

David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb. *United States Special Operations Forces.*

Stephen M. Grenier

Volume 28, winter 2008

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs28br03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Grenier, S. M. (2008). Compte rendu de [David Tucker and Christopher J. Lamb. *United States Special Operations Forces.*] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 28, 0–0.

Tucker, David, and Christopher J. Lamb. *United States Special Operations Forces*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have fueled the American public's long-standing fascination with special operations forces. Photographs of US Army Special Forces soldiers leading Northern Alliance militiamen on horseback and Navy SEALs conducting combat patrols have reinforced the reputation of these disciplined warriors. Six years after the devastating 2001 terrorist attacks, policy elites are asking several important questions: what roles will special operations forces play in the post-9/11 security environment, should their ranks be expanded, should they be granted new authorities, and what missions should they perform?

United States Special Operations Forces by David Tucker and Christopher Lamb is an important book that contributes to this discussion by explaining the characteristics, capabilities, and limitations of American special operations forces and suggesting some avenues for possible reorganization. The authors are no strangers to this conversation. Both previously served in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, the Pentagon entity that oversees all special operations and irregular warfare activities. Currently, Tucker is an Associate Professor and the Director of the Center on Terrorism and Irregular Warfare at the Naval Postgraduate School and Lamb is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, where he focuses on transformation and organizational reform issues.

The book's central thesis is straightforward: American special operations forces achieve their full potential when they are used against unconventional threats independently of conventional forces. However, although special operations forces have achieved some success against terrorist and insurgent targets, organizational reforms are required if they are to have a lasting strategic impact in the new security environment. *United States Special Operations Forces* is organized into three major parts. The first section describes how special operations forces are selected and trained, and provides a detailed history of these organizations. The authors highlight the physical and mental challenges that trainees must overcome and examine the important role that organizational culture plays in their recruitment, selection, and training. The second part explains the roles and missions that special operations forces perform and outlines why some units focus on direct operations, such as raids and ambushes, while other entities prefer to conduct indirect, non-lethal missions, such as constructing schools or training foreign military units. Tucker and Lamb assert in the provocative third section that special operations forces must be radically reorganized if they are to counter the unconventional challenges that threaten the United States and its allies.

The authors begin the book with a series of interviews with current special operations troops ranging from an Army Special Forces lieutenant colonel serving in the Philippines to an Air Force pilot who flew in Iraq and Afghanistan. These stories describe the type of person which elite units attract and the type of missions they conduct. For example, Army Special Forces, commonly called “Green Berets” for their distinctive head gear, choose men who are extremely physically fit and able to conduct guerrilla warfare with surrogate or indigenous forces in contested areas for long periods of time. Navy SEALs and Army Rangers also cherish physical fitness, but they primarily seek individuals who thrive on conducting direct action missions — short-duration operations such as raids and ambushes. In contrast, psychological operations and civil affairs units place less emphasis on physical attributes and focus on recruiting culturally sensitive men and women who can influence local populations and manage a variety of humanitarian assistance and reconstruction projects. Although special operations leaders claim that all units and missions are equally important, the authors argue that, in actuality, direct action, commando-type operations are preferred over indirect missions, such as digging wells or advising foreign military units. The highest positions in the United States Special Operations Command (SOCOM), the senior military headquarters for all special operations units, are consistently awarded to officers who serve in direct action units.

Throughout the 1990s, SOCOM leaders repeatedly deployed units that specialized in direct operations to troubled areas around the globe. Army Rangers conducted raids in Somalia, Navy SEALs boarded ships in the Persian Gulf, and Army Special Forces tracked down suspected war criminals in Bosnia. This trend continued after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when SOCOM sent forces to kill or capture terrorist leaders in Afghanistan. In early 2004, several prominent defense experts began to question the effectiveness of SOCOM’s “man-hunting” strategy and called for an increased focus on indirect operations to influence the traditional social networks that harbor Islamic extremists. Defense Department officials responded to this criticism by stressing the importance of indirect operations in the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review and SOCOM officials reassured members of Congress that they considered indirect operations to be the most important component of the nation’s counter-terrorism strategy.

