

# Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect: The Challenge of Currency Conversion



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*Tactical Operations for  
Strategic Effect: The  
Challenge of Currency  
Conversion*

Colin S. Gray

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# Foreword

Dr. Colin Gray's *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect: The Challenge of Currency Conversion* examines in depth the conversion of tactical behavior with its strategic consequences. This topic should be of great interest to the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community because special operations has recently been the 'option of choice' when dealing with various foreign policy crises. SOF are sent on these missions because of their skills and small-scale mission sets. More importantly, however, is the belief that these tactical operations will have a strategic effect. Unfortunately, that conversion does not always happen. Dr. Gray addresses this conversion by breaking down what is meant by using the term tactical versus strategic. As Dr. Gray posits, "the concepts of tactics and strategy are ones misused abusively on a habitual and widespread basis throughout the U.S. defense community." The author makes the case that "tactics concern military action, strategy is all about the consequences of such behavior." If there is confusion about these two concepts—and the author believes there is—then charting a sensible relationship between them is impossible. This monograph attempts to clear up that confusion by using historical examples where strategy and tactics have failed each other. One such historical example is the lack of strategy issued by Confederate President Jefferson Davis. In fact, Dr. Gray contends that "If any single factor is able to lead in explanation of the failure of the [Confederate States' Army] CSA in the Civil War, most plausibly it was the persisting neglect, even just incomprehension, of strategy." The author argues the tactical action and strategic effect disconnect is repeated throughout U.S. military history including the current conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan.

Dr. Gray's analysis is broken down into three main parts: problem, argument, and solution. The first part, the problem, explores the disharmony between the levels of action and desired consequences. For the SOF community, this problem addresses how "SOF should be conducted with, and in purposeful devotion to, action and other activities that contain or represent strategic sense for the promotion of the desired effect." While this sounds straightforward in theory, Dr. Gray reminds the reader it is difficult to obey in practice. The second part, the argument, distinguishes between the two

sets of ideas of strategy and tactics and explains why the distinction is of vital importance. SOF tactical actions are assumed to be highly skillful, yet these actions are often dismissed as strategically insignificant based on the small scale of the operation. Gray argues that strategic is not another word meaning big or large in scale but rather the value of SOF can be found in their ability to strategically target a critically important part of an enemy. In the final part, the solution, the author argues that SOF operations need to be better understood by those outside and inside the SOF community. Dr. Gray states that “neither the SOF community nor the rest of the military establishment, including the allies, really understands the proper roles that should be assigned SOF.” The goal is to have the necessary direction and leadership providing solid strategic sense so SOF may achieve the effects needed to advance U.S. policy. This will not be easy, nor will it happen quickly, but getting it right will allow tactical operations to convert to strategic effect for the nation.

Kenneth H. Poole, Ed.D.  
Director, Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

## About the Author

**D**r. Colin S. Gray is a political scientist with broad interests in national security policy, defense policy, strategy, strategic theory, and military history. He is a Professor of International Politics and Strategic Studies and Director of the Centre for Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, England. He is also a Senior Fellow at the National Institute for Public Policy in Fairfax, Virginia.

Dr. Gray worked at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, United Kingdom, and at the Hudson Institute in Croton-on-Hudson, New York, before founding the National Institute for Public Policy, a defense-oriented think tank near Washington, D.C.



Dr. Gray served for five years in the Ronald Reagan administration on the President's General Advisory Committee on Arms Control and Disarmament. A dual citizen of the United States and United Kingdom, he has served as an adviser to both the U.S. and British governments. His government work has included studies of nuclear strategy, arms control, maritime strategy, space strategy, and special operations.

Dr. Gray has published many articles in such journals as *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *Survival*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *Washington Quarterly*, *The National Interest*, and *International Security*. He has lectured on defense and foreign affairs in Europe and North America, as well as in China, Israel, and Australia.

Dr. Gray has written 28 books, including *The Sheriff: America's Defense of the New World Order* (University Press of Kentucky, 2004); *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2005); *Strategy and History: Essays on Theory and Practice* (Routledge, 2006); *Fighting Talk: Forty Maxims on War, Peace and Strategy* (Potomac Books, 2009); *National Security Dilemmas: Challenges and Opportunities* (Potomac Books, 2009); *The Strategic Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2010); *War, Peace and International Relations: An Introduction to Strategic History*, 2nd Ed.

(Routledge, 2011); *Airpower for Strategic Effect* (Air University Press, 2012); and *Perspectives on Strategy* (Oxford University Press 2013), among others.

Dr. Gray holds a B.A. in economics from the University of Manchester and a D.Phil in international politics from Oxford University. He is most interested in the theory and practice of strategy, the dialogue between policy and military force, and in the value of historical experience for the education of policymakers.

## Introduction

Strategy is designed to make war useable by the state, so that it can, if need be, use force to fulfil its political objectives. – Hew Strachan<sup>1</sup>

Strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory. Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.<sup>2</sup>

The currency conversion that is the subject of this report is that between tactical behavior and its strategic consequences. It needs to be appreciated that all strategy is made of tactical action. Military action is encompassed by the concept of tactics, while the product is the behavior that can be explained in terms of strategy. The great challenge to which the title of this report refers is that inherent in the differences in nature between tactics and strategy. These two inclusive concepts are fundamentally distinctive and radically different in meaning. A Special Operations Forces (SOF) community seeking to explain its functions needs to be crystal clear in distinguishing between the fundamentally distinctive meanings. Such discipline admittedly can be difficult to maintain, given the loose conceptual usage that is all too common in the defense community. To explain: as a matter of good conceptual order there are no, indeed there cannot be, any ‘strategic’ troops, forces, or weapons, for the simple reason that all troops, forces, and weapons have strategic meaning, be it ever so slight, or even arguable. To make the logical point directly, all military strategy is made by tactics; there is no other military source. But, no military action in the field should be considered inherently strategic, rather is it all within the realm of tactics. This means that any and all such military action requires conversion into the different and higher currency of strategy. Given that all military behavior should be sparked by political intentions, it has to follow that the use of military force cannot even make tactical sense if the relevant action lacks political meaning or even intelligible purpose or sense. Therefore, tactics and strategy have to be regarded as thoroughly mutually interdependent; we should not even attempt to recognize the existence of one without the other. Certainly, neither can make sense when considered alone. In the interest of promoting clarity of understanding, readers are advised that it is necessary to understand that tactics, on the one hand, should refer only to military action

or to behavior clearly and closely relevant to such behavior, while strategy, on the other hand, must be limited in assigned meaning strictly to the consequences of that behavior, arguable though often it will be. This analysis is presented in three organizing parts: problem, argument, and solution.

# 1. Problem: Theory and Practice

Far from being unusual, the idea of currency conversion is a stock in trade for most strategic concerns. By strategic effect we refer to the influence of some action or anticipation of such upon the course of events. The currency conversion to which this paper refers may be military to military, but a broader interpretation is plausible also. Indeed, the political meaning and consequence of any military happening probably should be regarded as a currency conversion. As a general rule, military force is threatened and applied for the purpose of changing an adversary's behavior. We strive to use our military prowess to persuade, or otherwise induce, an enemy to alter his policy and its implications in the field. As a general rule, effort at forcible currency conversion, even if largely confined in effect to the enemy's anticipation of events to come, will remain in the realm of guesswork and hope, rather than calculated consequences. Currency conversion is not an exact science.

The beginning of wisdom on the subject here has to be clear, if rather uncomfortable, understanding of the true distinctions in nature among the levels of effort necessary for the conduct of war and its warfare. Much—probably most—of what politicians say about the structure and dynamic competitive workings of war simply is wrong. It is wrong because they do not understand the nature of the grim subject. It is commonplace for Americans and Britons to lament the all too evident disharmony between tactical behavior and desired strategic effect, but it is far from commonplace for such frank and usually accurate recognition to be traced to its true cause.<sup>3</sup> The fundamental cause of disharmony lies in the distinctive natures of each level of behavior—grand strategic, military strategic, operational, and tactical—and the almost awesome difficulty of achieving the necessary conversion between levels. In principle, of course, there should be little difficulty, because the chain of national military command is supposed to tie it all together, except that in practice typically it does not do so adequately.

The epigrams that preface this text direct attention to a long persisting problem. Indeed, it is possible and perhaps probable that the challenge in using force for strategic effect admits of no easy and ready solution. Definition, explanation, and understanding of the problem in conducting tactical

behavior for such effect do not pose any great difficulty. Rather, the real challenge is the attempt to identify solutions as one shifts from the pure and unsullied air of theory into the often grimy exigencies of necessary practice. The epigrams quoted earlier should be understood as leaving no substantial scope for argument about the meaning of terms key to this analysis. Nonetheless, these words are written more in hope than in confident expectation, because the concepts of tactics and strategy are ones misused abusively on a habitual and widespread basis throughout the U.S. defense community. Contrary to the likely judgment reached in a hasty assessment, this faulty use of important ideas can matter profoundly. Those who choose to believe that this subject at this very early stage in the analysis is simply an issue most to do with personal preference in the deployment of language, are wrong. Strategy and tactics, nouns and adjectives, should not be employed almost at random, or for reason of institutional self-promotion, because their proper meaning is vitally important to national security. People who demonstrate a notably relaxed attitude toward the definition and then the use of important concepts are not being sophisticated in a tolerant way about minor issues, but rather typically reveal inadvertently that they do not understand the subject well enough when they address the relationship between strategy and tactics. The fact that these concepts are misapplied regularly, even apparently innocently, within the U.S. defense community, should not discourage us from attempting to be more accurate. This is not mere scholastic pedantry, because harmful consequences follow as a result of failure of conceptual grasp and grip.

Both authors of the quotations at the beginning of this report, and also Carl von Clausewitz, leave no solid ground for doubt as to the basis for the distinction between strategy and tactics.<sup>4</sup> Definitions abound, none are truly authoritative, though many countries' military establishments inevitably prefer ones they decide to favor. The author's personal preferences are the following:

Military strategy is the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purposes of policy as decided by politics.<sup>5</sup>

Tactics are actual military behavior, most especially though not only, directly in combat.<sup>6</sup>

While tactics concern military action, strategy is all about the consequences of such behavior; this is a night or day difference! Quite obviously, if we confuse the two there is little or no prospect of our identifying and then charting a sensible relationship between them. This is not a minor matter of trivial significance. It matters enormously for SOF that their contribution to the course of events should be approached in the light that ought to be cast clearly by suitable strategy.

