

**Mark Moyar.** *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces.* New York: Basic Books, 2017. 432 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-465-05393-3.

**Reviewed by** Robert Farley

**Published on** H-Diplo (June, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

Since before World War II, many of the world's foremost military organizations have experimented with the development of special operations forces (SOF), highly capable small units designed to take on extraordinary tasks. The motivating concept behind SOF is the idea that concentrated human capital can be leveraged to overcome unusual tactical problems. SOF formations select warfighters for extraordinary physical and cognitive capabilities, as well as extreme endurance, and then subject those warfighters to intensive training. This concentrated, elite human capital can then perform missions in contexts where conventional units would fail. These missions include raids deep into enemy-held territory, hostage rescue scenarios, assassinations of high-value targets, and the seizure of well-defended enemy fortifications.

In *Oppose Any Foe*, Mark Moyar chronicles the history of American special forces since World War II, casting a critical eye on the development and employment of these units. While Moyar acknowledges the heroism of such forces, and their effectiveness in certain tactical situations, he effectively paints a skeptical picture of their overall impact on warfighting, and on the larger American defense establishment. Moyar begins his account by discussing the prehistory of today's special operations forces, the ad hoc units developed

in the European and Pacific theaters during World War II. He examines both the political and military logics underlying these foundations, which often depended on idiosyncratic assessments of value and the strength of specific personal relationships.

Moyar details many of the formations and operations of SOF over the ensuing seventy-five years. These include well-trod territory such as Operation Eagle Claw, the failed effort to rescue US hostages in Tehran; the Son Tay Raid in Vietnam, intended to rescue US prisoners of war; Marine raids against Japanese-held islands in the Pacific; the Battle of Mogadishu; the assassination of Osama bin Laden, and a variety of other operations. While most of these operations have been chronicled in greater detail in other places, Moyar ably summarizes the key facts and puts the specific operations into the broader strategic context US planners expected them to serve.

Moyar also describes the behind-the-scene politics of SOF, focusing on the long-term debate between conventional warfighters, special operators, and civilian policymakers. At various points (the early years of World War II, the early years of Vietnam, and for much of the War on Terror) SOF enthusiasts and civilian policymakers have worked together against the conventional military establishment to create a bureaucratic ecosystem

in which SOF can survive and thrive. The uniformed services have resisted these efforts for cultural and bureaucratic reasons, but over time they have lost ground; SOF have become a permanent, established part of the US defense community, with ownership of key institutions such as SOCOM (Special Operations Command) and JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command).

Moyar is skeptical of the claims advanced by the advocates of SOF. He argues that the glamor and undeniable heroism of special operators has helped deflect scrutiny of some of their more egregious failures, and of the special operations enterprise as a whole. Moyar suggests that even the most successful SOF missions (such as the raid that killed Osama bin Laden) have incurred poorly-accounted-for strategic costs.

Moyar introduces four core challenges that faced policymakers in World War II, and that have echoed through the history of SOF. First, civilian political leaders with little understanding of military utility have nevertheless intervened in decisions about the creation and retention of elite formations. Second, the extreme flexibility of the SOF concept has made it difficult to pin down exactly what such formations are supposed to do, and where they are supposed to do these things. Third, there exists no firm agreement on which missions require concentrated, elite human capital, and which missions do not. Finally, the creation of SOF necessarily introduces intra-service conflict between conventional and elite components.

Moyar adds that civilian policymakers, with a limited sense of military utility, tend to find special operations attractive without fully evaluating their costs. Both successful and unsuccessful operations combine an excessive degree of military optimism about the parameters of the possible with a lack of political understanding of the risks and costs of failure. These problems are hardly incidental to the SOF project; high human capital individuals tend to have a strong sense of their ca-

pabilities. And civilians lacking in military expertise often have reason to take these beliefs at face value, especially when the SOF offer quick, cheap solutions to difficult policy problems. Moyar points out that some of this conceptual slippage finds its way into military thinking. While some commanders conserve SOF to a fault (keeping them out of the fight in anticipation of future missions), others expend elite formations in conventional operations, where the concentration of human capital has limited effect.

Special operations have long endured criticism from more conventionally oriented parts of the uniformed military. The development of SOF requires a tradeoff; regular line units lose human capital when their best soldiers and officers join elite formations. The dedication of training resources to SOF may also shortchange conventional forces. Moreover, the concentration of human capital in particular units makes high casualties particularly problematic. No matter how smart or tough they are, special operators die like anyone else during plane crashes and artillery barrages. The concentration of talent makes it extremely difficult to replace and reinforce the units in timely fashion.

