

PANTYHOSE ON THE FRONTLINES: An Undercover Look at the Special Forces

by Christophe Chung

Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces
Linda Robinson
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US conventional troops are stretched thinly across the globe in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Colombia, the Philippines and a number of other countries where the US has strategic interests. The largest deployment of conventional forces is Iraq, where—after toppling the regime of Sadaam Hussein in the spring of 2003—the US has been struggling ever since to stabilize the country and defeat an ever-expanding insurgency that has pushed the country to the edge of chaos. Despite the increasing threats to its quixotic democracy project in the Middle East, the White House has doggedly resisted upping the conventional forces in Iraq; it has refused even to consider re-instituting the draft. Maybe, just maybe, President Bush and his Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, are on to something. According to Linda Robinson, author of *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces*, large numbers of conventional forces are not the answer. Instead, she argues compellingly that the deployment of Special Forces, operating under a very different set of rules, is the most effective solution to this seemingly intractable problem.

Robinson asserts that the Special Forces—particularly the US Army Special

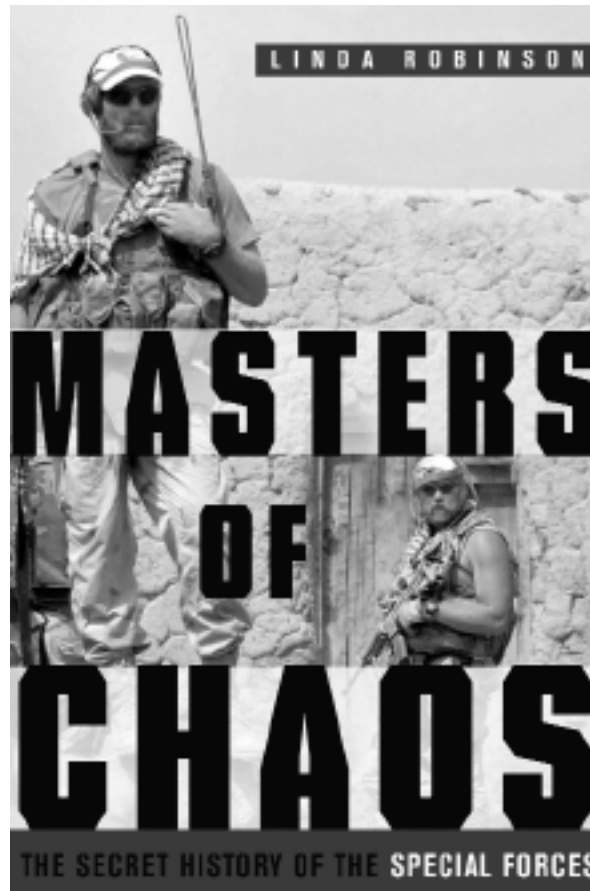
Forces, which are also known as the “Green Berets”—should be responsible for addressing asymmetrical threats from the 100-plus terrorist groups and insurgencies in the world. The Special Forces employ an “economy of force,” which results in lower costs and fewer casualties than conventional operations. And ultimately, the very size of Special Forces teams allows them to accomplish the same job that only much larger numbers of conventional troops could do. Their small size permits the use of unconventional means to win battles. They employ the basic commando tactics of shock,

surprise, speed, and violence of action, which, according to Robinson, is “the only way a small force can temporarily stun and prevail over a much larger one.” Furthermore, the Special Forces use “ruses, feints, deception, and night movements that...turn their weakness into advantages.”

With the Soviet Union’s collapse, what the Pentagon calls “low-intensity conflicts,” in the developing world, have become increasingly commonplace. These struggles are not the set-piece battles that the Army fought in World War II or Korea; instead, they are the domain of the guerrilla, the child soldier, and other unconventional warriors. To counter such aggression, the Special Forces employ their own unconventional tactics. Special Forces teams rely heavily on on-the-ground intelligence, which can only be gathered effectively through the support of locals. Robinson states that a team can “gain access to the locals only if they have rapport, credibility, and legitimacy,” which is largely built through their language skills and cultural knowledge.

