ McRaven, *Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) Review*, 2.

²⁰⁷ Corie Weathers, “Secrets and Marriage: When They Just Can’t Talk About It,” *Military.Com*, 2021, <https://www.military.com/spouse/relationships/military-marriage/secrets-in-marriage-when-they-just-cant-talk-about-it.html>.

decision making.”²⁰⁸ Military psychologist Peter Kilner believes “we have become so effective in training soldiers how to kill that soldiers often do not consider the moral repercussions of their actions.”²⁰⁹

SOF weapons and tactics also present unique risks not experienced by conventional forces. A Special Operations Association of America study found SOF operators are at an elevated risk of developing chronic-neuro inflammation (CNI); trauma that results in “alterations of the molecular chemistry of the brain.”²¹⁰ More research is required to fully understand the extent and effects of CNI on human moral behavior and judgment. However, much like the brain disease chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) which has gained public attention for its effects on National Football League players, any trauma that disrupts proper brain function can lead to irrational and unethical behavior that would normally be considered uncharacteristic of the individual.²¹¹ Combat scars come in many more forms; mental trauma of witnessing friends die, dismembered, or badly wounded, physical trauma, frustration of operations, living with bad decisions all of which are only exacerbated when personal issues arise at home. There is no way around the combat stress many SOF operators face, building resilient forces to withstand the fatigue is one of few options.

SOCOM has not turned a blind eye to the ethical issues or combat stress. Following the 2011 POTFF study, an official POTFF (Preservation) program was established within SOCOM. Congressionally funded, POTFF is the only program of its kind within the DOD. POTFF consists of five domains to address and support service members and their families.

- Psychological performance- improve cognitive and behavioral performance. Help SM and families to cope with stress, improve readiness.

²⁰⁸ Joshua R. Gubler et al., “Violence, Aggression, and Ethics: The Link Between Exposure to Human Violence and Unethical Behavior,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 147, no. 1 (January 2018): 25–34, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1007/s10551-015-2926-4>.

²⁰⁹ Van Baarda and Verweij, *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare*, 219.

²¹⁰ Andrew Marr, “Study Reveals SOF Suicides Highest in Military.”

²¹¹ Mayo Clinic, “Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy - Symptoms and Causes” (Mayo Clinic, 2021), <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/chronic-traumatic-encephalopathy/symptoms-causes/syc-20370921>.

- Human performance- holistic physical treatment and training. Includes sports medicine, strength and conditioning, performance nutrition, and sports psychology.
- Social and family performance- family resiliency programs.
- Spiritual performance- enhance core spiritual beliefs, values, awareness, relationships, and experiences.²¹²

POTFF was developed to combat the issues within the force recognized by the 2011 POTFF review. Although the intention is to meet the needs of service members and their families, further analysis of the program revealed there is plenty of work to still be done within the organization to function properly. In a twelve-week study, there is little evidence to support that the program is effective at conducting any of the five domain priorities.²¹³ More research is required in multiple areas to fully understand the mental trauma present within SOCOM.

Currently, there is no inclusive research to indicate what the cumulative effects from twenty years of war has had on SOF's mental health. There are numerous studies on the military in general, but these do not recognize SOF's unique roles and employment methods. General data is not sufficient to fully grasp the extent of mental health issues within SOF. More research is required to fully understand the extent of which SOF operators suffer from PTSD or CNI. Additional research regarding family and marriage issues within SOCOM specifically are needed to address the external stressors present among SOF. Abundant anecdotal evidence exists yet lack the in-depth research to truly understand the extent of the issue within SOF. Helping the force becomes harder when you do not know where to start.

²¹² "About POTFF" (USSOCOM, 2021), <https://www.socom.mil/POTFF/Pages/About-POTFF.aspx>.

²¹³ "Directed Study on Preservation of the Force and Family (POTFF) Initiative" (Monterey, Ca: Naval Postgraduate School, 2021).

V. SOCIAL WAR

A. EXCEPTIONAL AMERICA

The United States has been a global influence for well over a hundred years. Following WWII, American exceptionalism found its stride. Nations were tattered and destroyed; the U.S. was left standing amongst the rubble. A vacuum for power had been created and the United States filled it. Since then, the idea of American exceptionalism has driven the global world order.²¹⁴ Exceptionalism has contributed to U.S. global prominence. American strength and power have influenced world economic standing, fostered cooperation among international partners and allies, significantly shaped international law, and toppled regimes.

Being situated atop the global food chain has created a seemingly untouchable nation. Although, retaining power comes at a cost. Over time, America has also become the global police and caregiver. Prominence and cooperative power are maintained through fear and deterrence. Thus, came the idea of American militarism, the need for a powerful and lethal force to deter and coerce foreign policy abroad. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt summed up the idea of American militarism when he famously said, “speak softly and carry a big stick; you will go far.”²¹⁵ The adage is simple: foreign policy is more effective when a powerful military exists to enforce it.

Americans embrace the ideals of being a dominant global superpower and utilizing the military to retain it. Arguably, it is this ideology that has manifested in the longevity of a free and prosperous nation. American society not only approves of military action on behalf of U.S. power, it expects it. Throughout history, society has rewarded presidents with the courage to take the fight to any adversary willing to challenge U.S. resolve. President Roosevelt’s approval rating increased by 18% following the U.S. response to Pearl Harbor attacks; the same increase President Bush enjoyed by his handling of the Gulf

²¹⁴ Naficy, “American Exceptionalism and the Myth of Abandoned Victory.”

²¹⁵ Lewis L. Gould, *Theodore Roosevelt* (Oxford University Press USA, 2012), 31, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=829402>.

War.²¹⁶ These polls, however; indicate another unique facet of American views on war—they never consider losing. The largest jump in approval during Vietnam was not going into combat but instead pulling out.²¹⁷ Americans embrace of war only lasted so long as a win was guaranteed.

Vietnam tested American resolve and exposed a nation built around militaristic ideals. After fourteen years of sustained U.S. involvement, the promise of success was gone. American troops were withdrawn. Unsuccessful, American exceptionalism was left to question; how could Vietnamese insurgents fend off the U.S. military? Answer: American political leaders underestimated the will of the Viet Cong (VC) to resist.²¹⁸ The belief in military superiority led the U.S. to committing one of its biggest mistakes in history, underestimating its opponent. The military was left tattered and defeated. Marine Colonel Robert Heintz Jr. stated U.S. forces were “clobbered and buffeted from without and within by social turbulence, pandemic drug addiction, race war, sedition, civilian scapegoating, draft recalcitrance and malevolence, barracks theft and common crime” and left without congressional support.²¹⁹ Vietnam was a public failure that plagued American society. Restoring American exceptionalism was now the priority.

Rebranding and rebuilding the armed forces were the first steps to regaining American superiority. A massive shift in focus and strategy empowered the change for the military to reinvent itself. Renewed vision towards operational excellence drove innovation to new levels and fueled the generation of new weaponry, doctrine, and tactics.²²⁰ The failure of Vietnam exposed the vulnerability to American power, however; renewed American militarism was the answer to ensure it never happened again.

²¹⁶ Adam Clymer, “War In the Gulf: Public Opinion; Poll Finds Deep Backing While Optimism Fades,” *The New York Times*, January 22, 1991, sec. U.S., <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/22/us/war-in-the-gulf-public-opinion-poll-finds-deep-backing-while-optimism-fades.html>.

²¹⁷ Clymer.

²¹⁸ Thomas L. Ahern, Donald P. Gregg, and Donald P. P. Gregg, *Vietnam Declassified: The CIA and Counterinsurgency* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2009), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=792154>.

²¹⁹ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*, 36.

²²⁰ Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*.

B. SOCIETY'S EMBRACE OF WAR

SOCOM has become the epitome of American exceptionalism. SOF operators represent the hero in every story, the knight willing to sacrifice for the good of others. Of course, SOF operators should be highly valued as they provide a capability for the American public that is unmatched. However, their mere existence and prominence create a falsehood for the American public; that any adversary willing to challenge American power would be relegated swiftly.