In a theme he returns to repeatedly, Moyar argues that special operations have only rarely had a major strategic impact on war. Despite some high-profile successes in both the Pacific and European theaters in World War II, SOF had a trivial effect compared to conventional fighting forces on the eventual decision. Similarly, in the Korean War the heroism of Rangers operating along and behind Chinese lines had little impact on the outcome of the conflict. Special operators could not stem the flow of supplies down the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Vietnam War, nor could they turn the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) into a sufficiently effective fighting force.

In large part, Moyar makes a compelling case. In particular, Moyar's account is a helpful counterweight to much of the existing literature on

special forces, which tends to glamorize their activities and downplay their failures. Moyar highlights and gives voice to the critiques that conventional military professionals have made about special forces since World War II, critiques often dismissed in the popular literature as excessively hidebound and bureaucratic in nature.

Moyar repeatedly restates the case that conventional forces make against their SOF kin; that special operations forces detract from conventional formations by removing the best soldiers and officers, and that the resources devoted to training SOF similarly reduce overall conventional readiness. This claim certainly echoes the critiques that officers in conventional formations have made of SOF since World War II. However, Moyar offers precious little evidence to support this claim. If the creation of SOF has a negative impact on larger conventional formations, it is possible that this impact will show up in the data that we have available, but Moyar does not investigate this in any kind of rigorous fashion. We have methods, qualitative and quantitative, for evaluating the combat effectiveness of small units. For example, the Department of Defense keeps a variety of metrics on recruit quality and military performance; an ambitious research project could use this data to investigate the impact of special operations forces on diluting the conventional pool.[1] Similarly, various research projects in and around the Department of Defense have investigated the factors contributing to favorable loss exchange ratios in small-unit combat. [2] Unfortunately, Moyar lets one of his central theoretical claims stand on its own, without giving it the kind of support it needs.

Another of Moyar's central claims, on the perfidious effect that civilians have exerted on SOF, is at best incomplete. Moyar is surely correct that the development of SOF has consistently involved the influence of civilians, and that this influence has often ignored established military advice. He is also correct that special forces offer civilian pol-

icymakers the illusion of a convenient, cheap tool for creating military effects. However, while he ably relates the interaction between civilian and military authorities over the seventy-five-year history of SOF, he does not successfully build even an implicit theoretical edifice for explaining why SOF are institutionally successful at some times, but not at others. At some points in the narrative, failure earns SOF more resources; at other points, relative success earns no rewards. A comparative approach, relating the experience of SOF both to other US military bureaucracies (the US Air Force springs to mind) or to similar foreign formations would have produced a more compelling argument.

Moyar offers a less than satisfying discussion of foreign influence on the development of US SOF. While he notes that early US SOF groups self-consciously copied British formations such as the Special Air Service (SAS), the Commandos, and the Chindits, he does not delve into the interactions between British and American operators in any detail. Similarly, Moyar does little to investigate how other countries have evaluated the utility of SOF; Italy, France, and Russia have all used special forces to good effect in one context or another. That other countries have invested in small, elite units is surely relevant to Moyar's argument; he needs to either account for the fact that these formations arise from similar political dynamics (do the Russians and British have the same conversations as the Americans?), or acknowledge that a belief in the strategic efficacy of SOF extends beyond the American political context.

*Oppose Any Foe* is not the only book that an interested consumer should read on special forces; other accounts contain more analysis, and still others have a more complex and optimistic take on how special forces have performed during the War on Terror. But Moyar demands that we take seriously the costs that developing such units impose on the rest of the military, and take into account the strategic limitations of special opera-

tions. In the wake of the Obama administration, which overrelied on the use of SOF to obtain strategic objectives, these lessons are well taken. Moreover, despite the occasional dive into flourish-for-its-own-sake, Moyar has written a accessible account for most readers with even a basic baseline of knowledge about military affairs.

#### Notes

[1]. Janice H. Laurence, "Performance of the All-Volunteer Force," *America's All-Volunteer Force* (New York: Greenwood, 2004), <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/MG265/images/webS0838.pdf>.

[2]. Joseph A. Olmstead, B. L. Elder, and John M. Forsyth, *Organizational Process and Combat Readiness: Feasibility of Training Organizational Effectiveness Staff Officers to Assess Command Group Performance* (Alexandria, VA: Human Resources Research Organization, 1978), <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA138881>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

**Citation:** Robert Farley. Review of Moyar, Mark. *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. June, 2017.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48918>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.