This analysis and its argument do not attempt to venture very far into the almost wholly underexplored, let alone developed, realm of a theory of SOF/special operations.<sup>7</sup> That said, it is necessary at this very early juncture to identify a few of the building blocks most vitally necessary for eventual construction of such a theory. In his excellent relatively brief outline of what are most needed as the major components of military theory, former Green Beret, Professor Harold R. Winton, cited five principal tasks: it needs to define; categorize; explain; connect; and anticipate, or at least make a serious effort so to do.<sup>8</sup> Unquestionably, a theory of and for SOF, if not necessarily for all special operations, will not be able to attempt tasks three through five, unless first it succeeds in accomplishing the first two tasks, both of which, in linked ways, identify just what it is that we are, and also are not, talking about. This is not lazy repetition, but rather is an essential step on the path that could and should lead to a well enough crafted theory for special operations. Winton claims very plausibly that the core value of military theory lies in its potential ability to provide necessary explanation. Bluntly put, theory sorts out what needs to be sorted, each from the remainder. In all too apposite wording, the Prussian grand master of military theory, Carl von Clausewitz, expressed the dominant intention thus:

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*“Military strategy is the direction and use made of force and the threat of force for the purposes of policy as decided by politics.”*

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The primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become, as it were, confused and entangled. Not until terms and concepts have been defined can one hope to make any progress in examining the question clearly and simply and expect the reader to share one’s views. Tactics and strategy are two activities that permeate one another in time and space but are nevertheless

essentially different. Their inherent laws and mutual relationship cannot be understood without a total comprehension of both.<sup>9</sup>

Also, we are told that:

Theory exists so one need not start afresh each time sorting out the material and plowing through it, but will find it ready to hand and in good order. It is meant to educate the mind of the future commander, or, more accurately, to guide him in his self-education, not to accompany him to the battlefield.<sup>10</sup>

For our contemporary purpose and essential to the argument of this report, it would be a challenge to improve upon Clausewitz. The translation of Prussian German from the 1820s, at the latest, into our modern (post-1918) English contrasting the concepts of usage of tactics and strategy is rather problematic at best, but the sense of Clausewitz's argument is not at all in doubt. On balance, linguistically, often he did write of what we clearly regard as operational matters in terms that better fit our understanding of strategy. This was both an inevitable consequence of the high battle focus inseparable from the context of the Napoleonic Wars, and also simply a matter of standard contemporary linguistic practice.

What this author suggests is that it is essential for the tactical behavior of SOF to be anchored in and for a command chain that has to attempt to connect American strategy with its implementing tactics. To remove residual doubts that might be lingering about this subject, this author will state as simply as possible what is necessary for strategy and tactics to sing from the same, at least a fairly common, hymn sheet. The mission here is to help explain why it is that American military strategy and tactics have tended to fail each other. Instead of a coherent, if not always harmonious, military narrative wherein tactical behavior supported and thereby enabled the satisfaction of strategic tasks, the tactical action with which strategy must be made has lacked ready convertibility into strategic effect.<sup>11</sup> When extremely dangerous missions are performed well, or even just well enough, by SOF, naturally it is painfully frustrating to be brought to recognize that the strategic and political reward of this high tactical prowess essentially is likely to be wasted, because tactics and strategy, let alone policy and its politics, seemingly are functioning on different levels. If readers will indulge a liking for Clausewitz yet again, problematic translation duly granted of course,

this is what the Prussian had to say most essentially about the necessity for coherence in appraisal of the levels of warfare:

But in war, as in life generally, all parts of a whole are interconnected and thus the effects produced, however small their cause, must influence all subsequent military operations and modify their final outcome to some degree. In the same way, every means must influence even the ultimate purpose.<sup>12</sup>

This looks like the three-block hybrid war about which General Krulak of the Marines wrote back in 1999. General Krulak was advancing a holistic understanding of war that accommodated actions of different nature being pursued possibly in very close physical (and political) relation to each other. There was much sense in General Krulak's concept, but it was only a rough conception of an often confusing trend in politically inspired violence. Later writing, including some theory, on the subject termed hybrid warfare, continued the inclusive conceptualization that had been encouraged by General Krulak.<sup>13</sup>

A skeptical commentary on what was done or attempted must be an endeavor to explain why strategy and tactics seemed often to be sailing past each other as ships in the night, passing unseen and therefore unacknowledged in the diversity of their navigation.

This analyst long has endorsed the value that should be extracted from the logical meaning of strategic theory. Contrary to appearances, perhaps, an important reason why theory is important is because it can help, even enable, busy and tired military professionals to understand better than they might do otherwise just why their commonly hazardous behavior in the field of (tactical) action does not seem to garner the practical rewards for effort they believe it deserves. If we fight skillfully, indeed apparently successfully, how come the principal consequences of our effort appear to be so modest? The rewards of a sound education in theory should be gathered in the tactical, operational, and ultimately strategic consequences of prudent military decision making. The function of strategic theory is the education of the soldier so that he is able to make sounder decisions than would be probable in the absence of such intellectual preparation. It is not the task of general theory to yield tactical or operational advice. The particular content of such advice must lie in the realms of tactical and operational doctrine, for which the particular contexts of military action are likely to be critically

important. Ultimately in pursuit of strategic goals for the political purposes of policy, tactical behavior too often appears to have been disconnected from some higher intention. This persisting condition is neither hard to spot in the narrative of military performance, nor is it particularly challenging to understand, at least one would not think so. Nonetheless, repeatedly in recent American history it has proved exceedingly difficult, if not necessarily actually impossible, to correct so that tactical behavior can be cashed in strategically for political gain.

An obvious difficulty with the need to convert tactical achievement or effect into some useful strategic effect lies in the very nature of the key difference between tactical and strategic effect. Whereas the former is usually observable and may even be observed directly and measurable, the latter typically is revealed only by the course of events following the passage of time. Furthermore, while tactical effect usually is more or less obvious, strategic effect often is distinctly arguable, with causation and possible consequence not being apparently very directly related. It is frequently a feature of warfare for tactically accomplished soldiers to fail to realize that their tactical excellence commonly will only register tactical advantages. As I have observed already in this report, tactical mastery does not automatically convert into strategic coin. Understandably, the importance of this needed currency conversion may be a challenge to explain to the troops with their tactical skills.

It is necessary never to forget that the most fundamental task of strategic theory simply is explanation; it is really all about an endeavor to make sense of what has happened, possibly is still happening, and what might well occur in a future we can attempt to anticipate if not cause directly. It may strain belief to identify and insist upon this, but an enduring structural problem lies at the damaged heart of the challenge central to this enquiry. Specifically, the difficulty that tacticians persist in having with combat assignments that seem not to make much difference to the course of history desired by U.S. national security policy is attributable in large part to what we may choose to recognize as the nature of the subject. The lengthy American experience of war and its warfare, both in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, provided a painfully frustrating reminder of some old unwelcome truths. Although the focus of this report is upon the tactical behavior and strategic meaning of recent, contemporary, and future special operations, there is merit in opening a wider historical door upon this class of challenge. For example, the heavy use of United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) in Iraq

and Afghanistan is all too reminiscent of the frequently appalling historical record of lack of strategy guidance provided, but most urgently needed by the Confederate States' Army (CSA) in 1862. If any single factor is able to lead in explanation of the failure of the CSA in the Civil War, most plausibly it was the persisting neglect, even just incomprehension, of strategy. In the fall of 1862, Confederate President Jefferson Davis, who in some respects was a sincerely passionate and responsible politician with a seriously military education, issued guidance to his generals from which strategy was thoroughly absent:

Instead [of establishing clearer operational objectives for all of the offensive prongs of the several offensives he endorsed], too much of the operational plan boiled down to marching north and hoping good things happened<sup>14</sup> ... This was not good operational warfare.<sup>15</sup>

Redundant comment aside, this does sound remarkably familiar from recent American experience in Central Asia. Jefferson Davis could have fitted in well, at least in a few respects though certainly not in others, in the protracted U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan. Stoker's wording amounted to advice, because if Davis' army did what he was convinced that it should, good things arguably might follow as a benign consequence. This was not strategy. At best it was would-be hopeful operational, certainly tactical, opportunism. It is unmistakably evident from General Stanley McChrystal's detailed and somewhat reflective personal memoir of his extensive command experience, particularly over special operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, that he was unable to shape any design that might plausibly merit the title of strategy.<sup>16</sup> This failure, which he probably did recognize, had little to do with the tactical or even the operational misuse of special operations. Rather was it caused, apparently irretrievably, by the glaring fact that the policy guidance that needed to be founded on sustainable U.S. and Allied political support, simply did not exist and could not be fabricated in real time.

The most useful method by which we can probe for the possible strategic effect of military behavior is through utterance of the rough and brutally simple question, 'so what?' If properly expressed in a tone of challenge, it requires the addressee to attempt to connect what he has done, or might do in the field, to the zone of consequences that is strategic. Strategic effect is what tactics have to be about, since they should not be conducted solely for reasons of self-validation. This vital question—which may sound more like a

skeptical comment with hostile meaning barely hidden—should require an answer that focuses upon believed or anticipated consequences, which is the zone of strategy. Superior tactical performance, if bereft of plausibly benign strategic effect, is always likely to be a waste of effort on several counts.

The austere basic architecture of strategy specifies, one must say insists, that the model of the subject works because of the interdependent, if usually complex, relations among policy ends, strategic ways, military means, and assumptions (which commonly are left entirely neglected). When policy ends fail to serve well enough, being not up to the job at hand, strategy is impossible. Tactics may or may not be of an exemplary excellence, but that fact cannot much matter. An entire political venture and many billions of

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*When policy ends fail to serve well enough, being not up to the job at hand, strategy is impossible.*

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dollars literally will be wasted because the troops, SOF and others, are not deployed and employed for sensibly achievable policy purpose. This argument is so obvious, and has been revealed as current reality so recently over a period of years, that it is tempting to

label it as military business as usual. However, that will probably fairly be judged as unacceptably banal, if not unduly cynical. If the U.S. could not decide on what it should attempt to accomplish politically in Afghanistan and also Iraq, it is scarcely surprising that their generals were more than marginally challenged in their usually worthy, typically actively energetic, efforts to achieve something—but what was that something?

The ‘disconnect problem’ central to this enquiry cannot accurately be understood as being in any important sense uniquely American. Although the troubled relationship between strategy and tactics understandably is of pressing importance to USSOF today, as a matter of historical accuracy it is actually as ancient as we are able and care to look. Herodotus and certainly Thucydides are as essential and useful as sources for the better comprehension of the phenomenon of disconnection as General David Petraeus and General McChrystal. The reasons why this is so are examined throughout the analysis that follows in this report.

## **Disharmony Between Levels of Effort is ‘Business as Usual’: Understanding War, Warfare, and the Politics of Policy<sup>17</sup>**

Accepting with some hesitation the need to risk the tolerance of some readers, this author has to make explicit what the historical record has revealed already beyond room for serious doubt. The core problems are twofold: (1) people with proven records of excellence in performance at one level often have few natural gifts or aptitudes for exemplary service at others; and (2) even if and when currency conversion is appreciated as the show-stopper it can prove to be, domestic or Alliance politics may well preclude suitable military course corrective behavior.

Soldiers will feel justly annoyed when their personally dangerous efforts in the field are, or certainly appear to be, frittered away by apparently incompetent superiors far up the national or Alliance chains of command. But it is unlikely that this understandable frustration will lead to much improved comprehension of the true reasons for it. Though nearly all of us behave somewhat strategically much of the time, albeit usually instinctively without knowing consciously that we are so doing, understanding of this urge tends to be rather rudimentary, when it is not absent altogether. Expressed in the usefully standard terms of strategic theory, we all are obliged by circumstance to interconnect our policy ends, strategic ways, and accessible means, for the purpose of living in adequate prosperity with tolerable security. The entire truly personal strategic exercise will be guided, if not governed, by the assumptions we are obliged to endorse (concerning the rewards we anticipate enjoying as a consequence of prudent strategic behavior).