Reliance on military strength presents a challenge for American diplomacy in conflict. Endless war has become part of our society while many choose to ignore the costs.²²¹ As long as the U.S. is winning Americans are fine with that. American success through warfare has created the very antithetical environment that leads to its pursuit of conflict—ends through military means is the simple answer to U.S. foreign issues.²²² America's soft power agencies, those that deal directly with foreign diplomatic policy, have been gutted, their roles being picked up by the DOD as their budgets soar.²²³ In 2014, the DOD budget reached \$500 billion while the state department budget was a mere \$47 billion.²²⁴ If time and money are indicators for what an organization values (which they are), the disparity in budgets may suggest the value Americans place on war. American militarism begins to be that of a self-licking ice cream cone; the more they are asked to solve issues, the more budgets swing in their favor, which only leads to expecting the military to do more.²²⁵ Rosa Brooks refers to the sentiment perfectly stating, "if your only tool is a hammer, everything looks like a nail."²²⁶ In some ways, however, the military might be the only institutions trusted enough to handle America's biggest problems.

²²¹ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*.

²²² Bacevich, *The New American Militarism*.

²²³ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, 102.

²²⁴ Brooks, 102.

²²⁵ Brooks, 102–05.

²²⁶ Brooks, 21.

As the military engages in more issues their public approval increases while politician's approval goes down. A 2019 Pew Research poll showed 89% of Americans took pride in the U.S. Military.²²⁷ Conversely, only 32% of Americans had any pride in our political system, a number that had been steadily declining.²²⁸ Thus, perpetuating the idea of military involvement; Americans do not trust politicians to diplomatically deal with issues, they would rather support the idea of the military forcing a solution.²²⁹ The common solution sought in the last twenty years has been SOF.²³⁰

When the twin towers fell on September 11, 2001 Americans resoundingly supported the idea of war. Over 92% of Americans were satisfied with the war and its progress in late 2001.²³¹ American's were confident the U.S. would defeat the terrorist responsible. Many were confident in the military forces, mainly SOF, to track down Osama Bin Laden. There was no reason to believe otherwise. Year after year, however, the war has continued with little to show for it and support has been waning. Recent polls suggest over 40% of Americans believe the war in Afghanistan was a mistake, over 60% believe it is no longer worth fighting.²³² One reason Americans may be second guessing their acceptance of war, however, is due to their inability to understand what kind of war the GWOT would be.

C. THE ETHICS OF IRREGULAR WAR

Evidence suggests there are reasons to doubt the claim that the GWOT is a new kind of war. Rather, it is in many ways like the war the U.S. lost in Vietnam with new

²²⁷ Megan Brenan, "American Pride Hits New Low; Few Proud of Political System," *Gallup*, July 2, 2019, sec. Politics, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/259841/american-pride-hits-new-low-few-proud-political-system.aspx>.

²²⁸ Brenan.

²²⁹ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*.

²³⁰ Brooks, 120–21.

²³¹ Gallup News, "Latest Summary: American Public Opinion and the War on Terrorism," *Gallup*, December 21, 2001, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/5113/Latest-Summary-American-Public-Opinion-War-Terrorism.aspx>.

²³² BBC News, "Afghan War: Do Americans Support Biden Pulling Out?," *BBC News*, April 21, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56823213>.

tactics. In both instances, the U.S. was engaged in asymmetric warfare, a form of irregular warfare. Irregular warfare is defined by U.S. military doctrine as a “form of warfare characterized as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”²³³ Asymmetric warfare implies a disparity in either capability or volume of force. SOCOM is uniquely tailored to engage in unconventional warfare, as outlined in Title 10 of the U.S. code.²³⁴ The American militaries’ capabilities and sheer size are vastly disproportionate to their past foes, but irregular warfare presents peculiar challenges.

Waging war against non-state actors or violent extremist groups complicate the rules of war. There is no state entity of which to negotiate or coerce through diplomatic international sanctions.²³⁵ The U.S. is left fighting an insurgent force, one in which plays by their own rules. Uniformed soldiers are replaced with guerrilla fighters indistinguishable from the local populace. The battlefield disperses and becomes undefined, combatants are harder to identify.²³⁶ Vietnam insurgents hid in the jungles, and Al Qaeda hid throughout the Afghan mountains. This dynamic of war can become increasingly frustrating for SOF operators because you cannot hit what you cannot see. Information becomes the advantage, one in which the smaller less distinguishable force holds. The warzone is arguably more convoluted and complex than conventional war. The complexity and irregularities become a ripe environment for misconduct.

Historically, irregular warfare has accounted for far more instances of barbarism, ethical misconduct, and morally reprehensible conduct than conventional warfare.²³⁷ The war is essentially fought to achieve influence over the civilian population. A clear strategy is critical to understanding local populace needs and motivations. Insurgents manipulate

²³³ Department of Defense, *Joint Publication 1* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2017), 1–6.

²³⁴ USSOCOM, “About USSOCOM.”

²³⁵ Van Baarda and Verweij, *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare*.

²³⁶ Wayne Bert, *American Military Intervention in Unconventional War* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230337817>.

²³⁷ Van Baarda and Verweij, *Moral Dimension of Asymmetrical Warfare*, 139–40.

the battlefield, targeting civilian populations or weak military targets attempting to invoke an emotional response.²³⁸ Lawful combatants become harder to distinguish. Is it a civilian or an insurgent - a sympathizer or criminal? SOF operators are expected to make split second decisions in a high stress environments. Choose wrong and you could be killed by a child wearing a suicide vest or accidentally kill a civilian. Every decision seemingly becomes an impossible ethical dilemma. The very people SOF are fighting to win support over potentially become the people paying the highest price, and it is hard to win that way. Irregular warfare requires a great amount of restraint and emotional control by SOF, two things that become increasingly harder to do in the operational space. As prolonged fear, stress, and anger mount moral decision making is impacted. However, surrendering position on the moral high ground will do the adversaries work for them.²³⁹ Recognizing the moral dimension of war grows more difficult as the boundaries of the battlefield continue to blur for SOF. These boundaries, however, are socially constructed, and at times it seems American society approves if it can be justified.

D. JUSTIFYING ATROCITY

War changes everything. The need to ensure American dominance can drive society to accept that acts that are considered immoral or illegal in peacetime are permissible, even praiseworthy in wartime.²⁴⁰ This does not mean all American society approves of unethical behavior, but it does mean a portion will always find a way to justify the means. Just as history is littered with cases of ethical misconduct in war, there are many examples of politicians and even the American public offering justification. This is yet another instance where Vietnam and the GWOT intersect.

The My Lai Massacre is remembered as one of the worst war crimes in American history. On March 16, 1968 more than 500 Vietnamese civilians were murdered by

²³⁸ Bert, *American Military Intervention in Unconventional War*.

²³⁹ Ordiway, "Fixing the Problem: Integrating Virtue Ethics into U.S. Special Operations Forces Selection, Education, and Training."

²⁴⁰ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, 475.

American soldiers of Charlie Company in the village of My Lai.²⁴¹ On a “search and destroy” mission, the soldiers were sent to kill the VC believed to be there.²⁴²

The American troops did not find any VC in My Lai, but they did find roughly 500 villagers who unknowingly were awaiting their slaughter. The civilians were rounded up, beaten, tortured, and murdered at gunpoint and by hand grenades. Hamlets were burned, to some accounts with people still inside.²⁴³ Nearly all civilians were slaughtered that day. The only reason the killing stopped was due to American helicopter pilot Major Hugh Thompson. Upon noticing the unusual activity, Thompson and his crew recognized the slaughter that was taking place. Thompson landed his helicopter in between Charlie Company and the villagers, ordering their American counterparts to cease fire or they would be fired upon by the helicopter’s gunners.²⁴⁴ Charlie Company suffered one casualty on that day; a member that had shot himself in the foot to avoid participating.²⁴⁵ Although the acts were atrocious, the response from military and government leaders was equally disappointing.

The atrocity at My Lai was reported to military and congressional leaders, only to be ignored. Major Thompson and his crew were shunned by the military, cast out as traitors to their own.²⁴⁶ Other witnesses came forward as well, but to no avail. The media initially reported the events at My Lai as a success, suggesting multiple VC had been killed in the mission. It was all a lie. Journalist, Seymore Hersh, subsequently published an article describing the massacre at My Lai. Leaders could no longer ignore the truth.²⁴⁷ Instead of

²⁴¹ Charles M Rowling, Penelope Sheets, and Timothy M Jones, “American Atrocity Revisited: National Identity, Cascading Frames, and the My Lai Massacre,” *Political Communication* 32 (2015): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.944323>.