The simple act of eating the local food, speaking the local language and socializing in local sports can build alliances. In Afghanistan, the Green Berets won some allies in a game of *buzkashi*, a polo-like sport that involved a headless calf. Robinson notes that in Iraq, the Green Berets ate falafel and pitas—even though it was making them physically sick—so as not to alienate their hosts.

In researching the book, Robinson spoke with a large number of current and



former Special Operators, and details of their personal stories are intertwined with the broader geopolitical context of their work. This makes the book more readable than a military history text or a policy brief; however, the author's enthusiasm for her subject sometimes bleeds over into myopia. She does not, for example, discuss the limitations of the Special Forces, nor does she discuss in much detail the situations in which they failed to meet their objectives.

Still, her observations about tactics and strategy are right on. Robinson notes that a rule of thumb in unconventional warfare is to play the best game possible with the hand you are dealt. Holistic responses to threats and synergetic alliances with local fighters have proven to be effective ways for the Green Berets to get their job done. They have to be flexible enough to use everything from laser target designators to mule trains. Since most of these conflicts are fought in the developing world and because the Special Forces are usually airdropped into a conflict zone, they cannot rely on the same

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level of logistical support as the regular army. Sometimes their improvisations are, well, interesting. In Afghanistan, the troops took to wearing a light, warm, durable form of underwear: pantyhose.

Masters of Chaos reads like a saga of international adventure. Robinson follows a select group of soldiers from their initiations into black-ops to the battles of Panama, El Salvador, Desert Storm, Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan, and into Operation Iraqi Freedom. The hard battles are not fought on wide-open, rural battlefields between uniformed armies, but rather in the urban landscape, with the attendant challenges of dealing with local populations.

She points out that “the inherently political nature of war is even more pronounced in an unconventional conflict, where the adversary is not a state or an army but rather a small irregular force that is hard to detect yet capable of causing major political and psychological impact.” The non-territorial nature of these conflicts, and the active audience, have created political theater on a grand scale. Winning over the hearts and minds of the local populace has become increasingly crucial in winning conflicts since an insurgency draws its strength from local support.

Therefore, when the Special Forces arrive in a locale, they pay close attention to the economic, educational, legal, health and security needs of the civilian populations. They implement civil affairs concurrently with their battle engagement—whether by digging wells or distributing aid. For example, in Bosnia, the Green Berets lived in local apartments in close contact with the civilian population; they carried out Operation Teddy Bear, distributing 1,000 teddy bears in Serb villages. In Iraq, the Special Forces wore neither helmets nor body armor and took care not to intimidate

the people they were trying to work with, unlike the Marines and regular Army troops, who enter civilian areas only when armed to the teeth and riding in armored vehicles.

Recommendations

Robinson argues that the Army must emphasize unconventional warfare training and the expansion of the Special Forces in order to deal effectively with what has become the dominant form of conflict around the globe. She cites a Special Forces officer who proposes that Fort Bragg be converted into an unconventional warfare training center with a strong emphasis on language and cultural training.

Robinson proposes a “robust prevention policy” to prevent situations from brewing into full-fledged conflicts. The US would bring to bear a wide range of military and non-military strategies, including diplomacy, economic incentives, sanctions, psychological operations, covert operations carried out between the CIA and Special Forces, and cooperation with other governments.

For situations that require military force, the Special Forces are the paramount asset. In Kurdistan, a single Special Forces task force, with the help of its Kurdish allies, was able to do the job that many felt would require 60,000 conventional forces. They secured 300 square miles, routed the extremist group Ansar al-Islam, and neutralized the largest terrorist camp outside Afghanistan. Only twenty-three Kurds were wounded and three killed; not a single American casualty was sustained.

Masters of Chaos leaves the reader with the feeling that the Special Forces can do anything. Robinson provides enough evidence to show that this is not far from the truth, although the book does not examine what makes American military policy work or fail. Instead, it presents a portrait of one set of actors within that policy, combined with an argument for increasing their role and learning lessons from them. And it builds a very strong case.

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