It is entirely common for the currency conversion challenge to be beyond the reach even of skilled and experienced analysis. In other words, we simply do not and probably cannot, know what, say, political, military strategic, operational, and tactical behaviors, will mean on and for levels other than their own. This author is arguing the case for recognition of the true differences between the contexts for politics, war, and actual warfare. These differ, but not always or even usually in ways unmistakable to participants, even personal participants. Of course, the chain of command should provide the necessary guidance for tolerable coherence, if not necessarily harmony, among levels of behavior and responsibility, but commonly it fails to do so. The entire record of strategic history attests to this disharmony. Politics attempt too much, or too little, and the troops in their necessarily tactical

'bubble' wonder at the empirical evidence of incompetence they cannot help noticing, if, that is, they have the time and inclination for a little reflection—which often understandably they do not.

The fundamental cause of the disharmony is really nothing more complicated than the enduring particular natures of the activities required for satisfactory performance at the different levels of effort. People commonly find personal difficulty, even outright failure, if challenged by context to perform beyond what they discover to be their natural comfort zone for competent behavior. The limits of this zone are the consequence of biology, culture, and circumstance. Many people are more than content to exist almost entirely in the here and now, with scant thought about possible consequences tomorrow. For troops engaged actively in combat, such neglect of the luxury of some positive anticipation of tomorrow and the days following is almost entirely appropriate. Attractive or worrying distractive thoughts about the future could get you killed today! Unfortunately, perhaps, the distinctively unique levels of performance do not comprise anything closely resembling a seamless web, notwithstanding the true and necessary interdependence among the ends, ways, means, and vital assumptions that theory identifies in the abstract with high confidence. In practice, the national, let alone the Alliance, chain of command bears little resemblance to a smoothly harmonious machine. Indeed, the historical record appears to show that the Peter Principle, which holds ironically that each person is able to rise so far as to reach his or her own individual level of incompetence, more often is the norm than the exception. It is not only the case of plain incompetence, the sheer effort and experience demanded as the price to be paid for particular excellence has the consequence of all but disabling people from being able to shift levels for different kinds of required behavior. In practice, this means there are many superior warrior-soldiers who are close to incapable of reasoning even operationally, let alone strategically or politically. The concept of strategic sense is a close relative to strategic effect—except, significantly, the former focuses upon a state of mind in command, whereas the more common concept of strategic effect makes no particular suggestion concerning what or how one should employ a strategic effect for net advantage. The idea of strategic sense, though admittedly and undeniably subjective, does have the virtue that it directs attention upon the purpose of an effort, a distinction that the idea of strategic effect does not convey with such conviction. While the concept of strategic sense may well be far less familiar to many

readers than is strategic effect, that probable fact ought not to be permitted to discourage us severely, given what it adds to an analysis that allows much scope for judgment.<sup>18</sup> Also, there will be little if anything in the resume of a person with decades of first-hand experience in the political world, likely to contribute significantly to his understanding of strategic, operational, or tactical military matters.

Once we are perhaps ready to acknowledge the full team of players highly relevant to the relationship between strategy and tactics, we can begin to appreciate how challenging it can be to invent, develop, and produce tactical action for national security that has real and genuine coherence. While the focus of attention here is upon the relationship between strategy and tactics, in the live dynamic narrative of strategic history, that concentration typically misses the proper target. The core issue for this report may well appear to be fairly strictly the difficulty of threatening or using limited force in ways and for political purposes that comprise a coherently whole venture. However, in practice we should be willing to learn from the historical record that the most persisting difficulty for SOF usually has not been the challenge of needing to perform with notable strategic sense. Rather, the problem has been that USSOF could not employ strategic sense that literally was missing from the action. General McChrystal was not the first American commander to discover that if one is short of a strategy, more than tactical excellence is necessary if the game is to be raised to the higher level of strategy.<sup>19</sup> The should-have-been American strategic story of Afghanistan in the 2000s could not develop, let alone persist, because the politics required by policies were never sufficiently sound in local terms, and the country was too large and well inhabited to be controlled and disciplined, or even just ‘advised’ (prudently by the U.S. and its allies). When the selectively brief initial euphoria of ‘victory disease’—a malady to which Germans had been especially prone—deriving from the apparent U.S. military successes of 2001 to 2003 had subsided, it became all too clear that even exemplary military prowess by SOF could not function sufficiently constructively to serve the policy ends of strategically sensible political purpose.<sup>20</sup> To risk undue repetition, the reason is because the relationship between strategy and tactics cannot be treated intelligently if it is regarded as a closed system. The strategy-tactics nexus has to be meaningless, or worse, if policy goals are not specified and understood in political guidance. The summary judgment that best captures the issue is the familiar one of ‘mission impossible.’ But, what is the political

mission and, pending understanding of the answer to that question, how can we know what kind and level of tactical effort is likely to prove necessary for its attainment?

The purpose here is not to make a case highly critical of the long American-led struggles in Afghanistan and Iraq from 2001 to 2015, but rather to attempt to explain the reasons behind the strategy-tactics disharmony of the period. Therefore, this author chooses to depersonalize his analysis in order to avoid adding to the embarrassment of those guilty of conducting what needed to be skillful statecraft and strategy, but usually in practice was not.

The war and its warfare that American (and British, *inter alia*) SOF found themselves waging energetically in Afghanistan and Iraq was provided over-abundantly with context. There were the dynamic political contexts of Coalition politics among variably willing allies, some only of convenience, and those polities all had domestic political contexts of their own. Aside from the political context(s) there was, indeed there is always, the political-military context flagged and sorted in the logic of the theory of strategy. We know with high confidence that strategy, though relatively simple and straightforward to explain in PowerPoint form to an audience, in practice is high on the scale of human difficulties to practice coherently for national net advantage. Strategy is a creative art governed principally by judgment, not by calculation.<sup>21</sup> In malign addition, perhaps multiplication, to the political contextual challenges cited already and unsurprisingly, SOF and other troops found their efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq hindered and frustrated by the fact that the theory of strategy was not permitted to rule over hopeful optimistic ambition.

To explain: the relationship between strategy and its enabling tactics requires, as a matter of absolute need, that policy ends, which is to say political choices, provide both legitimacy and practicable guidance. Rephrased, you cannot know how to achieve something unless first you are told just what it is and is not.<sup>22</sup> To be blunt, how can you possibly know how well you are doing 'in the field' with special operations, for example, unless you are confident that you have available some meaningful measures of success, even if they can be obtained only as a consequence of judgment and not by metric analysis?

Unfortunately, there is no fully satisfactory way to avoid mentioning a critically important negative factor emphasized by military historian Williamson Murray:

[F]or whatever reasons, the record of military institutions has been all too dismal, suggesting a pattern of incompetence in their failure to innovate and adapt. In looking at a series of essays examining the military effectiveness of national military organizations in the first half of the twentieth century, an eminent retired soldier commented in the following terms. '[I]n the spheres of operations and tactics, where military competence would seem to be a nation's rightful due, the twenty-one essays [by historians] suggest for the most part less than military competence and sometimes abysmal incompetence. One can doubt whether any other professions in these seven nations [about which Lt. General John H. Cushman was commenting] during the same periods would have received such poor ratings by similarly competent outside observers.'<sup>23</sup>

Murray and Cushman may well be correct in their excoriating condemnation of human weakness, but it is sensible to be somewhat more generous on the subject of occasional human failure. It can be rather too easy to forget that strategic endeavor is by definition a deadly competitive and above all else an adversarial enterprise.<sup>24</sup> There are no fields of contested strife at all comparable to the strategic. Much, indeed probably most, of the business studies literature that seeks to employ strategic theory fails to understand how and why military strategy uniquely is different. In business, strategic error may lead to bankruptcy, while in military strategy on behalf of statecraft, strategic mistakes tend to result in death and destruction, as well inexorably as policy failure. Nonetheless, it is only human to make mistakes, particularly

when in competition and even possibly some limited cooperation with the enemy, because in any war one is inventing the unique dynamics of an actual armed struggle in real-time as one goes. If this line of rea-

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soning has some merit, it has to be the case that of necessity we can play particular violent passages of arms only once, before circumstances change on us and on the enemy. A prudent implication of this thought is that the course of strategic history is condemned to be a typically chaotic procession of happenings that could not have been planned much in advance,

because the context was evolving too rapidly and probably unexpectedly to have been anticipated with high confidence. Beyond the pages of simplistic text books and the formal slides of PowerPoint briefings, the processes of governance and of strategy making have no choice other than to cope as best they are able with the unexpected, including that which appear to be largely randomly chaotic, as best they can. When Murray and Cushman level charges of incompetence, there is little room for doubt but that they are probably correct, in major part at least. However, by way of essential addition it is advisable to pose the definitive strategist's question, 'so what?' If some significant incompetence is usual, it should be expected, and measures to limit its possible damage ought to be ready to hand. Perfection in military, let alone strategic, performance has never been historically characteristic and it is never likely to be so in the future.

Wherever we look at inter-zonal boundaries between interdependent but nonetheless distinctive classes of activity and meaning, we find abundant evidence of disharmony. This is not just scholarly pedantry, rather it is full and all too true recognition of the unique, albeit linked, natures of the several behaviors bearing more or less directly upon the often troubled relationship between strategy and tactics (for SOF, inter alia). Stated in the most basic manner, the subject here is the problem encountered when we strive to accomplish tasks of a particular kind, in this case, often though not invariably violent, for the purpose of securing rewards of a yet different kind. For example, we fight in order to prosecute an operational intention, or we pursue operational inspiration for the purpose hopefully of securing strategic effect that may satisfy the policy ends approved by our political masters. However, neatly interlocking and interdependent as the distinctive conceptual zones may appear, the whole of strategic history tells us that what amounts to a dilemma in currency conversion often frustrates what should be achievable as we strive to move from one conceptual zone into another. For examples: strategic grand design may not be adequate to meet the traffic of demand upon it, especially if it misjudges the weight and intensity of political challenge (e.g., the weakness of Union strategy in the first two years of the American Civil War); operational artistry might fail to settle upon, or implement, maneuver that an enemy is unable to counter (e.g., the mismanaged Allied campaign in mainland Italy, 1943–1944); or the tactical performance, which is to say the fighting power, of troops simply may be too

weak to achieve higher operational purpose, no matter how sensible those goals might have been.

The entire structure of national security policy and strategy really comprises a contestable puzzle of deeply uncertain key relationships not at all permissive of elucidation by rigorous metric analysis. A substantial part of the reason for this was explained persuasively by Clausewitz when he laid heavy emphasis upon the potency of what he called 'the moral element.'<sup>25</sup> This vital region of uncertainty means that the operational and also the strategic value of tactical behavior is often considerably uncertain. Troops we believe should be sufficiently intimidated to receive and be ready for a generous looking offer to surrender may instead prefer to behave self-sacrificially with extraordinary, if personally fatal, determination.