²⁴² Rowling, Sheets, and Jones, 310.

²⁴³ Seek History, *My Lai Massacre - The Most Shocking Episode of the Vietnam War*, video (Seek History, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLuBtv1EtcI>.

²⁴⁴ Seek History.

²⁴⁵ Rowling, Sheets, and Jones, “American Atrocity Revisited: National Identity, Cascading Frames, and the My Lai Massacre.”

²⁴⁶ Seek History, *My Lai Massacre - The Most Shocking Episode of the Vietnam War*.

²⁴⁷ Rowling, Sheets, and Jones, “American Atrocity Revisited: National Identity, Cascading Frames, and the My Lai Massacre.”

investigating the matter, political leaders decided to create a task force to “control the problem,” the problem being Hersh.²⁴⁸ However, My Lai became a symbol of anti-war protest and the public demanded answers.

Upon investigation, 26 members would be charged with murder in My Lai, however only one was convicted. Lieutenant William Calley was sentenced to life in prison for his role in the killings. The Charlie Company Commander was acquitted, even though reports suggested he participated in the killings. No other military officers in the chain of command or elected leaders were held accountable for their roles in the cover up. In fact, Lt Calley would spend less than three days in a military prison before being released and placed on house arrest. A public outcry of support would subsequently lead President Nixon to release him completely.²⁴⁹ How could this be? Why would the public support such an atrocity?

The American public wants to believe in its heroes. Events like My Lai lead society to find a way to rationalize the unethical actions as a means to believe in their nation’s ideals. Instead of recognizing the events for what they are, acts that go against all American values and ideals, people justify the atrocity as a cost of war. The cost to maintain American exceptionalism. The handling of the My Lai Massacre is eerily similar to recent charges of war crimes among the Navy SEALs.

Allegations of war crimes at the hands of SEAL Team Seven began to surface in 2017. Members of SEAL Team Seven reported Chief Petty Officer Eddie Gallagher had killed innocent civilians while on sniper watch along with killing a wounded detainee, then taking pictures with the corpse. Witnesses stated Chief Gallagher, a trained sniper, shot an elderly man and a young girl while on sniper watch, both clearly civilians.²⁵⁰ Gallagher was also reported to have stabbed a wounded teen-aged enemy detainee multiple times in the neck as he was receiving medical attention, inevitably killing him.²⁵¹ Gallagher then

²⁴⁸ Rowling, Sheets, and Jones, pt. Introduction.

²⁴⁹ Seek History, *My Lai Massacre - The Most Shocking Episode of the Vietnam War*.

²⁵⁰ Dave Philipps, “Navy SEALs Were Warned Against Reporting Their Chief for War Crimes,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/us/navy-seals-crimes-of-war.html>.

²⁵¹ Philipps.

took a picture with the corpse, sending it to a friend with a text message that read “good story behind this, got him with my hunting knife.”²⁵² The incidents with Gallagher were not isolated, however. Multiple members stated Gallagher would indiscriminately fire rockets at houses and recklessly fire his machine gun towards villages.²⁵³ In 2010, Gallagher was reported by Army SF soldiers for shooting a young girl to kill a combatant behind her.²⁵⁴ A 2014 reports shows he attempted to run over a Naval police officer.²⁵⁵ Other members of his unit stated Gallagher “bragged about slaying 10–20 people a day or 150–200 a deployment.”²⁵⁶ When members within the unit came forward and reported their Chief, they were all warned against it. The SEALs were warned they could possibly lose their trident if they continued to press the issue. The accusers were labeled as traitors and harassed by the other SEALs. Initial reports mounted to no internal or external investigations. In fact, promotion evaluations show his superiors thought he was the perfect guy to lead the platoon, a combat proven vet.²⁵⁷ Eventually, members within the unit threatened to go public if an investigation was not launched.

The investigation into the allegations of war crimes culminated with Chief Gallagher being charged with first degree murder. Although, the narrative started to change. Navy officials and lawyers all stated the other SEALs were disgruntled, that they did not like Gallagher and did not think he deserved to be in a leadership position. His own lawyer stated the other members were upset that Gallagher would steal their food or put them in reckless situations,²⁵⁸ Witnesses began to step back, many of them refusing to testify and one even changing his story to admit he was the one that killed the captive.²⁵⁹

²⁵² Philipps, para. 45.

²⁵³ Philipps, “Navy SEALs Were Warned Against Reporting Their Chief for War Crimes.”

²⁵⁴ Philipps.

²⁵⁵ Philipps.

²⁵⁶ Navy Times Staff, “What Motivated Fellow SEALs to Dime out Eddie Gallagher?,” *Navy Times*, April 22, 2019, para. 5, <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/04/22/what-motivated-fellow-seals-to-dime-out-eddie-gallagher/>.

²⁵⁷ Philipps, “Navy SEALs Were Warned Against Reporting Their Chief for War Crimes.”

²⁵⁸ Philipps.

²⁵⁹ BBC News, “Edward Gallagher: Navy Seals Called Platoon Leader ‘Freaking Evil,’” *BBC News*, December 28, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50931195>.

Chief Gallagher was acquitted and only convicted of the lesser charge, posing with a corpse.²⁶⁰ No other officers in the chain of command were held accountable, including his direct supervisor which is believed to have led the cover up. Much like the My Lai Massacre, public outcry resulted in President Trump pardoning Gallagher and allowing him to retire with his trident; a move that went against Naval Special Warfare Commander Rear Admiral Collin Green.²⁶¹ Since his pardon, Gallagher has openly stated the combatant was killed by his team and that everyone was in on it. On a recent Apple podcast Gallagher revealed “we killed that guy. Our intention was to kill him, everybody was on board. It was to do medical scenarios on him until he died.”²⁶² The events led to further scrutiny of the prestigious SEAL community. Comparing the accounts of My Lai with that of Chief Gallagher suggest we did not learn from our history.

Accountability for war crimes, or in this case lack of accountability, can be just as damning as the events themselves. Both My Lai and Chief Gallagher share many similarities that would lead some to question if military leaders, government officials, or even the public really want to deter war crimes. Both instances were heinous, yet no one suffered any consequences, why is that? Neither case was immediately investigated. It seems that threats of public scrutiny were the driving factors that led to any investigation at all. This must lead some to believe military leaders and government officials do not really care about the act, they care more about the reputation. In both cases, the ethical action of those willing to stop the misconduct were questioned and ridiculed more than the unethical actors themselves. Maj Hughs and members of SEAL Team Seven were cast out as traitors and warned they would be punished if they persisted to seek accountability. These actions certainly do not foster an environment that promotes accountability. How does this support the ethical foundation of an organization? Why is the public so quick to

²⁶⁰ Dave Philipps, “Navy SEAL Chief Accused of War Crimes Is Found Not Guilty of Murder,” *The New York Times*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/02/us/navy-seal-trial-verdict.html>.

²⁶¹ Matthew Cole, “Navy Admiral Who Clashed with Trump Over Disciplining SEAL to Retire,” *The Intercept*, February 1, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/01/navy-seal-collin-retire-green-eddie-gallagher/>.

²⁶² Luis Martinez, “Eddie Gallagher’s Shocking Claim That SEALs Intended for Detainee to Die,” *ABC News*, May 5, 2021, para. 5, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/eddie-gallaghers-shocking-claim-seals-intended-detainee-die/story?id=77462164>.

cry out for the war criminal and demand protection, why should they get a pass? What message is sent when presidents cede the moral high ground and exonerate these criminals? These are all questions we should be asking.

Society can have special operators and ethical conduct of war; but they must demand it. The SOCOM CR stated they found a culture that promoted combat to the detriment of leadership and accountability.²⁶³ The Eddie Gallagher incident should be proof of what can happen within this type of culture. Chief Gallagher was promoted on his combat prowess, inept to effectively lead his men and committed criminal acts. He got a pass. Around the same time of the CR release, the Gallagher case took another interesting turn. NSW Commander Rear Admiral Collin Green set out to reinforce a culture of accountability and restore good order and discipline to the NSW community. Rear Adm. Green ordered a review board of all officers that had supervised Gallagher throughout his deployment.²⁶⁴ The reviews were subsequently halted by civilian leaders. Acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly stated, “given the unique circumstances of these three remaining cases, I have determined that any failures in conduct, performance, judgment, or professionalism exhibited by these officers be addressed through other administrative measures as appropriate, such as letters of instruction or performance observations on their officer fitness reports.”²⁶⁵ The intervention by the civilian secretary once again undermined the NSW commanders attempts to hold his troops accountable and perpetuates a culture that is unaccountable. SOCOM may recognize a culture lacking accountability, but the actions to exonerate those involved insinuate a desire for it to persist.

