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From Horse Soldiers to Hybrid Conflicts:

Unconventional Warfare's Evolution since 9/11

by Alp Yenen
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The stark contrast of the beginning and end of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan forces a reflection on the trajectory of unconventional warfare over two decades of the Global War on Terror. The early days of U.S. operations in Afghanistan vividly showcased the effectiveness of unconventional warfare. The rugged images of U.S. Army Green Berets on horseback, taking over the country together with the Northern Alliance, as famously featured in the movie *12 Strong* (2018), marked a departure from the technical images emitted from missiles and planes equipped with cameras during Operation Desert Storm a decade earlier. The initial defeat and retreat of the Taliban seemed to undo the U.S. Armed Forces' aversion to unconventional warfare since the Vietnam War, rekindling the potential of special operation forces and clandestine intelligence services.¹ Undoubtedly, the Global War



on Terror has shaped the trajectory of special warfare, leaving a lasting impact on both military conflicts and their depictions in popular culture.

However, over time, the initial optimism soon yielded to a more intricate reality. The [infamous 2017 quote](#) from President Trump that “We are not nation-building again. We are killing terrorists” epitomized the shifting focus of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. Gradually, the focus transitioned from fostering collaboration and nurturing bonds with Afghan forces to targeted man-hunt operations and counterterrorism. This strategy proved insufficient in countering the resurgence of the Taliban, paving the way for their return to power in 2021, accompanied by haunting scenes from the Kabul airport. The tragic fate of countless Afghan commandos and interpreters, abandoned and subsequently executed by the Taliban, draws a distressing historical parallel to the plight of the Montagnards in Vietnam, who stood alongside U.S. troops only to be forsaken as a persecuted minority. Such instances serve as bitter reminders of the complex dynamics and human costs intrinsic to unconventional warfare.

Within the realm of U.S. special operation forces, the U.S. Army Special Forces, commonly known as Green Berets, have long been synonymous with unconventional warfare, entrusted with tasks encompassing for-

eign internal defense and security force assistance to indigenous units. The Green Berets became popular after embedded author Robin Moore published his same-named [best-seller book](#) (1965) telling the daring operations of Green Berets in the hapless Vietnam War, which was later turned into a [billboard no. 1 hit song](#) (1966) and a [box-office hit movie](#) (1968). As Army Special Forces, the Green Berets have trained [commandos](#) and [guerrillas](#) in allied nations across the world during the Cold War and thereafter.² Yet, they have grappled with a profound identity crisis over the past two decades since 9/11. The rise of surgical direct-action operations, reminiscent of special mission units such as Delta Force and SEAL Team Six during pivotal moments like the capture of Saddam Hussein and the elimination of Osama Bin Laden, has overshadowed the more long-term engagements of unconventional warfare. [A recent study](#) shows that the allure of intensive language training, [a cornerstone of Green Beret curriculum](#), is waning among the new generation: 29% no longer view it as a pivotal skill. A statement by an anonymous Green Beret in the same study encapsulates the essence of the prevailing “identity crisis,” noting that a generation reared on the events of the Global War on Terror and “the promise of door-kicking raids, dynamic entries, and kill/capture methodologies” may find this idealized vision doesn’t accord with reality. The former ideal of the Green Berets as [“Ph.D.s who can win a bar fight”](#) seems to be far off.

The decline in recruitment figures across the United States further underscores this transformation. Moreover, an unsettling history of war crimes and other criminal offenses committed by U.S. special operators prompts contemplation on whether the experience of the Global War on Terror [eroded the moral fabric](#) of U.S. special operation forces.

Meanwhile, a significant geostrategic shift has also taken place. During the Afghanistan conflict, the U.S. special operation forces relished a significant technological edge. Equipped with night vision goggles that bestowed upon them the ability to [“own the night,”](#) as well as advancements in satellite communication and drone warfare that redefined air superiority, the U.S. military held a distinct advantage. However, the global strategic landscape is in a state of rapid flux, with the [specter of strategic competition](#) with Russia and China looming large on the horizon. The balance of technological power is now undergoing a tectonic shift. As the current war in Ukraine demonstrates, engagements where both adversaries boast relatively comparable advancements may soon define the new standard. Intriguingly, the prophetic words of Colonel Sam Trautman, the Green Beret mentor of the fictional character John Rambo in David Morrell’s novel *First Blood* (1972), resonate with a haunting significance. His premonition, “To find a man all you have to do is fly over the spot where you think he is, and the machine will register



his body heat... And a man like me, he won't be needed. This is the last of something... I fear the day when machines take the place of men," underscores the profound implications of advancing technology. As history evolves, the future of unconventional warriors hangs precariously in the balance.

Nonetheless, amidst these complexities, unconventional warriors will still remain [relevant](#). The convergence of human intelligence work and special operations will persist as an indispensable element in the hybrid wars of the future, mirroring the transgressive capacities displayed by the [OSS](#) in the Second World War and the [MACV-SOG](#) during the Vietnam War as well as the task forces of the [JSOC](#) and the [CIA's SAC](#) during the Global War on Terror. Additionally, a renewed emphasis on international partnerships to cultivate local capacities for resistance and reliance, as has been occurring across Scandinavia, the Baltics, and Ukraine, will emerge as essential in crafting an [integrated deterrence](#) against the looming aggression of United States' near-peer adversaries.

As the global landscape evolves, marked by hybrid conflicts and new tragedies unfolding in the aftermath of the Global War on Terror, the unfortunate reality is that warfare will persist. Amidst this perpetual state of conflict, even as the conventions of war undergo

redefinition, warfare will retain its unconventional facet as a transgressive and transformative force to be reckoned with.

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¹ Annie Jacobsen, *Surprise Kill Vanish: The Definitive History of Secret CIA Assassins, Armies, and Operators*, John Murray, 2020.

² Tony Schwalm, *The Guerrilla Factory: The Making of Special Forces Officers the Green Berets*, Free Press, 2014.