## 2. Argument: The Search for Strategic Effect

Whereas the first section was devoted primarily to exploration of the principal problem addressed here, that of disharmony between levels of action and desired consequences, the second section is concerned primarily with accurate targeting of the proposed solution upon which this author focused in the final third of this report.

Probably it is necessary that this author should emphasize the scale of the conceptual challenge that SOF, or indeed any capability among the array of U.S. military instruments, is bound to need to make. If strategic effect is the dynamic goal, as is most appropriate, one needs to appreciate that its meaning will rarely be entirely self-evident. Despite the expenditure of considerable energetic literary effort over the past decade and more, the ideas of strategic effect and even of strategic sense have not advanced far beyond the roles and status of expedient slogans. Seemingly, everyone approves of the core ideas revealed in the adjectival use of strategic, but few, if any analysts, have been willing to expose the level of their understanding to the possibly critical appraisal that might follow from claims for specific strategic argument. The central pillar in this report has to be insistence that SOF should be conducted with, and in purposeful devotion to, action and other activities that contain or represent strategic sense for the promotion of the desired effect. This attractive sounding idea undoubtedly is sound in principle, but it can prove abominably difficult to obey in practice. For an obvious objection, often it will not be at all obvious that we have stumbled upon a course of threat and action that usefully can be treated as a reliable repository of appropriate strategic effect. Indeed, the intensity of our domestic debates about Vietnam, and more recently Iraq and Afghanistan, and more currently still, Ukraine, tells us that even if strategic effect is a very useful concept for the revelation of truth and error, its content is likely to be eminently contestable. That said, still there may be high value rewarding the employment of strategic sense, because at the very least it should help to direct political debaters toward a usefully dynamic concept that might spur argument constructively. Readers of this report skeptical of the argument just made need to be challenged to find and attempt to employ superior alternative ideas.

To this author, at least, it would seem to be the case that strategic effect and indeed sense are the most potent relevant concepts that may be deployed. Nothing else comes close to addressing the core issue under discussion, that of currency conversion between tactics and strategy. The ideas of strategic effect and strategic sense are of course closely related. However, the 'sense' notion is deeper and probably more significant in actual military practice as compared with the much more common concept of strategic effect. The effect idea is very heavily tactically imbued and would direct attention to the attempts to achieve ever greater metrication of warfare. Viewed thus, it is considerably similar to the uses of airpower in Vietnam. Strategic effect is not in any meaningful sense incorrect, but it encourages a rather narrow view of warfare that may discount the important moral element. Also, this author finds the concept of strategic sense to be most appropriate for those who have to command special operations.

This author is not suggesting that strategic sense keyed upon the effect can be divined or otherwise derived with respect to the relationship between tactics and strategy alone, misconceived as a closed system. Quite far removed though it may seem from the often grubby and usually dangerous world of action, SOF tactical behavior should serve policy ends that unmistakably are ultimately political. This goal may be unarguably secure in classically Clausewitzian terms, but that guarantees nothing in particular in the contemporary world of frequently expedient action. As this author explains in the third chapter of this report, probably the only practicable route to take toward the strategic enhancement of SOF tactical behavior is one that has exploited the benefit that should be derived from serious exposure to the reasoning in a competent theory of special operations, especially SOF activity. In order for SOF personnel to understand why they should undertake some missions rather than others, it is necessary for them to be respectful of what they can and should be allowed to do to enhance the strategic targeting in their tasking. Needless to say, perhaps, it is scarcely less important for SOF to attempt to appreciate the limits to the practicable value of theory.

A relationship that requires most careful handling is that between policy (and its politics) and strategy.<sup>26</sup> This nexus may seem to fall outside the scope of this report, but that impression would be an error. Strategy often is mentioned in public discussion, frequently with the implication that it is the senior concept present. In point of fact, strategy should only be discussed in the context of the political goals sought as policy objectives. While strategy

has to rule over tactics and operations, politics as policy similarly always ought to be understood as strategy's superior. Often it is necessary, certainly it is desirable, that there should be some effective fusion of strategy with policy and its politics, but there needs to be no confusion over who to target or ultimately is in charge of American military effort in Iraq, Afghanistan, or wherever. Although civilian governance needs to listen to professional military advice concerning what appears to be feasible as action, there should never be room for doubt concerning the political value sought.

Readers may notice this author is striving to place emphasis upon the key role that politics and policy need to play in the tasking of SOF. It would be futile to seek to address the currency conversion issue between tactics and strategy in the absence of such recognition. This report must cope with the reality of there always being three clusters of behaviors most relevant to the subject here: strategic, tactical, and political. Should politics be omitted from the analysis, then the resulting duopoly consisting only of strategy and tactics has to lack legitimizing purpose. Politics and its resulting, if frequently changeable, policy is what the use of tactics in pursuit of strategy has to be about. They cannot be self-regarding fields of endeavor. While this connection with higher authority in, indeed even above, the chain of command is universally recognized in the ranks of the professional military, it should be much clearer to SOF elements than

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perhaps is commonplace among more regular forces. It can be frustrating, even annoying, to find SOF authors claiming strategic status for their behavior, when they betray little appreciation of what strategic effect means, entails, and how it might be acquired. Annoying though it is often for SOF that are tactically first class and may well be directed clearly and to sound seeming military operational purpose, the always essential strategic sense of the needed effect can only be gained and employed profitably if the top end of the command chain is politically competent. It has to reach across the strategy bridge into the zone wherein policy is constructed and politics lurk; it is functioning to provide ultimate political direction to SOF action. Some scholars have noticed what they have chosen to term a "tacticization of strategy."<sup>27</sup> This is clear enough, but probably it understates a common challenge to higher command. The pragmatic challenge of combat, not least

in the non-standard contexts in which SOF most typically are committed to action, can be so close to the edge of military feasibility as to pose real difficulty for the higher reaches of the command chain. Almost everyone who has written somewhat critically and occasionally skeptically about the roles of SOF has made mention of the almost “tribal” character of the organizations that they seek to describe.<sup>28</sup> This criticism usually is performed in a manner not completely unfriendly to the SOF units in question, but it is raised as a concern for the chain of command that needs to be understood and addressed fairly. It seems clear enough to this analyst that “tribal” features are common to many military organizations, although SOF units probably do manifest bonding among their characteristics to an unusually intense degree. For obvious and familiar examples, the U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S. Army Rangers, as well as the particularly clearly designated special operations and SOF units, all function in states, styles, with equipment, in language, and manners of behavior that can be described as “tribal.” The principal reason for this, unsurprisingly, is the relatively high danger to which the members of these formations may be exposed, and the equally high levels of common unit, as contrasted with individual, combat performance expected and performed.

Military history demonstrates a rather consistent tension between the levels or categories of warfare that are understood as the tactical and the operational, let alone the distant abstraction of the strategic. For a specific example, a Marine division was inserted into Khe Sanh on the inner Vietnamese border for operational and arguably strategic reasons in 1969, but in point of fact, now in long retrospect, it is reasonably obvious that it was lured by the North Vietnamese into an area that had no higher operational meaning, certainly any deeper strategic meaning, by strategists who were better at their craft than were their U.S. equivalents. Moreover, so desperate did the protracted battle for Khe Sanh become, and so concerned was the White House about the Marines’ ability to hold out, that any operational or strategic merit in the American combat there descended precipitately to the status of a tactical fixation. This probably reads as being hyper-critical, but it is not so intended. The principal point simply is to claim that there is an immediate and pragmatic logic to what needs to be done in and as warfare that all too easily causes strategy to fly out of the window as a luxury to be rested for a more relaxed context. There is human as well as operational immediacy to tactical risk and opportunity, real or apparent, that can devour

attention that should be paid, if not necessarily devoted, to strategy. Some military scholars have alleged that the operational level of war poses a deadly challenge to strategy; allegedly in fact it can direct a threat to the practical authority of strategy. This is not a foolish criticism to make, with the evidence in its support assembled, but still it is misdirected. While there are problems in the conduct of war at different levels of focus that the public just has to learn how to live with, the “devouring” of strategy by operations should not be counted among them.<sup>29</sup> By way of a preemptive comment, the general answer to the problem of over-mighty operational art lies firstly in greater care in personnel selection to command posting for especially “tribal” organizations, and secondly, no less important, to fairly constant review of the functioning, including direction taken, by the command’s units in particular.

It cannot be denied prudently that just as SOF need to be directed by some strategic sense of the effect needed, so strategy always should find tactical sense indispensable. Not all of history’s greater strategists or even operational artists have been blessed with high tactical sense.<sup>30</sup> If their battlefield numbers were sufficiently overwhelming, or if they happened to score high on Machiavelli’s fortuna stakes on the days in question, it may not much matter that they lacked tactical gifts, except to the poor combat soldier of course. A lack of tactical adaptivity usually is punished eventually, while an absence of strategic sense almost always proves fatal to the political prospects for a cause, no matter how long it takes for the disadvantage to do its deadly work. An obvious example was oversupplied by General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia in the latter stage of the Civil War (summer 1863–spring 1865). General Lee permitted his arguable strategic ambitions manifested in the invasion of Pennsylvania to be captured by the operational opportunism unwisely displayed in fighting a major (three-day) battle, with personnel losses at Gettysburg his army could not afford, and from which it never truly recovered. The high point of the third day of battle (celebrated or lamented) primarily with reference to General George Pickett’s Charge up the open slope and heavily defended Cemetery Ridge, was probably the lowest point of General Lee’s wartime generalship.<sup>31</sup> Tactical failure has a way of poisoning operational, strategic, and political ambitions. Had General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Allied landing on the coast of Normandy on 6 June 1944, failed tactically on the beaches, which certainly was a possibility, especially given that it was militarily unprecedented, then such a tactical and operational disaster could and most probably would have caused a strategic—possibly

even a political—revolution in the subsequent course of the whole of World War II. This would have warranted historical description as a tacticization of strategy, indeed.

With regard to SOF in particular, though surely not exclusively, a relatively painless answer to the challenge posed by tactics to the integrity of strategy, and also by strategy to the integrity of tactics, lies in the ability of strategic theory to make clear relationships that need to be sorted out in the minds of generals; their staffs should benefit from such exposure also. Even a few politician policymakers, while they are engaged in the process of considering how best to employ the relatively rare talents of SOF to the national and allied advantage, would benefit from the more cutting edge of theory.