Presidential and public intervention to save war criminals undermine any attempts for military leaders to foster an environment of ethical action. A large majority of SOF operators detest the unethical actions of Gallagher and those like him. Unfortunately, they are drowned out by public reprisal. Society has not promoted the ethical actions of those

²⁶³ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*.

²⁶⁴ Caitlin Kenney, “Three Navy SEAL Officers Will Not Face Review Board, Acting Navy Secretary Says,” *Stars and Stripes*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/navy/three-navy-seal-officers-will-not-face-review-board-acting-navy-secretary-says-1.609032>.

²⁶⁵ Kenney, para. 3.

that stopped or stood up to unethical behavior, many would never recognize their names. Instead, society promotes the unethical as heroes. Gallagher is free now, marketing his name by selling books and cashing in on his own clothing line.²⁶⁶ A vast majority of SOF operators still live by their SOF ethos and believe in the ethical conduct of war, but society may be selling a different message; we will protect our heroes at any cost. SOCOM may be interested in restoring the ethical foundation of SOF, but will societies influence support it?

²⁶⁶ Caitlin Doornbos, “After War Crimes Acquittals, Gallagher Cashes in on Notoriety with Clothing Line and Endorsements,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/after-war-crimes-acquittals-gallagher-cashes-in-on-notoriety-with-clothing-line-and-endorsements-1.613267>.

VI. SOCIAL REFLECTION IN SOF

A. CHANGING SOCIETY

War is a generative force.²⁶⁷ War can manipulate and alter societies. It can produce social change, construct alternate values or ideologies, or divide a populace by creating divergent nationalist principles. Arguably, all these social changes have been a part of American history within the past twenty years. The U.S. has seemingly found themselves in a forever war with no end in sight. One after another, president's vogue they will end the war on terror with no such luck. America has been at war so long most people barely recognize it. War has become background music no one hears, or the wallpaper you walk past daily but fail to truly recognize. In some respects, perhaps war should be expected as the unipolar superpower in a globalized world. Adversaries naturally long to challenge the U.S. hoping to acquire more power themselves. As global competition increases, the challengers will likely only increase. American society is programmed to compete and has been for decades. Prior to one war ending political leaders are already looking to the next war. To ease the blow of reality, politicians and the media have replaced war with words like *conflict* hoping for a more positive emotional reaction.²⁶⁸ When the twin towers fell on September 11, 2001, a nationalist sentiment emerged. Americans were united and eager to take the fight to the enemy, a sense of revenge for the senseless attack.²⁶⁹ Americans knew history was changed forever on that day, but many never envisioned how the next twenty years would continue to change everything.

The boundaries of war have vanished. Technology has created a global interconnectedness and war is everywhere.²⁷⁰ Although the fight is overseas, constant

²⁶⁷ Siamak Naficy, "Of Culture and Cliche: Politics and the Uses (and Abuses) of Anthropology," *CTX Journal* 4, no. 4 (November 2014).

²⁶⁸ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*.

²⁶⁹ Anna E. Shaleva, "How Does External Conflict Impact Social Trust? Evidence from the 9/11 Attacks as a Natural Experiment," *Journal of Applied Security Research* 11, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 267–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361610.2016.1179476>.

²⁷⁰ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*.

media coverage brings the war straight to your living room. Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) colonels Qiao and Wang predicted this in 1999 stating, “when all the boundaries lying between the two worlds of war and non-war of military and non-military are destroyed, we will enter an era in which visible national boundaries, invisible internet space, international law, national law, behavioral norms, and ethical principles will have absolutely no restraining effect.”²⁷¹ The ideals of war have crept into American society.²⁷² The government has increased the use of surveillance on its own people. American police forces have adopted many of the military tactics and equipment used by their military counterparts. Swat raids have increased precipitously through the years, less than 3,000 in 1989 to over 60,000 now.²⁷³ Some may suggest this number simply correlates to an increase in criminal activity, however, FBI crime statistics show violent crime rates have plunged by nearly 50% since 1990.²⁷⁴ Although, if you ask Americans they may say the exact opposite. A recent Gallup poll showed 78% of Americans believed crime was rising each year.²⁷⁵ If you are wondering how this could be, it is in large part due to the constant media coverage Americans are entrapped with.

Advances in internet technology have drastically increased the pace in which information is shared along with the sheer volume of people it can reach. Today there are over three 312 million Americans online—95% of the population that is instantly connected.²⁷⁶ The internet has largely contributed to the dissolving borders of peace and

²⁷¹ Brooks, 22.

²⁷² See also Margaret MacMillan, “War: How Conflict Shaped Us,” *The New York Times*, October 6, 2020, sec. Books, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/06/books/review/war-how-conflict-shaped-us-by-margaret-macmillan-an-excerpt.html>.

²⁷³ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*.

²⁷⁴ USDOJ, “FBI Report on Crime Shows Decline in Violent Crime Rate for Third Consecutive Year” (USDOJ, September 28, 2020), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/fbi-report-crime-shows-decline-violent-crime-rate-third-consecutive-year>; John Gramlich, “What the Data Says (and Doesn’t Say) about Crime in the United States,” *Pew Research Center*, n.d., <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/20/facts-about-crime-in-the-u-s/>.

²⁷⁵ Justin McCarthy, “Perceptions of Increased U.S. Crime at Highest Since 1993,” *Gallup*, November 13, 2020, sec. Politics, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/323996/perceptions-increased-crime-highest-1993.aspx>.

²⁷⁶ Joseph Johnson, “Number of Internet Users in the United States 2019,” *Statista*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/276445/number-of-internet-users-in-the-united-states/>.

war, creating the space for information wars. Information wars target populations using online media sources and social media to influence “hearts and minds of a targeted audience.”²⁷⁷ Info wars manipulate narratives or push political agendas to influence the values and beliefs of the population. U.S. adversaries recognize this vulnerability, utilizing social media to manipulate or damage public opinion.²⁷⁸ Adversaries goal is to stoke fear in a target population or spread hate and create chaos from the inside out.²⁷⁹ Colonels Qiao and Wang warned the weapons for the battlespace would change, believing technology would eliminate global barriers and create social vulnerabilities.²⁸⁰ American society may acknowledge vulnerabilities exists, yet choose to stay connected, at least in part.

American society has fragmented, the increase in connectedness has ironically led to larger disconnects. Today, American society is more divided than it has arguably ever been.²⁸¹ A nationalist American identity has steadily eroded to smaller tribal factions. Examining Gallup polls from the last twenty years shows Americans pride in their country has been steadily dropping. The poll indicated pride in America is the lowest it has ever been (since Gallup has conducted the polls), only half of Americans polled were proud of the U.S., down from 87% in 2000.²⁸² Individuals attach their views and values more to partisan ideologies than a *united* state. Arguably, Americans have always done this, but not to this degree. This divide has been accelerated in large part by the media.

Controlling information is the key to influence and power. American corporations and politicians are slowly gaining all control of the information, and in turn changing our

²⁷⁷ Catherine A. Theohary, “Information Warfare: The Role of Social Media in Conflict Note,” *Information Warfare: The Role of Social Media in Conflict*, March 4, 2015, 1–2.

²⁷⁸ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, *Cyberwar Is Coming!* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp, 1993), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reprints/RP223.html>.

²⁷⁹ Jarred Prier, “Commanding the Trend: Social Media as Information Warfare,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 11, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 50–85.

²⁸⁰ Brooks, *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*.

²⁸¹ Michael Dimock and Richard Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide,” *Pew Research Center*, November 13, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/11/13/america-is-exceptional-in-the-nature-of-its-political-divide/>.