Tucker and Lamb argue that there is little evidence to support the claim that SOCOM has addressed the inequities between direct and indirect operations. The recent transfer of the majority of civil affairs and psychological operations units from SOCOM to the Army Reserve, coupled with the decision to raise the rank of special operations commanders who specialize in direct action operations, suggests that SOCOM’s senior leadership remains enamored with direct action operations. The authors conclude that units conducting indirect operations will never receive adequate resources in the current forces structure. To address this systemic problem, Tucker and Lamb call for establishing a separate com-

mand — the Joint Unconventional Warfare Command — that would consist of Army Special Forces, civil affairs, psychological operations forces, combined with a cadre of experts from all four military services and several federal government agencies that would focus on working with indigenous forces. Special operations forces not included in the Joint Unconventional Warfare Command — Navy SEALs, Army Rangers, and Marine Special Operations Companies — would form an organization focused on direct action operations — the Special Operations Strike Command. This entity would enable its assigned forces to further develop their capabilities to locate, track, destroy, and exploit enemy targets. Each organization would be commanded by a four-star general officer and retain SOCOM's critical military service-like acquisition authorities. The authors posit that if both organizations have four-star commanders and are bureaucratic equals, then indirect operations will garner the attention and resources they deserve. Tucker and Lamb acknowledge that their reorganization proposal faces significant bureaucratic obstacles but they are too quick to dismiss some of the likely negative effects of these reforms. For example, they reject the claim that indirect and direct forces are more effective when they work together and argue that both types of units will flourish under different commands. However, this premise ignores the dramatic success that Combined Joint Special Operations Task Forces — composite units that include both indirect and direct action forces — are having in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Tucker and Lamb's detailed analysis of the debacle in Somalia is alone worth the price of the book. The authors trace the decisions that led to the failed October 1993 raid that resulted in the deaths of 18 Americans and hundreds of Somalis. They conclude that the battle's disastrous outcome was the result of poor decision-making on several levels. Civilian leaders in Washington did not communicate the nation's policy goals to the Pentagon and the American public, senior military officers did not inform policy makers that changes in the operational environment increased the risks associated with combat operations, and tactical commanders did not realize that Somali warlords learned from earlier engagements and developed techniques to mitigate American advantages in firepower and mobility. Unfortunately, the book does not cover all topics equally well. The authors only briefly examine the current ongoing efforts to increase the number of special operations forces. These expansion efforts are more than programmatic changes to training programs and recruiting efforts; the special operations community is undergoing the most significant cultural transformation since the end of the Cold War. By not delving into this development, Tucker and Lamb missed an opportunity to analyze how the pressure to expand special operations units is affecting combat performance. Despite these omissions, *United States Special Operations Forces* is an enlightening perspective on these elite units. It provides neophytes with an easily readable introduction into the world of special operations and gives practitioners and academics a detailed, up-to-date reference on several major issues in the field. If you are limited to one volume

on modern American special operations forces, this is the work that should be on your bookshelf.

Stephen M. Grenier is a Department of Defense Fellow in Washington, DC. The points expressed in this review are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Government.

Hironaka, Ann. *Neverending Wars: The International Community, Weak States and the Perpetuation of War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Neverending Wars examines an important issue in international relations: why, since the end of World War II, have civil wars been so long? It attempts to answer this empirical puzzle by offering a fresh theoretical framework, a “sociological neo-institutional” approach (what in political science is normally labeled *constructivism*) (p. 10), anchored by both statistical analysis and short interspaced case studies. At the heart of Hironaka’s book is the argument that more attention needs to be paid to structural (international) explanations for the durability of civil war. (p. 149) This is a welcome challenge to a literature that, as she rightly notes, tends to focus on local causes of civil war.

Unfortunately, the argument as presented in the book is weakened by a seriously flawed analytical framework and a series of logical errors. These blemishes are exacerbated by selective and shallow case studies that could often just as easily refute her thesis.

The author begins by stating that she will “. . . explain the increased duration of civil wars, not the original causes.” (p. 3) But her analysis repeatedly slips into a discussion of the origins or causes of those wars. For instance, the central structural (international) explanation, borrowed appropriately from Robert Jackson and Carl Rosberg, is that the post-war international system fostered the creation of weak (“quasi-states”), a condition that fosters civil war. (p. 13) It is also a condition that enables protracted civil war. (Ibid) At other times she conflates duration and cause. Such as “[C]onsequently, the analysis incorporates and reflects the intuitive notion that long wars represent more “civil war activity” than short ones.” (p. 43) Therefore, she argues that her framework can determine which characteristics of states are associated with varying rates of civil war activity. (Ibid)

She is likely right, but her theoretical framework and selected case studies only weaken the argument. She essentially compares the weak states of the South to the strong states of the North (not their peers; see page 46). There are two problems with this framing. First, if structural factors are the key independ-