### **Strategic Sense and Theory for SOF**

Because of the typically small scale of total effort devoted to the relevant operations, theory about SOF has been slight.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, such theory as there has been has attracted claims for strategic effectiveness that inherently are implausibly high. On the other hand, theory has passed over SOF in what probably should be understood either as a discreet and commonly seriously classified silence, or simply as an intentional neglect. The latter possibility can reflect a dismissive take on our whole subject. None of these broad approaches is either advisable or necessary. This author appreciates how up front and personal SOF operations commonly have to become, that commentators have difficulty even imagining that theory for SOF is possible, let alone militarily as well as strategically and politically useful or necessary. These kinds of attitudes are easily understandable, but they are seriously in error. They reflect an attitude toward theory, poor theory at least, that is notably wrong, though usually is well intended. This report does not propose to lay out the draft of a theory of special operations, though the subject certainly is in urgent need of such. It is my intention to attempt to proceed to find and develop a special operations/SOF strategic theory in a follow-on report that would be dedicated specifically to accomplishing that mission in theorization. For the remainder of the space allotted here, the intention is to discuss the advantages, as well as a few of the greater perils that may mark a forward march of the most relevant theory.

The beginning of wisdom has to lie with an accurate consistency in the use of the English language, so that author and reader of this report can be

certain that they agree on the meaning of key terms. Personal participation in violent danger by the most senior commanders generally passed out of style in the 18th century, save through bomb sights, but one can understand that the idea of shared peril, including at the most serious end of the medical spectrum, was not without value for morale. The physical expansion of relevant battlespace has rendered personal participation in combat both impractical as well as seriously imprudent. Napoleon exposed himself in battle occasionally *pour encouragés les autres* (in order to encourage the others), but wisely he did not make a habit of doing so. However, it must be admitted that in the American Civil War, the casualty, including fatality, rate for full colonels and above was seriously high, not that there were many “stars” of generalship in the contending armies, North or South. What is perhaps surprising were the casualty rates in World Wars I and II in the German Army. Partly this was a matter of doctrine and a professional commitment to understanding combat that can be gleaned in good part only by personal and perilous participation in combat, and partly it really was an issue of what best can be described as personal and group moral choice—of doing personally what was believed to be in the nature as well as the character of the subject of this report.

This author will proceed now simply by stating, perhaps restating, a few definitions that should be well enough understood in the English speaking world already, while admittedly being well beyond surprise by the mangling of language, of definitions in particular, that continue to hinder understanding of points that should be elementary. To be truly basic, to write theory, strategic, military, or other, simply is an endeavor to distill meaning at an economical price in language for explanation. Theory may well have acquired a poor reputation among soldiers largely because it can appear to represent, or misrepresent, what the doers often are obliged to attempt to accomplish, with the often tangled and entangling explanation by others who merely, generally sitting somewhere in near perfect personal safety, observe and comment on their dangerous efforts in the field of action requiring rightful conduct in the leading of men. For example, a large fraction of the Nazi Wehrmacht was not officered by aristocrats long of high family social standing. Of course, an inevitable consequence of the personal participation of commanding generals in or very close to actual combat, is that some of them, not infrequently the *wrong* ones (thinking of “Stonewall” Jackson at Fredericksburg in 1862 nearly a year before Lee really needed him on

his adventurous foray into Southern Pennsylvania leading to Gettysburg). Unsurprisingly, competent generals were in short supply in both the Union and Confederate Armies. “Johnny Reb” generals could have learned their typically rather new trade of warfare better had they not succumbed so frequently to Union minié bullets. It is well not to forget that even in warfare where death and injury to military commanders can visit unannounced from the sky, as occurred frequently in World War II, the profession of arms is an enterprise riven with risks uncommon in normal civilian life, if indeed that concept retains much meaning. There is little doubt, though, that the latest era of very limited warfare that characterizes not unfairly the Western and Israeli experiences in the 2000s, has resulted in an exceedingly low fatality rate among general officers in the Allied armies of intervention.

The essential first step in a march toward better comprehension of the problems that strategy and tactics pose for each other is the clearest possible understanding that the two domains are fundamentally different in their natures. This means that improvements in the one are not likely to work usefully for the other. With respect to individual soldiers, this tends to mean that the few warriors both motivated and able to consider the possible and perhaps probable consequences of their tactical deeds, typically are not particularly well suited, selected in this case, to conceive of the potential value of those deeds in strategic terms. There is nothing especially difficult, or even simply arcane, about the difference that is fundamental between strategy and tactics. That said, the difference under discussion here is no less important just because it does not require several degrees in “rocket science” for understanding. *Tactics* covers all military activity at and bearing directly upon its delivery in anger against an enemy. *Strategy* is all about the consequences of tactical military action, both those expected and those not. It should not be

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particularly difficult to understand why soldiers at the sharp end of warfare, probably under fire, commonly are not strongly motivated to think and perhaps worry about the possible meaning of their current behavior for the course of history, indeed

of strategic history, well down the temporal road into the future. When this author coined, or perhaps borrowed, the concept of currency conversion

between tactical and strategic activity, the last piece of alchemical magic this author had in mind was some magical process of fusion that could transform the pure essence either of tactics or of strategy into the other concern. This cannot be done; it has been attempted and inadvertently approached many times in (mal)practice, including recently by the United States and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan, but really it is impossible. Strategy and tactics are activities of different kinds, meaning with quite distinctive natures. Emphatically they cannot be blended let alone fused usefully to make a more potent, perhaps a timelier, outcome to a conflict of which the political crowds in the intervening states are probably tiring. General Krulak was wrong, in that the Marine Corps cannot expect or require corporals to become 'strategic' actors. That said, still it is true that tactically successful Marine corporals may promote or enable effects that should have serious strategic meaning.

It is entirely commonplace and easily understandable for men whose professional lives are governed in demanding practice by violent possibilities, to find scant time for theory. An attitude of some disdain for theory and theorists is readily comprehensible. To theorize about action and its desired consequences often is contrasted in unflattering ways with the truly hard duty of hurting the enemy up front and personally. However, as the subject theme of this report should have made clear enough already, it makes no sense to focus upon the skills needed for action all the while failing to address in sufficient detail just what it is that SOF are trying to accomplish and why. There is extraordinary need for SOF to seek to maintain what can be termed mission integrity, not least because SOF assets lend themselves all too easily to misuse and even abuse by a high command that may well not really understand the particular capabilities that SOF could bring as assets to a conflict. The issue here is not strategic theory, rather is it the potentially positive value that the understanding of such theory could be able to bring to a struggle. Particularly is this the case when or if friendly SOF units have been allowed to adopt a disdainful attitude toward mere theoreticians, in contrast to the efforts of those whose active duty included substantial action against the enemy directly.

Many are the objections that practical soldiers tend to feel, if not always display publicly, toward strategic theory. Despite infrequent efforts by theorists to claim high practical relevance and even pragmatic utility for their work, the soldiers who must place their lives on the line understandably are an audience difficult to impress with displays of theoretical insight, almost

no matter how dazzling they may be. What follows in this report below is a relatively swift explanation of the value of strategic theory for SOF, notwithstanding many common negatives in attitude adopted by men whose lives seem to be dominated by high practical demands from the unforgiving realm of action.

## Theory for Action

Readers of this report might reflect briefly on the high urgency of the topic treated. The attitude that drives through the text is one that seeks to insist upon an essential unity of theory with and for practice. Those who choose to contrast theory with practice often simply do not understand this prime function of strategic theory. Far from being a life-long theorist, Clausewitz lived through the most bitter years of active military struggle against armies led by one of strategic history's authentic geniuses: Napoleon.<sup>33</sup> Clausewitz was nothing if not a practical soldier who learned the skills needed for his theorizing from extensive first-hand experience, often gained when perilously under fire, he is quite unambiguous about the merit in good theory. Above all else, it should help the pragmatic, possibly also the opportunistic, soldier take what could be fatal personal risks for worthwhile military, ultimately strategic reasons. The same comment applies also to the theoretical effort of another soldier-scholar already cited in these pages, former SOF soldier Harold R. Winton.<sup>34</sup> In the chaotic context that often, indeed typically, characterizes warfare, it is all too easy for warriors to go opportunistically with the apparent current flow of events and not worry unduly about the political destination and meaning. This is understandable and, to a degree at least, prudent. Meticulous planning, military and political, can appear extremely foolish until the scope for its exercise is revealed beyond room for much remaining doubt by a changing context.

A major virtue of well-constructed and crafted strategic theory is that it should not be vulnerable to falsification by unexpected events for which the theory's drafters had not made appropriate provision. Should a theory of special operations be overtaken by unanticipated events, there will be urgent need to revise and perhaps repair the extant theory. There are few items that should be regarded sensibly as immortal in the principal focus of this text. In common with particular weapons and ammunition, no matter how favorably they are regarded currently, when error, possibly suggested

by a serious list of possible flaws is detected and even experienced, it may well be time to change. This author is concerned to encourage the pragmatic view that his subject, with a focus on the value of theory, should not resemble a sacred trust, populated by words alleged to have near mystical potency. There needs to be a master theory with high educational merit, for the benefit both of those SOF personnel who have had little prior necessity to face up to the often extraordinary demands of relatively small-scale commitment and action, and to those whose extensive operational experience might have encouraged a relaxation of imaginative alertness. It would be a notable error to conceive of strategic theory for SOF as an effort that contrasts with the operational world of action, both probable and actual. Theory for SOF is theory for the education of those charged with taking action on our behalf. It is no exaggeration to claim that most aspects of the topic here are relatively elementary and should pose no great, let alone near impossible, challenge for understanding by the thoughtful soldier. However, the strategic historical record demonstrates in copious repetitive detail just how difficult it can be for commanders to follow commonsense guidelines of prudence, when opportunities encouraging error are so readily available. It is not the task of strategic theory to play analytical policeman and discourage imprudent adventures by its presence, but its recognized availability can help prevent the making of unwise tactical and even operational military choices.

Strategic theory has its uses both for SOF education and also, perhaps as usefully, for the alerting of the policy world to the utility of SOF.<sup>35</sup> There have been times in the past when tactically first-rate SOF units have been consigned to sit on the bench away from action, because those most responsible for their possible commitment could not agree upon desirable and feasible missions for this scarce and valuable expertise. Unfamiliarity can encourage a willingness to ignore problems, not necessarily because of bureaucratic hostility. It must be admitted, however, that SOF in recent times have been subject to overuse as well as underuse, with both categories of practical abuse reflecting inadequate comprehension of the relatively scarce capabilities at issue.

Although the crafting of theory for SOF will be unable to change behavior overnight, it should serve vitally as a key that unlocks some problems that otherwise appear beyond solution. It is a function of strategic theory to open the door of understanding on the possibilities that otherwise most probably would pass unnoticed.

SOF's opportunities to make a strategic difference have to rest upon a secure intellectual grasp of the theory of strategy in all its aspects. What may have been lacking, despite the abundance of recent field experience, was a

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secure grasp of where and how special operations played on the team in-country. Probably it is fair to observe that it has not always been obvious just what the mission was that the U.S.-led team was pursuing most assiduously.

It cannot credibly be denied that large parts of the security challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan were not readily addressed by U.S.-led armed forces in the 2000s. Neither the physical nor the political terrain were especially conducive even to carefully tasked effort, no matter how skilled was much of the tactical implementation.