²⁸² Megan Brenan, “U.S. National Pride Falls to Record Low,” *Gallup*, June 15, 2020, sec. Politics, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/312644/national-pride-falls-record-low.aspx>.

society. The consolidation of mass media has been the largest contributor to controlling information. In 1983 over 50 firms controlled most media platforms, shrinking to nine firms in 1998.²⁸³ Today, six corporations own 90% of all media platforms, 232 media executives control the information of over 270 million Americans.²⁸⁴ The attempt to incentivize consent, however, seems to have backfired. Americans have grown more untrusting of the media in recent years. Recent polls suggest less than 45% of Americans trust the media, the lowest it has ever been. Further examination of that poll provides evidence of the partisan divide in the US; only 10% of republicans compared to 73% of their democrat counterparts had any trust in the media.²⁸⁵ This data is telling as the news organizations not controlled by the major six also happen to predominantly cater to republicans, while most news media controlled by the major six lean towards democratic views. To many, the idea of objectively reporting news is long gone, replaced instead with a skewed representation of what is really happening in American. The overall affect has been a loss of trust amongst Americans in general. Half of Americans today do not trust each other, believing people are less reliable than they ever have been.²⁸⁶ The lack of trust has contributed to the changing American culture. A culture addicted to social media; an addiction that is accelerating the change.

Social media has created an interactive society while reducing individual interpersonal skills. Individuals can immediately access social groups that either support or agree with their own beliefs or values. The expansion of connectivity enables the building and grouping of more diverse subgroups within society. Social media not only alters how we interact with each other it can alter the way we think. Like any other form

²⁸³ Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1998).

²⁸⁴ Ashley Lutz, "These 6 Corporations Control 90% Of the Media In America," *Business Insider*, June 14, 2012, <https://www.businessinsider.com/these-6-corporations-control-90-of-the-media-in-america-2012-6>.

²⁸⁵ Megan Brenan, "Americans Remain Distrustful of Mass Media," *Gallup*, September 30, 2020, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/321116/americans-remain-distrustful-mass-media.aspx>.

²⁸⁶ Lee Rainie, Scott Keeter, and Andrew Perrin, "Americans' Trust in Government, Each Other, Leaders," *Pew Research Center - U.S. Politics & Policy*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/22/trust-and-distrust-in-america/>.

of media there is information control. The instantaneous virtual interaction coupled with the massive amounts of information has led to altering individual's emotional behavior.²⁸⁷ The art of triggering emotions has led to one of the biggest challenges with social media, the control of disinformation.

Social media provides unregulated territory to spread false narratives and altered *facts* designed to invoke an emotional response from the reader. Social media has created a false reality in a sense. Individuals not only believe what they hear or say but have adamant information assessable to support their ideas.²⁸⁸ The ability to spread information or disinformation through social media creates a delusional influence through the social interactions. As more than 80% of Americans use social media, the reach of spreading such influence is vast.²⁸⁹ The biggest issue with social media is the type of emotional influence it typically results in anger.

Social media opens the chasm for public discourse on socially controversial topics. Applied ethics theories have sought to understand the moral considerations of socially controversial issues, yet this becomes more perplexing with social media. In large part due to the potential for unethical practice by the state or corporations to artificially manipulate the moral principles of our society through information manipulation.²⁹⁰ Individual moral development through social values and norms has been replaced with an altered moral view of society through the lens of social media. The discourse through social media generates

²⁸⁷ A. D. I. Kramer, J. E. Guillory, and J. T. Hancock, "Experimental Evidence of Massive-Scale Emotional Contagion through Social Networks," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111, no. 24 (June 17, 2014): 8788–90, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1320040111>.

²⁸⁸ Real Moral Problems in the Use of Virtual Reality discusses the unethical implications of creating alternate truths through virtual reality. A reality in which individuals no longer distinguish between real or virtually created truths. Erick Jose Ramirez and Scott LaBarge, "Real Moral Problems in the Use of Virtual Reality," *Ethics and Information Technology* 20, no. 4 (December 2018): 249–63, <http://dx.doi.org.libproxy.nps.edu/10.1007/s10676-018-9473-5>.

²⁸⁹ H. Tankovska, "Social Media Usage in U.S.," *Statista*, April 14, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273476/percentage-of-us-population-with-a-social-network-profile/>.

²⁹⁰ Bligh Grant, Joseph Drew, and Helen E. Christensen, *Applied Ethics in the Fractured State* (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2018), <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=5568955>.

more division, anger, and violence throughout American culture..²⁹¹ The increase in social media use among Americans has contributed to a changing moral culture.

A shifting American culture has manifested into a divided society. The events of 2020 could be considered the culmination of societies moral erosion. A year that was marked by a global pandemic caused Americans to rely on internet technology more than ever. American society saw the benefit of technology through online schooling, teleworking, and socially distanced internet gatherings. The same year was also marked by rioting, looting, burning of cities, racial tension, and intense political divides. The changing American culture culminated with a mob of people sieging the U.S. Capital during a congressional vote on January 6, 2021.²⁹² The events of 2020 should be viewed as a reflection in changing American ethic and culture. This reflection emanated throughout all of society, SOF is no exception.

B. THE SOCIAL REFLECTION IN SOF

SOF is a direct reflection of the society it represents. Huntington believed the military is shaped by two forces, one of those forces being “social imperative arising from social forces, ideologies, and institutions dominant within the society.”²⁹³ The additional sub-identities that are forming throughout society are likely all present within SOF as well. SOF is an ecosystem within an ecosystem. The values and norms of society have as much, if not more influence on individual operators as that of SOCOM. SOF and society are reproductive systems for each other. As war has generated and changed society, so too has that society influenced and changed the forces that fight the wars. Arguably, SOF have become the most affected by the changing American culture and lack of boundaries.

²⁹¹ Wharton University, “Why Social Media Is the New Weapon in Modern Warfare,” *Wharton University*, July 17, 2019, sec. Books, <https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/singer-weaponization-social-media/>.

²⁹² Ian Bremmer, “The U.S. Capitol Riot Was Years in the Making. Here’s Why America Is So Divided,” *Time*, January 16, 2021, <https://time.com/5929978/the-u-s-capitol-riot-was-years-in-the-making-heres-why-america-is-so-divided/>.

²⁹³ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 2.

SOCOM operators bear the brunt of a changing society in many ways. SOF are directly engaged with the fight on both ends of the spectrum, as military members and as members of the broader society. As society has relied on the military to wage continuous wars on its behalf, SOF has carried the physical and emotional scars from these wars. The lack of boundaries has been a career long reality for SOF. Continuous deployments eliminated their ability to differentiate between war and peace well before American society recognized its destructive nature. Huntington also believed the “military ethic is concrete, permanent, and universal. There is no dichotomy between military-mind and civilian-mind as there is no single civilian mind.”²⁹⁴ Even in 1957 Hunting was right, there is no single civilian mind; that has never been truer than today. Although, he may have underestimated the power of social influence on the military. Huntington may not have foreseen what affects a connected society online could have on military professions. In 1957, the military was the social connection for many. It was the place where like-minded individuals joined to form a community bond. Today, those bonds still exist; however, social media has created a new limitless environment for bonds to be formed and fostered outside military supervision. The SOF ethic is exceptionally strong, but not concrete. It is not immune to external influence, and its cracks are evident through the moral decisions some SOF members have made. However, the connection between SOF and society and the effects of a changing cultural ethic could potentially have lasting effects on special operators.

SOF is not only influenced by society but composed of it. Every single person in SOF was once a civilian within society. Those recruited into SOCOM have values and beliefs engrained in them from a broader social influence.²⁹⁵ The future of SOF will be entrusted to those that are currently being raised in a culture much different than those in now. Shifting morals created through media and virtual influence will likely be represented throughout all military departments in the future. Arguably, a generation that could lack motivation, score lower on tests, or have less developed interpersonal skills does not reflect

²⁹⁴ Huntington, 89.

²⁹⁵ Neal Curtis, *War and Social Theory* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230501973>.

the SOF operators of today. At least not from the media's perspective. Media influence and projection of SOF have become one of their best assets, and arguably one of the main contributors to an eroding SOF culture.

C. SOF AS A COMMODITY

The romanticized draw towards SOF is not just found within political relationships, it can be seen within the general public. SOF has been glorified throughout society. As noted before, American exceptionalism thrives through portraying the heroes that protect it, the media has done this with SOF abundantly. A culture that once promoted the ideals of quiet professional now jump at the chance to sell their story.

SOF operators have reached celebrity status within today's society. The mystique of special ops units has always provided somewhat of a love affair for American society. However, the last decade has resulted in an explosion in SOF exposure. The Navy SEALs have been at the forefront capitalizing on societies demand for SOF. The self-promotion within the SEAL community has come with adverse effects to the SEAL culture. Current Navy SEAL, Lieutenant Forrest Crowell, insisted that the commodification of SEALs has caused a counterculture that incentivizes narcissistic and profit-oriented behavior to prosper within the community.²⁹⁶ In his thesis titled *Navy SEALs Gone Wild: publicity, fame, and the loss of the quiet professional*, Crowell argues the marketing of SEALs has led some former SEALs, politicians, and private interest groups to prosper at the expense of a fading SEAL ethos.²⁹⁷ The marketing of SEALs and SOF, however, wasn't completely driven by societal demand. It was the SEALs that drove the market for themselves.

Navy SEALs turned to Hollywood to cash in on their own brand. In 2007 the movie *Lone Survivor* was released, depicting the heroine story of Marcus Luttrell. The movie also released around the same time Navy SEAL leadership openly endorsed a movie about Navy SEALs called *Act of Valor* in an attempt to drive up recruiting. These moves may have

²⁹⁶ Crowell, "Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional," 47.

²⁹⁷ Crowell, "Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional," 51.

sparked the social interest, but it was the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011 by SEAL Team Six that really opened the gateway to celebrity status for Navy SEALs. Although not specifically mentioned in President Obama's address to the nation stating Bin Laden had been killed, it did not take long for the press to start publicizing the unit responsible. One *Business Insider* article even stated, "it shows how important the publicity about Bin Laden's killing is to the U.S. that this morning, Team 6 is front-page news."²⁹⁸ Subsequently, two separate individuals have come forward since the raid claiming credit for being the official shooter that took the life of Bin Laden. Both releasing books to garner public notoriety for their roles in the prolific mission. Since then, the flood gates of SEALs commodifying their brand have opened. Books about Navy SEALs and written by Navy SEALs have skyrocketed. From 1962–2010 only 80 books were written about Navy SEALs, since then that number has risen over 200%..²⁹⁹ Books are not the only market SEALs have broken in to. Podcasts, movies, fitness proprietors, merchandise sales, national television series, video game consultants, and even appearing as guests on mainstream media platforms, if you name it SEALs have stuck their foot in the door. The Navy does not even own the rights to its own brand website.³⁰⁰ The website navyseals.com is actually owned by a former SEAL that claims to be "the only authentic Navy SEAL media property on the Internet."³⁰¹ The public fame should lead some to wonder what happened to being a quiet professional?

The self-promotion of SEALs has eroded the culture and altered their identity. Crowell argues the self-aggrandizement and self-promotion of SEALs has "eroded military effectiveness, damaged national security, and undermined healthy civil-military relationships."³⁰² SEALs are divided. There are those that still believe in the ethos which in part reads, "I do not advertise the nature of my work, nor seek recognition for my

²⁹⁸ Robert Johnson, "Meet The 'Seal Team 6', The Bad-Asses Who Killed Osama Bin Laden," *Business Insider*, March 2, 2011, <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-team-that-killed-bin-laden-seal-team-6-2011-5>.

²⁹⁹ Crowell, "Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional."

³⁰⁰ Crowell.

³⁰¹ Crowell, 13.

³⁰² Crowell, sec. Abstract.

actions,” and there are those current and former which clearly do not.³⁰³ Navy SEAL leadership noticed this trend back in 2012 and 2014 writing letters to the force admonishing those that cashed in on the SEAL brand and expressing shame and guilt in their actions.³⁰⁴ The letters did nothing, the promotional tactics of SEALs continued. As of April 2021, three members (current and former) of SEAL Team Six appeared on a CBS news segment addressing the issues of self-promotion within the command. The three men, speaking from anonymity, stated former SEALs cashing in on fame are exposing critical tactics, techniques, and procedures. All three insisted most SEALs “want the books to stop, want the movies to stop, want the tv shows to stop,” SEALs want to go back into the shadows.³⁰⁵ The men ended by saying, “we are here in desperation, we need help.”³⁰⁶ The men on CBS seemed to echo Lt. Crowell’s sentiment; societies legitimization of SEALs cashing in has had a corrupting effect on the community.³⁰⁷ Unfortunately, the SEALs woes continue to play out in the press, and in this case all press is not good press.

The glorification of SEALs by the media has recently been met with attempts to vilify them. Most articles written today are regarding recent transgressions SEALs have been involved with, most notably Eddie Gallagher. A google search of the phrase “Navy SEALs war crimes” from 2010–2012 shows 40 thousand returns. That same google search from 2018–2020 provides just under 500 thousand. This should lead some to wonder, have the SEALs gone that far off track? Is it possible the media has created a perception of SEALs acting unethically or is it that SEALs are in fact more unethical? The answer is a mixture of both perhaps. There is no denying the self-aggrandizement mentioned in Lt Crowell’s thesis has caused multiple identities to formulate within the command.³⁰⁸ Some SEALs even view the criticism as inevitably a good thing for the command. In a New York

³⁰³ “SEAL Ethos” (Naval Special Warfare Command, 2021), <https://www.nsw.navy.mil/NSW/SEAL-Ethos/>.

³⁰⁴ Crowell, “Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional.”

³⁰⁵ CBS This Morning, “*We Need Help*”: Current and Former Navy SEALs Say Fame Has Undercut Their Mission, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rvX1ujaMzGE>.

³⁰⁶ CBS This Morning.

³⁰⁷ Crowell, “Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional.”

³⁰⁸ Ellemers and Rink, “Identity in Work Groups.”

Times Article relating to the Eddie Gallagher case, one SEAL stated the publicity was “finally casting a light on problems that the SEAL teams had kept hidden,” and that “rogue elements in the SEALs had been operating as if rules and standards did not apply to them, and that too often, SEALs who were overly focused on loyalty have covered up for one another.”³⁰⁹ The men cast as heroes had fallen victim to their own hype. This statement, along with the three men that spoke with CBS expose the hidden truths behind the social influence of SOF; social admiration and self-aggrandizement had contributed to a culture that is clearly in trouble. However, one should also question the medias’ role in creating the culture. How much of the culture was exacerbated or perpetuated from a growing media narrative? There is evidence the news over promotes the transgressions of SEALs as well. Examining the returns from one google search shows over 65% of all articles written since 2001 relating to SEAL misconduct all pertain to the same eight incidents. In some cases, telling the same story long enough make some start to believe it. There may be a reason for this, and it is political.

D. SOF AS A POLITICAL PAWN

America’s SOF operators have increasingly been used as political fodder for political attention. As partisan divides widen in the U.S., the media and politicians are using SOCOM as pundits to push or detract from the narrative. Huntington believed the military should be out of politics, stating true military professional are “immune to politics.”³¹⁰ Janowitz later stressed the military was very political, however should be non-partisan in nature.³¹¹ The problem with both views is that arguably SOF today is neither. In part, this again may be partially attributable to SOF’s own commercializing of their brand. More time in the spotlight results in more time for scrutiny.

³⁰⁹ Dave Philipps, Richard A. Oppel Jr, and Tim Arango, “How SEALs and Veterans View the Trump-Navy Tussle Over Gallagher,” *The New York Times*, November 25, 2019, para. 14, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/25/us/navy-seals-gallagher-reaction.html>.

³¹⁰ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 83.

³¹¹ Reiley and Jacobs, “Ethics Matter”; Finney and Mayfield, *Redefining the Modern Military: The Intersection of Profession and Ethics*, 38.

The tactic of using the military in political debate is nothing new. Just as politicians are inherently drawn to SOF, their opponent has attacked the relationship for political gain. President Bush often spoke of the work SOF was doing in the GWOT, and often political news media would attach his saying to their actions, either in a good light or bad light. It has been in the last decade, however, a partisan divide has begun to occur within SOF. In a 2012 CNN segment the headlines read “Ex-SEALS slam Obama over leaks.”³¹² The anchor goes on to mention how former members of the Navy SEALs were “slamming” President Obama for exposing tactics and procedures (the irony could not be more real), to which the anchor responded the republicans were resorting to “swift-boat tactics” and that in fact the NSW commander himself Admiral McRaven endorsed President Obama taking credit for the raid on Bin Laden.³¹³ Seemingly after the open debates, the partisan politics of SOF would be on full display.