On reflection, it is reasonably clear to see today that the U.S. efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan were both more likely than not to prove disappointing.<sup>36</sup> Geography and history, let alone politics, were unfriendly to the purposes and prospect for such Western interventions. It needs to be said that no measures of military skill usually are able to rescue seriously politically flawed operations. Nonetheless, there has been scope for possible improvement in the contribution made by USSOF in both countries. SOF tactics have needed to be integrated and rendered more compatible with a complete union with the political purpose of the intervention. It is necessary to make clear the practicable limits that bounded SOF utility. Politics really does rule the relevant analytical terrain for the study. This means that no excellence in tactical technique and no skill in operational movement can offset sufficiently major political decisions that are ill advised. These hard words need saying because otherwise some readers might believe that the U.S. disappointments in both Iraq and Afghanistan were plausibly and non-marginally attributable to military errors. By and large this was not the case, neither very clearly in Afghanistan, nor clearly enough even in Iraq. This author is concerned that this modest analysis should not be interpreted as a positive endorsement for the interventions, though one qualified by the caveat of an essential "if only ..."

The task remaining for the final section of this report is to suggest some of the ways in which the USSOF efforts of the past 15 years might have been improved as a consequence of their being better guided and therefore by helpfully relevant strategic theory than usually was the case.

### 3. Solution: Problems and Possible Answers

It was said of troopers in Napoleon's armies that each one carried a marshal's baton in his knapsack, so great was the potential for promotion as the reward for demonstrated merit in combat. Modern military organizations tended to be much less zealous in the rewarding of competent, or fortunate, enthusiasm in battle, but this anecdote does point usefully to a solution that is required if the currency conversion from tactics to strategy is to be effected more productively.

It may be helpful at this relatively late stage of the enquiry to restate for optimum clarity just what the focus must be for the subject here. A challenge is to explain why it is, or may be, that it proves difficult for SOF to operate with high competence, yet on balance commonly fail to have the strategic effectiveness intended. In principle, at least, it is not much of a challenge to seek a leading reason for the failure that is so widely noticed. The problem with which American SOF were struggling both in Afghanistan and Iraq was one that, as the old saying goes, truly was above the pay grade of soldiers on the ground. Accepting some risk of offering an inappropriate analogy, suitable solutions to the challenge posed by a major disconnection between tactics and strategy cannot plausibly be sought in better military and quasi-military methods, or in the acquisition of still better military equipment. Improvements in method and tools often are very welcome. Indeed, high technical sophistication has become a generally welcome hallmark of American SOF. However, the strategy-tactics disconnection does not lend itself either to technical or to methodological fixes. The all too relevant challenge is intellectual in the first instance and basic structure of concern, and somewhat organizational, in the second.

There should have been no great and probably lethal mystery facing American, British, and other allied forces in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both countries ought to have been well enough known ahead of time in the very early 2000s so as not to fuel serious concerns regarding competence to redirect and manage their largely domestic, but only inter alia, and neighboring domestic antagonisms, especially those from Iranian sources. Notwithstanding the courage that troops showed the total experience of from 2001 to 2014,

both in Afghanistan and Iraq, undoubtedly led to some notable measure of domestic political de-legitimization of military and developmental endeavors that appear to carry or be close to carrying a counterinsurgency (COIN) label.<sup>37</sup> This is an old story; time can be a most important element in strategy, on all sides of a conflict. Iraq and Afghanistan have played out much as should have been expected. As a general rule, somewhat well meaning, but crucially ignorant foreigners have lost out to local or neighboring forces that belong either in country or certainly to close neighbors in the region.<sup>38</sup> This could read as apparently severe criticism, particularly of SOF, but this author does not intend that. What this author is claiming is that in both countries, SOF did not understand the local cultures, broadly defined as well as needed, if they were to have any serious chance of effecting the political change attempted. This is not meant as a blanket critique of COIN effort. This author is at most saying that too many troops understood too little about the countries to which too often they were hastily deployed.

Of course there were islands of some comprehension of local realities in Afghanistan and Iraq floating uncomfortably in the sea of Western ignorance, but understanding of local conflicts, antagonisms, and rival local interests was not high. To risk being too blunt about it, in neither the United States nor in Britain was it appreciated in anticipation just how riven with hostilities were the societies U.S. and British forces were commanded to help rebuild. Unsurprisingly, tactically generally excellent or not, they failed, as did the political policies that friendly armed forces were intended to support. It is this author's contention here that sensible employment of the general theory of strategy could and should have enabled the United States and Britain to avoid much, if not necessarily most of the difficulties they faced but failed to meet successfully in the 2000s. In a follow-on study to this report, this author will specify the ways in which the application of the general theory of strategy should be able to benefit the performance of SOF, even in the specific contexts of Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, mastery of strategy's general theory could not have guaranteed political success for the interventions, but it should have provided a much better understanding of the strategic challenges, and therefore of the scale and nature of promising solutions.

## The Value of Strategic Theory

The problem that this report strives to address all but commands answer in theoretical terms. The difficulty for tactics and strategy has been historically very common indeed. Today, however, long traditional modes of operation tend not to be usable politically, even if they might work well enough. Traditionally, a few bold spirits, leaders in empire building, would use the modest military force at their command as best they were able for advantage, and then, probably much later, political representatives of the British or American state would put in an appearance and suggest territorial or ethnic changes that most suited state interests (usually commercial, in the British case). Today, however, contextual matters cannot be assumed to be permissive. Local, including very local and personal; tribal; national; as well as regional contexts can threaten to destabilize political settlements that are not firmly grounded in the interests of important players as they themselves choose to define them. Indeed, even discovering who is and who is not such a player can mark an essential increase in required local understanding.

A principal value of strategic theory is its function as a stimulant to produce basic logical thoughts that often are likely otherwise to be missing. SOF personnel tend to be action-oriented problem solvers. In some contrast, strategic theory of most kinds is oriented toward the explanation of why and how the subject under examination works or ought to do so. If SOF tactical behavior disappoints, despite its typically high competence, some familiarity with strategic theory should lead one to suspect that the common problem of disharmony among

performances in the chain of command is likely to be significantly to blame. If deployed helpfully and not simply as an unthinking verbal formula, the

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standard logic of strategy can prove useful in revealing probable errors, including those on the largest of scales. This standard logic should not be allowed to fool us with its apparent simplicity; consider in the light of what Clausewitz says critically about theory.<sup>39</sup>

A due appreciation of the value in the logic of strategy offers no specific solutions to lethal looking problems, but it can provide receptive minds with vital educational assistance toward the proper ordering of thoughts

for eventual corrective action. As a terse reminder of the basic structure of strategic reasoning, this author specifies as follows: (policy) ends, (strategic) ways, (military et al) means—and assumptions. As Clausewitz insisted, the primary value of strategic theory lies in its merit for the education of those who must make life and death decisions in real-time, perhaps with little advance temporal notice. It is the job of theory to sort out what otherwise may be confused, and to equip the military operator well enough with non-specific advice so as to enable him to make prudent real-time material and even moral decisions.

The first decision required of the executive with respect to a possible political-military intervention in a COIN context, penetrates to the heart of the issue for this report. What, if anything, should we be doing, and why should we be doing it? It can be instructive to consider 7 December 1941 as providing a gold medal performance as an example of an immediate cause of war that could have been crafted in Washington for the domestic political purpose of unifying the American nation. The basic theory of strategy should lead us to interconnect the entire structure of effort. We need not only consider our current policy goals, but also we have to explain how those might be met, given the ways and means probably available to and usable by the adversary. As if this is not challenging enough, there are certain to be domestic skeptics who will ask probing questions concerning the assumptions on the basis of which the possible action is founded. The theory of strategy does not, indeed cannot, provide all of the answers that should be required before an intervention is ordered, but certainly it can help importantly to direct enquiry that may prove critical. As with much good and useful theory, that of strategy arms its users with the probing questions that need to be asked. The true function of the general theory of strategy, and even more its distilled and basic essence in the ends, ways, and means formula, is to start the engine for fundamental enquiry on the more troublesome of issues pertaining to a possible intervention. It cannot be denied that the American liking for the concept of strategy, and especially for the claimed adjectival attribute 'strategic' almost certainly has achieved the dignity conferred by sheer old age and habit. Today, all this author can do is indicate error, while recognizing the unfortunate dignity conferred by what now is some longevity. Public argument about the proper use and meaning of 'strategic' would soon fuel political responses by those many people and institutions with interests that could discern threat in linguistic discipline.

It should be needless to say that when a government decides to take action for what transpires to be necessary COIN purposes, usually it is not up to being particularly welcoming of skeptical commentary. Also, to be fair, one must acknowledge an inevitability to fairly poor advance knowledge. There were some grounds for optimism in advance concerning Afghanistan and Iraq, but neither proved amenable to, let alone readily permissive of, Western effort to effect radical change in local culture. The degree of challenge to Western standards of social justice posed by the substantially still intensely tribal context in Afghanistan proved difficult to understand and nearly impossible to alter. This has been particularly difficult for the regular armed forces of the United States. A particular source of American problems lies in nothing much more sinister than simply the strength of 'the American way.' Being part of what this author describes here, inevitably it can be a hard task for professional U.S. soldiers to see themselves as others, especially those locked into tribal society in a Central Asian context, see them. Americans typically look, sound, and behave differently from the local norm in any region in Afghanistan. This may not matter much at first, but soon the attractions of novelty wear off and American and British soldiers and aid workers just look foreign, indeed alien. In Helmand Province in Afghanistan, the local presence of British soldiers in 'fort-like' structures was locally welcomed as an exciting source of human targets. Taking sniping shots at isolated British and American compounds was instantly locally popular more as sport than as war.

The rather negative commentary in the text immediately above serves to illustrate the scope of the challenge for COIN. On the one hand, general truths that intervening soldiers need to know about local foreign societies are not particularly hard to convey or comprehend. On the other hand, though, the practical distance between understanding in principle and empathetic behavior can prove unreachable. Much of what we have learned about the social enablers of COIN engagement has had to be learned the hard way in-country, and by a process of painful trial and error. It is a prime value of well-attested strategic theory that it should be able to serve a variety of particular needs. It has to be understood that war and its warfare simultaneously have both universal and eternal characteristics, as well as intensely local characteristics. This duality is the reason it is feasible to conceive of a general theory of good practice in COIN, while also being seriously attentive to the particular features of an individual insurgency that require unique

solution(s). Clausewitz was admirably clear and also persuasive on the matter of the proper role of theory.<sup>40</sup> Strategic theory distills the essence of meaning about a subject, and should greatly aid organizations that strive to understand the nature of the task that high policy has set them. Strategic theory, for COIN for example, cannot possibly and should not attempt to provide answers to the questions posed pragmatically by the insurgents: that is not the role of theory. What strategic theory can offer, however, is a mainly generic understanding of the nature of the COIN challenge, and of the range of options theoretically available to the forces of order.