SOF’s willingness to appear on national news media perpetuated partisan military support. Lt. Crowell demonstrated in his thesis through google searches how Navy SEALs disproportionately appeared as guests on FOX news over any other media platform.³¹⁴ As FOX news is known to lean towards republican ideals, this creates a perception that SOF are not partisan neutral. Repeating Lt. Crowell’s search methodology today provides further evidence of two things; not only is there a disproportionate appearance, but the media coverage of topics tends to be more in line with partisan ideology. While searching “Navy SEAL Fox news” from 2018–2021 you will get just under 300 thousand hits. The first page within google is full of articles that seemingly support Eddie Gallagher creating a positive connection with President Trump, headlines that read as such:

- Navy SEALs to shift from counterterrorism to Global threats.
- Former Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher sues Navy.

³¹² CNN, *Ex-SEALS Slam Obama over Leaks on Osama Bin Laden*, video, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-VBXUF_oSI.

³¹³ CNN.

³¹⁴ Crowell, “Navy SEALs Gone Wild: Publicity, Fame, and the Loss of the Quiet Professional.”

- Navy Scraps Review for three SEAL Officers
- Plea from a Navy SEAL's brother: Mr. President The system is broken, and we need your help to fix it.
- Pete Hegseth swims with Navy SEALs to honor veterans.
- Navy SEAL Edward Gallagher found not guilty.
- Edward Gallagher: The story behind trump

Searching the same phrase but with CNN, a traditionally liberal news media, the results look much different. There is just over 100 thousand hits, and the results are much more daunting in their picture they paint of Navy SEALs.

- Transgender Navy SEAL: Biden order 'going to give a lot of other individuals that change to finally be themselves'.
- U.S. Navy SEAL team ordered home from ISIS fight for drinking alcohol while deployed.
- Navy SEAL leaders fired after allegations of sexual assault and drinking.
- Edward Gallagher: Navy launches review of SEAL's.
- Navy SEAL commander: SEALs have 'have drifted from our Navy core values'.

Continuous searches bring back the same results, depending on which news media you watch you may have a much different perception of SOF. This is potentially do to both timing and the political climate. President Trump was openly a supporter of special operations forces, and throughout the same period SOF members became more vocal on television as political pundits. SOCOM has been one of the most trusted institutions in America, the romanticized connections of politicians coupled with their historic low trust

ratings would mean bolstering support with a highly respected partner.³¹⁵ As partisan gaps increase, a natural tactic of opposing political parties is to destroy the credibility of opposing parties relationships.³¹⁶ In this case, SOF not only gave them the needed misconduct to support the campaign of discredit, but had already created the perception of partisan support by openly criticizing elected officials in the media. The media has certainly perpetuated a perception of SOF partisan support. However, SOF themselves are again partly to blame.

As politics change in our nation, there is plenty of evidence to support the idea that society influences the military; however, less time is spent examining how much the military influences society, namely through politics. When President Joe Biden recently picked retired general Lloyd Austin as the Secretary of Defense many criticized the selection. Secretary Austin was also on the board of directors for Raytheon, a major U.S. defense contractor.³¹⁷ Austin is also an active board member on many other large corporations with ties to the government. Additionally, Austin required a waiver from congress to fill the SECDEF position as he had not met the mandatory seven years out of service, a period meant to mentally separate a uniformed service member to becoming a civilian leader.³¹⁸ This is not the first time a waiver has been submitted; previous SECDEF under President Trump, retired Marine general James Mattis required the same waiver.³¹⁹

It has become more commonplace for retired military to translate their skills into politics and defense industry contracting positions. Huntington describes this as a form of influential power, one that provides influence through the institutions the military

³¹⁵ Rainie, Keeter, and Perrin, “Americans’ Trust in Government, Each Other, Leaders.”

³¹⁶ Dimock and Wike, “America Is Exceptional in the Nature of Its Political Divide.”

³¹⁷ Nick Turse and Alex Emmons, “Biden Defense Secretary Nominee Lloyd Austin Comes Under Fire for Industry Connections,” *The Intercept*, December 8, 2020, <https://theintercept.com/2020/12/08/biden-defense-secretary-lloyd-austin-raytheon/>.

³¹⁸ Mallory Shelbourne, “Congress Approves Waiver for Lloyd Austin to Serve as SECDEF,” *USNI News*, January 21, 2021, sec. News & Analysis, <https://news.usni.org/2021/01/21/house-approves-waiver-for-lloyd-austin-to-serve-as-secdef>; Dan Maurer, “The Military Waiver Requirement for Secretary of Defense Shouldn’t Substitute Individuation,” *Lawfare*, December 22, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/military-waiver-requirement-secretary-defense-shouldnt-substitute-individuation>.

³¹⁹ Maurer, “The Military Waiver Requirement for Secretary of Defense Shouldn’t Substitute Individuation.”

professional is connected to.³²⁰ A 2018 study found over 380 retired military had filled positions as “board members, executives, lobbyists, or consultants with defense contractors.”³²¹ Veterans are additionally finding more seats in Congress. Currently, there are 76 representatives that are veterans, of them 71% are republican.³²² The influx of veteran influence throughout the defense department and congressional leaders has arguably led to more public scrutiny of the military as members records are constantly evaluated based on their service. The affects have resulted in SOF being directly involved with controversial social issues.

As political smear campaigns over partisan agendas increase, SOF has found themselves directly in the conversation. Within the past year there have been plenty of societal issues that have resulted in much debate. As COVID raged throughout 2020, partisan debates over vaccines became the norm. In attempts to garner support for Americans to take the experimental vaccine, one CNBC article turned to the military. The article titled *Fauci says military members who opt out of Covid vaccine are inadvertently ‘part of the problem’* was the media’s attempt to pointedly target military members to get involved; in a sense virtue shaming those military members that had decided not to get a vaccine.³²³ The irony of the article is that military members are potentially the most vaccinated members of society, yet targeted as a problem if they were to opt out of one more. Then, in March of 2021, after a year of racial tension in the U.S., President Biden stated he was prioritizing SOF to look at diversity and inclusion within the ranks. Shortly after, FOX News host Tucker Carlson took aim at President Biden’s initiative to create “maternity flight suits” and mocked the President’s diversity and inclusion campaign as

³²⁰ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations*, 89.

³²¹ Turse and Emmons, “Biden Defense Secretary Nominee Lloyd Austin Comes Under Fire for Industry Connections.”

³²² H.C.V.A, “Veterans in Congress” (H.C.V.A., 2021), <https://republicans-veterans.house.gov/resources-for-veterans/veterans-in-congress.htm>.

³²³ Amanda Macias, “Fauci Says Military Members Who Opt out of Covid Vaccine Are Inadvertently ‘Part of the Problem,’” CNBC, March 5, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/04/fauci-troops-who-opt-out-of-covid-vaccine-are-part-of-the-problem.html>.

pandering to “woke” identity politics.³²⁴ Carlson went on to claim the job of the U.S. military is to protect and defend the U.S. and that requirements should not be based on appearance or color, but a capable standard.³²⁵ Military officials were quick to respond to Carlson’s comments, one pentagon official stating “what we absolutely won’t do is take personnel advice from a talk-show host or the Chinese military.”³²⁶ The fact that FOX, a right- leaning news source, made comments bashing an opposing party’s initiatives is not surprising. What should be more surprising is the top military official’s response. An organization that is to be nonpartisan and nonpolitical was now openly feuding with a clearly partisan news source. The military has often been the target of debate in the media, but has traditionally remained silent, at least in official response. The public feud fueled future segments for FOX News. In response to the diversity and inclusion initiative, SOCOM announced through social media they had hired their new Chief of Diversity & Inclusion, Mr. Richard Torres-Estrada.³²⁷ Fox host Tucker Carlson again took aim at SOF, stating the new initiative did nothing to improve safety or maintain a high standard of American elite, rather the military was caving to woke social initiatives.³²⁸ Carlson went on to highlight the new chief also had some troubling social media history; history that promoted anti-police sentiments, and a photo comparing former President Trump to Adolf Hitler.³²⁹ An investigation was subsequently launched by SOCOM into the posts of Estrada and he has since been reassigned pending the results of the investigation.³³⁰ The

³²⁴ Fox News, *Tucker: Our Military Leadership Has Gone “Woke,”* 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSCSzqJcm9w>.