Readers of this report should have little difficulty understanding, indeed relating quite closely, to a principal argument that this author must now expose and explain. Specifically, while it is very understandable for SOF to be concerned by the apparent shortage of competitive strategic advantage that they win through action, the problems they discern have roots that cannot plausibly be addressed with a SOF focus. Both in Iraq and Afghanistan the United States and its allies attempted the impossible and inevitably they failed. Put bluntly, no amount of tactical excellence could enable either country to perform socially and politically as our preferred theory suggests might be possible. Impossible missions always fail, sooner or later. It has taken many years for the American and British military establishments to recognize the strength of this overall judgment. What this author suggests here is not offered for the purpose of advancing negative arguments and also assuredly not in order to level yet another set of charges against policymakers. Instead, the intention is strictly limited to identification of the particular benefits that can be wrung from good enough theory.

When U.S. or British policy is recognized in its political aspiration, there is some danger that the policy 'ends' in the standard format are considered largely to be a 'given,' requiring little further because the policy has moved into an action phase. It has been a distressing fact, however, that the United States had a poor relationship with its local allies in Vietnam, and an even poorer one with its leading local supporters in Iraq and Afghanistan. Unsurprisingly, the root of the American problem in all these cases was failure to understand the local context well enough. Both Iraq and Afghanistan are large countries with substantial populations and challenging terrains, and they are divided and sub-divided in multiple ways, though primarily by exclusive tribal affiliation and also by religion. Given the fairly standard rate of usual human antagonism, and the opportunities that chaotic conditions

offer to criminal urges, it is plain to see why the maintenance of domestic order often has proven to be a challenge too far. What also is clear today, in retrospect of course, is that the politically derived policy ‘ends’ identified as essential for theory and practice in the basic structure of strategy, have to be crafted with extreme care. Contrary to the sense of much in the professional literature bearing upon COIN, we cannot prudently simply pass over policy ‘ends’ without looking closely, including self-critically, at the particular details of the case. It is a matter really of public record now that the American COIN efforts in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan were all weakened (or worse) by political deficiencies in policy. The economic austerity of the general theory of strategy, with its purpose keyed to policy ends, should not be allowed to foreclose prematurely on the political objectives it is sensible to pursue. The record of disappointment and even failure over the course of the past 50 years should have taught us to ask the more difficult questions of proposed military intervention. If we neglect the paying of close attention to the probable feasibility of our policy ‘end,’ we have ourselves to blame.

### **How does Tactical Behavior Become Strategic in Meaning?**

Much of what is written about strategy and tactics, particularly the relationship between them, is both confused and confusing. Presumably, this is one reason at least why the matter of the relationship often is passed by without much attempt at comment. What this author wishes to accomplish here is to distinguish very clearly between the two sets of ideas that comprise strategy and tactics, and also explain why the distinction is always of vital importance. Accepting the risk of appearing to be unduly rigid in linguistic usage, as opposed simply to being disciplined, as hoped and intended, this author needs to challenge some large bodies of professional people who persist in misusing the terms at issue here. Moreover, this author claims that the distinction is not only a matter of familiar utility, but actually is one that can influence thought and action in military practice.

Readers will have noticed that this text posed the questions of currency conversion directly for this section of the report. In order to preclude needless confusion, this author must insist that tactics and strategy are significantly distinctive and that there should be no possibility of the one assuming the mantle of the other. Understood in the tersest manner possible, strategy

is all about the consequences of military action, while tactics are all about the action itself. This distinction, as explained here, should mean the two are clearly delineated without difficulty. With the dictionary definitions being so plain and clear, it is rather frustrating to find so many people and institutions persisting with incorrect usage. If this were a minor matter, this author would endeavor just to ignore it, but with the meaning of these concepts being so far apart, yet the concept being employed so freely, this author believes he must fight an already lost cause and attempt to insist upon correct usage. The difference in meaning is important, indeed it is crucially so for the understanding of our subject. It cannot plausibly be presented as academic pedantry to insist upon the need for clarity in the distinction between military cause and its consequences, which ultimately should be, or at least should touch on the political. Tactics in a sense become strategic in the same way that strategy acquires political meaning; but just because of political meaning, strategy does not miraculously become politics.

Lest the point is in danger of being lost by my argument, this author needs to explain that strategy and tactics, confusingly perhaps, are made of the same material. Any and all action in war must be tactical in the doing, while simultaneously also it must be strategic in the consequences that follow. Tactics can be understood to have integrity as action in war-

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*Tactics in a sense become strategic in the same way that strategy acquires political meaning; but just because of political meaning, strategy does not miraculously become politics.*

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fare, but that same action also has integrity as a consequence for the making of the future. Any and all so-called strategic behavior has to comprise tactical behavior with some explanatory connection affirmed linking behavior today

and tomorrow with the behavior of yesterday. The specific topic here is to explore and explain how tactical behavior becomes strategic. This author argues that strategy and tactics are phenomena with distinctive natures. The conversion process between them is often uncertain, even problematic because it demands a vital change in context. In case any lack of clarity should persist, this author must explain that any and all military action has to be understood as being tactical. The process of conversion into the coin of strategy happens as and when belligerents assess the consequences of recent action, draw conclusions from that analysis, and develop plans to exploit the changed situation. When we enquire as to the strategic value and meaning

of special operations in war we are seeking to answer the great question ‘so what?’<sup>41</sup> What we are not doing is searching for some miraculous ingredient that somehow would enable tactics to become strategy. The two are essentially different, even though they are totally mutually dependent. To repeat, everything is tactical in the doing, but strategic as a consequence of that doing, whether it is pre-planned or not. It follows as a linguistic necessity that troops cannot meaningfully be designated either as strategic or tactical, because the same troops have to be, indeed can only be, both simultaneously. Given that strategy and strategic should be employed to refer strictly to plans for, and the consequences of, military behavior, it must follow that there should not be any troops pre-designated as being in some magical fashion somehow strategic.

Proper use of the concepts of tactics and strategy has significance for SOF that can be noticeable, the distinction upon which this author has insisted here is interested only in the meaning, in context, of particular military actions. Whether the action is large or small in scale, or in some other metric of relative assessment, is a matter of little inherent interest. Weight of strategic meaning is strictly to be understood only with reference to its believed consequences. The typically modest size of SOF actions most probably is a significant factor concerning the probable limitations of the likely consequences of such action, but this is not a truth by definition. In principle, at least, the strategic meaning of SOF behavior is determined by the consequences it fuels in terms of changed benign opportunities for friendly forces, and additional constraints to harry the enemy. Most probably this author does not need to labor the important point that although theory can and must be taught in its fundamental structure, a talent for its practice is rare indeed. The great Russian strategic thinker, Alexandr Svechin, advised that there are no rules for strategy.<sup>42</sup> If our military leaders are men and women who truly are comfortable intellectually only in contexts well populated by familiar ways and means, we are not likely to be well served strategically. It can be a challenge to explain persuasively to skeptics that tactical excellence, though the vital enabler of all that might follow has no essential meaning for strategy.<sup>43</sup> Problems understood accurately as being strategic in nature are ones that usually do not lend themselves to alleviation or resolution by solutions marked most characteristically by an established record of tactical, or even operational level, and least likely competence. With particular respect to SOF, high tactical prowess is assumed. The value

of SOF in particular is the assumption that often nonstandard approaches to problems will be considered, even if that means possible employment of truly novel means and methods.

It is noticeable how often SOF are dismissed as to their relative strategic significance on the non-explicit grounds of their modesty in scale. Notwithstanding the frequency of quite common misuse, strictly there is no need to anticipate high strategic returns proportionate to the conduct of combat on a large scale. Strategic is not another word meaning big or at least large in scale, or even—dare this author say—nuclear. The value of SOF includes their ability to target some critically important part of an enemy's chain of command, for an obvious example. The general theory for strategy that this author favors for the better education of SOF must include explicit acknowledgement and specific treatment of the essentially dual nature of special operations. For an exceedingly broad-brush summary characterization, we can identify both special operations that are very distinctive stand-alone events, and special operations conceived, planned, and executed for the purpose of enabling the more effective conduct of regular operations of war. It is a high merit of SOF that they should be capable of conducting warfare in both styles; though, of course, their typical extreme modesty in scale of combat effort must limit their potential effectiveness. It is useful and fairly accurate to think of SOF as general purpose problem solvers. With these rather mundane words this author seeks to indicate that SOF assets are almost uniquely capable of being directed to solve, or at least alleviate, problems in warfare almost as soon as they arrive. Timing is probably the least well understood and appreciated factor covered by the general theory of strategy. Quite obviously, relatively small highly trained units that are almost instantly available for deployment, possibly isolated deployment, into contexts with substantial risks, are uniquely valuable. Not infrequently, one is obliged to consider the benefits and the disadvantages of forward military deployment that should, certainly might, have been avoidable had some SOF assets been ready to deploy more promptly in advance. Of course, such deployment typically cannot be shorn of all political hazards.

If readers will revisit the title to this section of the report they may notice that this author was most careful not to employ the high concepts of strategy and tactics in a way that could be misleading. For the sake of maximum clarity, the author shall now restate this argument and also draw out its irresistible practical implications.

## Strategy and Tactics: A Complementary Essential Relationship

The line of reasoning advanced in the following four points seeks to claim firmly that any and every SOF task both requires tactical skill to complete and must have strategic meaning.

1. *Strategy* is all about the consequences of (military) behavior. It is not about the actual conduct of behavior; for that one must turn to the realm of *tactics*.
2. *Tactics* is all about the doing of whatever it is that must or should be done. In other words, strategy and tactics are both made by the same content in experience.
3. It has to be fundamentally incorrect to conceive of and refer to allegedly inherently strategic missions, because all missions have some strategic value, be it ever so modest or even negative. To repeat, all allegedly strategic endeavors have to be made by means of tactics; there is nothing else.
4. *Policy ends* legitimize and empower the tactical behavior one has to understand as tactics, though commonly the ambitions of policy are more the product of political hopes than they are of careful analysis, let alone calculation.

In short, it is an error to think of SOF actions as strictly tactical ventures that may, or may not contribute usefully to some rather mysterious quality thought of as strategic effect. Tactics do not, indeed cannot, themselves become strategic. Now, for a closely related thought, can tactics or strategy become politics? They must acquire political meaning, but that is a different and more restricted, if pointed, usage.

It appears to be clear enough there is only one way in which the apparent disconnection between strategy and tactics might be corrected. This author believes the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, approaches realization of the necessity for recognition, but cannot really claim adoption of the solution proposed here. Alas, there is no wonder drug that enables strategic insight. However, it should be true to argue that mastery of the classics of strategic theory would serve as a potent fuel for strategic thought—most especially the value in Clausewitz, Sun-Tzu, and Thucydides. These authors provide the education that will enable individuals, who seemingly are wholly

tactically focused, to raise their game for consequentially strategic benefit. There is little doubt that it is all too easy simply to advise that SOF need urgently to be tasked in pursuits that are weightily strategic in their likely consequences. One reason strategy is so challenging an adventure to get 'right enough' is because the core of its practical meaning cannot be examined on evidence. Readers may recall this author has sought to insist upon a focus on consequences as being at the heart of strategy's true meaning. In addition, this focus drives continuing devotion to the critically important question (and critical comment) 'so what?' This is not to suggest here that every SOF team member should strive to master strategy. But, this author is compelled by the nature of the alleged disconnect problem to advise that USSOF assets would benefit from better strategic direction. In order to accomplish this challenging task, the whole USSOF community needs to take its self-education in strategy duties more seriously than it has done in the recent past.

## 4. Conclusion: Politics, Strategy, and USSOCOM

In this modest report, this author may well have devoted too much space to rather obvious issues that are, in fact, typically understood well enough, believing conceptual clarity is critically important. Most readers of this short report will have attended meetings, possibly high level in character, wherein briefers have deployed and employed the terms strategy and tactics with scant, and even then possibly erroneous comprehension. In this work this author has striven to rescue tactical effort from the misunderstanding that typically places it in a plainly subordinate position below policy, strategy, and operations. A person so miseducated is unlikely to be able to contribute usefully to the argument advanced here. On careful reflection there would appear to be only one solution, most probably partial, to the disconnect challenge. Specifically, SOF members, especially in their higher ranks, need to acquire more education in strategy. This author appreciates that this cannot be a wholly reliable path to pursue, because SOF tend to be employed and sometimes misemployed to fix the latest problem of the hour or day, with little time to consider in advance the possibility of adverse consequences.

It is apparent from experience in Iraq and Afghanistan that a noteworthy part of the SOF effectiveness problem has to be understood as deriving from misunderstanding on the part of other elements among the friendly forces of intervention. However, if SOF fail to grasp what they can and might attempt, they will partly have themselves to blame. This author appreciates that SOF confront a particularly challenging dilemma: on the one hand, their ever modest size serves to encourage the chain of command to employ them almost promiscuously on the 'job of the day.' On the other hand, their elite status (meaning very rigorously selected) for admission can offer too much encouragement to the belief that SOF need to be kept intact and ready only for truly special and perhaps unusual missions. In other words, neither the SOF community nor the rest of the military establishment, including the allies, really understand the proper roles that should be assigned to SOF. The suspicion on the author's part that SOF are not understood well enough throughout the American military establishment, is well attested

in the episodic crises that have interrupted USSOF efforts from the time of Korea in 1950 to 1953 and onward.

In this report, this author advises that United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) seek assistance from the admittedly thin ranks of first-rate strategic theorists for the purpose of removing much of the confusion that reigns currently unchecked. SOF planners and operators urgently need to improve their understanding of what they are doing and, more urgently still, why they are doing it. At some risk of understating the problem, this author has to insist that the most urgent of USSOCOM's institutional requirements is, alas, beyond the power of that organization to satisfy. Specifically, USSOF have a persisting necessity for direction and leadership by people, probably only a few people, who have what best can be characterized as strategic sense geared to achieve the effects needed for the advancement of U.S. policy. The general theory of strategy, plus a specific theory of special operations, should enable a cadre of leaders in USSOCOM to think and act imaginatively in response to nonstandard challenges in, or even as adjunct enabling contributors to, irregular warfare. Correct use of basic concepts of strategy and tactics would be an important way in which to begin a drive to clear the confusions and frustrations that so often have hampered SOF efforts in the past and were the persisting consequences of the observed disconnection that this report has sought to address. In order to realize their strategic potential, the tactical behavior of SOF requires conversion into the coin of strategy. This has to be a genuine example of currency conversion, because tactical action is most likely empty of inherently strategic meaning. SOF and their political masters have to understand that the currency conversion under discussion here is not simply a desirable extra makeweight to add to a case for intervention. In the same way, and for the same reasons, that politics is the womb of war, so strategy needs to be the womb of tactics for our specific purposes. This author has sought to explain clearly in this report that strategic meaning can derive only from the currency that we understand and practice as tactics. It is an illusion to believe that there is an accessibly attainable level of military effort to be understood as strategic. Strategy is derivative solely from tactics, even though it may and indeed ought to be inspired by politics. ↑

## Endnotes

1. Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 43. This short claim is as profound as it is usefully brief.
2. This author attributes this quote to Anon, while some (this author believes wrongly) attribute it to Sun Tzu.
3. Colin S. Gray, *Strategy and Defence Planning: Meeting the Challenge of Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 62–3; and T. X. Hammes, “Assumptions—A Fatal Oversight,” *Infinity Journal*, 1 (Winter 2010), 4–6.
4. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (1832–4; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 128. “... tactics instruct the use of armed forces in the engagement; strategy, the use of engagements for the object of the war.”
5. Colin S. Gray, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 18.
6. *Ibid.*
7. For a thoughtful and highly important relevant short study, see James D. Kiras, “A Theory of Special Operations: Unnecessary and Dangerous,” paper prepared for the 2014 SORA Conference, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Many years ago this author began to work on what might have become a theory of Special Operations, but lack of official interest at that time (early 1990s) and competing personal priorities obliged this author not to pursue the challenge further. See Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1996), Part III, ‘Strategy and Special Operations,’ 169, 186–187. See also: William H. McRaven, *Spec Ops, Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995); General Stanley McChrystal, *My Share of the Task: A Memoir*, (New York, Penguin Group, 2013); and Derek Leebaert, *To Dare and to Conquer: Special Operations and the Destiny of Nations, from Achilles to Al Qaeda*, (New York: Little, Brown, 2006). The choice of chapter case studies by McRaven has too much by way of infantry shock raids for this author’s understanding of the nature of special operations. For entertaining history that may be held to claim somewhat dubious affinity to the spirit of modern special operations, see also Uval N. Hunter, *Special Operations in the Age of Chivalry*, (Woodbridge, VA: Boydell Press, 2007).
8. Harold R. Winton, “An Imperfect Jewel: Military Theory and the Military Profession.” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (December 2011), 854–6.
9. Clausewitz, *On War*, 132.
10. *Ibid.*, 141.
11. Strategic effect is a key concept here; it is an idea that is almost remarkably resistant to confident analysis. See Gray, *The Strategy Bridge*, ch. 5. The concept

of strategic effect is urgently in need of further careful attention, as is the vital idea of grand strategy. The latter simply encompasses all of the aspects of a state; it has an inclusivity far beyond the military. For some American disputes about the practical utility of the concept of grand strategy, see Brando, *What Good is Grand Strategy? Power and Purpose in American Statecraft from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2014). For a generally friendly version of the concept, see Charles Hill, *Grand Strategies: Literature, Statecraft, and World Order* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

12. Clausewitz, *On War*, 158.
13. Charles C. Krulak, "The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War," *Marines Magazine*, Vol. 28 (May 1999), 28–34.
14. Donald Stoker, *The Grand Design: Strategy and the U.S. Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 205. In his 'Conclusion' Stoker fails to surprise his readers when he claims with high credibility that "[s]trategic thinking in the South was almost non-existent," 411.
15. *Ibid.*, 205.
16. McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*.
17. The disharmony that is the consequence of disconnection is allowed an organizing role in Edward N. Luttwak's master work, *Strategy: the Logic of War and Peace*, rev. edn. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).
18. Robert Lyman is particularly enlightening on the vital topic of strategic sense; both for those blessed with the ability to exercise and benefit from it, and those incapable of reasoning strategically, see *The Generals: From Defeat to Victory, Leadership in Asia, 1941–45* (London: Constable, 2008), 341.
19. McChrystal, *My Share of the Task*, 181.
20. Relevant British experience and perspective can be gleaned from the following works: Jonathan Bailey, Richard Iron and Hew Strachan, *British Generals in Blair's Wars* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics* (London: C. Hurst, 2013); Strachan, *The Direction of War*; and especially Christopher L. Elliott, *High Command: British Military Leadership in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars* (London: C. Hurst, 2015). This is a short list of first rate books that are exceptionally alert to strategic concerns.
21. See Jakub Grygiel, "Educating for National Security," *Orbis*, Vol. 57 (Spring 2013), 201–16.
22. See Harry R. Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional: Strategic Thinking and Strategy Formulation in the 21st Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008).
23. Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 25.

24. Clausewitz, *On War*, 75. Also see: Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War Through Western Eyes*, (London: C. Hurst, 2009). This work is especially perceptive on war's 'reciprocal dynamic' as each conflict makes itself, possibly with only modest assistance from policy.
25. Clausewitz, *On War*, 75.
26. *Ibid.*, 605–610.
27. For the leading example of the exposure of this error, see Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*, 3rd edn. (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 353–60.
28. Jeannie L. Johnson, *Assessing the Strategic Impact of Service Culture on Counterinsurgency Operations, Case: United States Marine Corps*, Ph.D. Thesis (Reading, UK: University of Reading, May 2013); and Paula Holmes-Eber, *Culture in Conflict: Irregular Warfare, Culture, Policy, and the Marine Corps* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014). The Johnson Ph.D. is a superior study of the subject.
29. For a challenge to the alleged utility of operational art, see Justin Kelly and Mike Brennan, *Alien: How Operational Art Devoured Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, September 2009).
30. This is an argument advanced clearly in Andrew L. Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II: British and American Irregular Warfare* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013). This study is an admirable fusion of empirical historical detail and conceptual alertness.
31. See John Keegan, *The American Civil War: A Military History* (London: Hutchinson, 2009). Keegan ventures the opinion that Lee was not really a strategist, though he was a brilliant tactician and operational leader. His campaign of limited offensives into the North in 1862–1863 is still a model of “how a weaker power may bring pressure to bear on a stronger.” 66.
32. See Finlan, *Special Forces, Strategy and the War on Terror*.
33. Clausewitz, *On War*, 583.
34. See Winton, “An Imperfect Jewel,” 854–6.
35. See Derek Leebaert, *To Dare and to Conquer*; and Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). These two books have an unusual historical depth and can hardly fail to stimulate the imagination of ambitious SOF operators.
36. The Afghan and Iraqi experiences that became intense in the COIN regard are tackled strongly, but with some suitable and necessary empathy in Gian Gentile, *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency* (New York: The New Press, 2013). Gentile's potent critique may be helpfully balanced by the careful and penetrating analysis in Steven Metz, *Iraq and the Evolution of American Strategy* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2008), particularly Chapter 6, ‘Counterinsurgency.’ To return to the very strongly critical side of the argument, see Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failure in*

*Iraq and Afghanistan* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011). Amidst the trickle, not quite a flow yet, of works on the irregular conflicts of the 2000s, see the considerable intellectual achievement that is Emile Simpson's distinctively Clausewitzian book, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics* (London: Hurst and Company, 2013). Unsurprisingly, what might be considered a standard and even defining work on Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s has yet to appear.

37. Gentile, *Wrong Turn*.
38. See Hammes, "Assumptions."
39. Clausewitz, *On War*, 578.
40. Ibid.
41. For understanding of the value of SOF, as well as of the limitations to that value, see Hargreaves, *Special Operations in World War II*; and also Kiras, "A Theory of Special Operations."
42. Alexandr A. Svechin, *Strategy* (1927; Minneapolis, MN: East View Information Services, 1992), 64.
43. In Colin S. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy* (Westport, CT: 1998), chapters 7–8, this author argued that the maintenance of an excellent SOF capability expanded the range of choice for policy, not least by possibly authorizing non-standard responses to sudden challenges. Of course, a somewhat irregular mind-set on the world is needed if a SOF capability is to be employed as the problem solver of choice in desperate contexts.