³²⁵ Fox News, *Tucker Responds to Pentagon’s Criticism of His Show,* 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mi-_VqYODLw.

³²⁶ Paul Shinkman, “Pentagon Lashes Out at Tucker Carlson for Calling Military Women a ‘Mockery,’” *U.S. News & World Report*, March 11, 2021, <http://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-03-11/pentagon-lashes-out-at-tucker-carlson-for-calling-military-women-a-mockery>.

³²⁷ Ryan Morgan, “US Special Ops Announce 1st-Ever Diversity and Inclusion Officer,” *American Military News*, March 26, 2021, <https://americanmilitarynews.com/2021/03/us-special-forces-announce-1st-ever-diversity-and-inclusion-officer/>.

³²⁸ Fox News, *Tucker*.

³²⁹ Fox News.

³³⁰ Stephen Losey, “New SOCOM Diversity Chief Reassigned Amid Probe of Social Media Posts, Including One Comparing Trump to Hitler,” *Military.com*, March 29, 2021, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/03/29/socom-investigating-new-diversity-chiefs-posts-including-one-comparing-trump-hitler.html>.

public spat with Fox News should indicate two things: When the military gets involved with partisan or political discourse it potentially fuels the fire; and social media has a direct effect on SOF.

The topic of diversity and inclusion has created much debate regarding SOF. In a recent congressional hearing, much of the content centered around building a more diverse force. One key finding presented by retired Army Lieutenant General Michael Nagata, a 30-year SOF veteran, stated that society may want a more diverse SOF, but currently SOF struggles with recruiting minorities and women.³³¹ More research is required to understand the barriers and obstacles to recruiting in SOF to properly address the diversity of the organization. The issue of race and diversity within SOF should be addressed but must be implemented with a thorough understanding and knowledge of the current structure to ensure acceptable standard operating capability.³³²

These revelations of the diversity chief come amidst the increased spotlight on the military. Following the events of January 6, 2021 when the U.S. Capital was overrun with protestors, among them current and former military members, SECDEF Austin announced extremist in the ranks was a threat to the force. The entire DOD had a military stand-down day to discuss the topic and ensure the message was clear it would not be tolerated. To date, it is unknown if and how large the problem of extremism is within the military.³³³ More research is required to understand how many members may have ties to or align with extremist ideologies.

³³¹ U.S. House Armed Services Committee, *20210326 ISO Hearing: "SOF Culture and Climate: The Future of the Force,"* 2021, pt. Witness Statement of Michael Nagata, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OMB2hN49v3U>.

³³² Katherine J Reynolds, John C Turner, and S.Alexander Haslam, "Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories' Contribution to Understanding Identification, Salience, and Diversity in Teams and Organizations," in *Identity Issues in Groups*, ed. Jeffrey Polzer, vol. 5, Research on Managing Groups and Teams (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2003), 279–304, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S1534-0856\(02\)05011-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1534-0856(02)05011-9).

³³³ Todd South, "Extremism in the Ranks Is a 'Threat,' but the Pentagon's Not Sure How to Address It," *Military Times*, February 21, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2021/02/21/extremism-in-the-ranks-is-a-threat-but-the-pentagons-not-sure-how-to-address-it/>.

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VII. CONCLUSION: SOCOM 2030

The future of SOF culture will be is largely dependent on how civilian and military leaders react to the influences that surround special operators. Ethical misconduct within the force should not be dismissed, it is unacceptable behavior that should not be condoned. Although it would be easiest to simply say it was a few bad apples, this would be negating the multiple factors that can influence moral judgement and decisions. The organizational culture of SOCOM has focused on war, while losing focus on the force.

Throughout history SOF has been integral to supporting national security but overuse and over reliance has created an unstable environment within SOCOM. America's desire for SOF to be the solution to every problem has resulted in the unsustainable growth of an organization that now struggles to understand all its roles.³³⁴ Romantic ideals have enabled politicians to over rely on SOF and led a public to love them at all costs. SOF has become the pawn to the American way of war, a never-ending battle to remain superior. The affects are hidden to some, justified by others, but an honest objective look into SOCOM reveals a broken culture and eroding ethic. Twenty years of continuous fighting have had damaging effects on SOF culture; an organization built for war has lost the most to it. War became the culture. The culture was seemingly a symptom, however; reflecting the complexity of environmental influences that produced it. Politicians demanded it, leaders were raised in it, promotions relied on it, and the people could not imagine a world without it. Internally, there was nothing left untouched by the presence of war. Externally, there was much the same. Society has promoted the ideals of the American elite, embracing their actions as heroes with an infallible reputation. The military is one of the few institutions left within society that people still trust. Essentially the only institution society trusts to handle difficult foreign relations. The cost of ethical erosion to some is simply the cost of war.

³³⁴ Mark Bowden, "Why Special Ops Is the New National-Security Catchall," *The Atlantic*, April 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/04/how-special-ops-became-the-solution-to-everything/618080/>.

As leaders look to the future in attempts to realign the ethical focus of SOF, they must first acknowledge the intrinsic link to an eroding culture. The individual ethic is undoubtedly influenced by cultural norms and values. Fixing the problem is complex and multifaceted. SOCOM is a complex organization operating in a dynamic environment, the ability to break down or control the variables is nearly impossible. A singular solution does not exist. Narrow focus on singular influences will likely produce an unforeseen cascade of affects in other facets of SOF culture.

Understanding the internal and external influences that are present is the only path to a renewed focus on American commandos. One of Edgar Schein's primary embedding mechanisms insists "how leaders react to critical incidents and organizational crisis" will determine the culture.³³⁵ The 2011 POTFF study proposed "major paradigm shifts in holistic organizational culture and behavior of the force" was required to enable future success of SOF.³³⁶ The 2019 CR found initiatives that resulted from the study were only marginally successful due in large part to the challenge of implementation.³³⁷ In other words, SOCOM acknowledged cultural issues were effecting the force, but did not fully embrace a culture that was intent on fixing it. The 2019 CR found much of the same issues listed throughout the 2011 POTFF study, only with increased magnitude. SOCOM leadership appears to have heard the latest message from the CR clearly this time. Recognizing a culture that needs refocused, commanders have called for change.

Rear Admiral Collin Green sent a message to his NSW members stating only "we have a problem."³³⁸ Admiral Green could have been speaking to many different units within SOCOM when he sent that message. The commander had a goal to fix a troubled culture within the Navy SEALs.³³⁹ Green was not alone in his efforts to fix ethically

³³⁵ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 252.

³³⁶ McRaven, *Pressure on the Force and Families (POTFF) Review*, 2.

³³⁷ USSOCOM, *United States Special Operation Command Comprehensive Review*, 44.

³³⁸ Gina Harkins, "Head of Navy SEALs Says, 'We Have a Problem' Following High-Profile Scandals," *Military.com*, August 1, 2019, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/08/01/head-navy-seals-says-we-have-problem-following-high-profile-scandals.html>.

³³⁹ Cole, "Navy Admiral Who Clashed with Trump Over Disciplining SEAL to Retire."

misguided cultures, there are many units within SOCOM that still hold true to unwavering sacrifice and dedication to their country and do so while conducting themselves honorably and selflessly. Unfortunately, they are drowned out by those that forgo the responsibility to uphold the SOF ethos. The ethical misconduct present within SOF is a direct result of the misguided and eroding SOF culture. Changing a culture will require a dedication to leadership, accountability, and a thorough self-reflection of those within SOCOM. A comprehensive analysis that thoroughly understands the internal and external influences is critical to a true self-assessment if change is desired.

While in a class at Naval Postgraduate School, a professor asked a class with twelve different members from SOCOM, “what makes SOF special?”³⁴⁰ The quiet that filled the room was telling, a full answer was never given. Nearly all members of the class were from a different unit within SOCOM, a different culture. The inability for anyone to identify with what makes them part of something special would lead some to believe the cultural erosion and identity crisis continues to spread. Without a renewed focus on SOF culture, the gap will potentially widen. When members of SOCOM are asked in 2030 what makes them special, what will they say?

³⁴⁰ Kalev Sepp, “History of SOF,” Defense Analysis Department (Monterey, Ca: Naval Postgraduate School, February 2020).

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