

Special Intelligence

The roles of the CIA and the military may merge, in the form of "Special Forces," made up of data-analyzing urban commandos

by [Robert D. Kaplan](#)

THE United States military, for all its sex scandals, has an easy time with the media in comparison with the Central Intelligence Agency. Media criticism of the military is periodically mixed with awe, as when journalists reported the successes of the Gulf War, made heroes out of Generals Colin Powell and Norman Schwarzkopf, and lionized bridge-construction units in Bosnia. But media criticism of the CIA is so constant and blistering that it suggests a hatred of the intelligence profession itself -- or at least a feeling that spy agencies are obsolete in a post-Cold War information age. That is ironic, because the intelligence industry is sure to become even more necessary for our well-being, and therefore more powerful within government.



That was one conclusion I reached after serving briefly as a consultant to the Army's Special Forces Regiment at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Special Forces are a military growth industry. The new chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Henry H. Shelton, comes from the Special Operations Forces. In 1996 U.S. Special Forces were responsible for 2,325 missions in 167 countries involving 20,642 people -- only nine per operation, on average. Words like "low-key" and "discreet" are frequently used by Special Forces members to describe what they do. Considering that the threat posed by Russian mafias and Russian nuclear terrorists is now greater than that posed by Russian tanks and infantry, the military usefulness of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization will depend more on the integration of Special Forces within NATO's largely conventional command than on the integration of the Czech Republic and other former Eastern-bloc states. Then there are the gas and oil pipelines soon to be built through unstable tribal lands around the Caspian Sea, which will need protection; mounting problems with drug cartels; a predicted upsurge in the kidnapping of rich and politically prominent people and their children; the increase in climatic catastrophe, now that human beings are inhabiting flood- and earthquake-prone regions to

an unprecedented extent; and worldwide rapid-fire urbanization. All these augment the importance of lean and mobile military units that conflate the traditional categories of police officers, commandos, emergency-relief specialists, diplomats, and, of course, intelligence officers.

The public will demand protection -- for as few tax dollars as possible -- from a whole new kind of enemy that is using technology to miniaturize and conceal explosives and communications devices. The future will thus be brutal to industrial-age armies with big tanks and jets, and kind to corporate-style forces in urban settings, which rely on both electronic and human intelligence. In recent years various spy agencies provided information that led to the capture of plutonium smugglers. In contrast, the extensive use of conventional troops to change the regime in Haiti was both costly and unpopular -- despite the lack of bloodshed. The old, pre-Vietnam method for Haiti would have been to use both the intelligence service and Special Forces to ease out or topple a cruel and incompetent regime. That method might have avoided the challenge of instituting democracy, but it would have been quieter and less time-consuming -- and cheaper. Although we won't often topple regimes in the future, the urge will grow to use what the Army calls "quiet professionals" to neutralize problems that the public does not consider to be of urgent national interest. An urban geographer with whom I recently spoke told me that Vancouver -- a typical emerging city-state with a productive economy and its own strategic transport links -- will have no particular need for either Canada or the United States. But it will require a protective shield of the kind that Washington's Special Forces and intelligence units can provide.

SPECIAL Forces activities range from backpacking around the Thai-Burmese border in a quest for information about drug smuggling to conducting surveillance for the Bosnian peacekeeping operation. Along with the usual commando skills and an emphasis on urban fighting, the subjects taught at the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg include dentistry, ophthalmology, veterinary medicine, x-ray interpretation, well-digging, negotiating, and exotic languages. The aim is to create a force of men (women are not yet eligible for Special Forces) that can (this time) truly win "hearts and minds," by acting as doctors and aid workers in a Third World city or village -- and also, if need be, can kill or apprehend a war criminal, a terrorist group, or another adversary. At a recent Special Forces conference I observed an auditorium full of 1990s commandos who looked markedly different from the Vietnam-era warriors who occupied the first two rows as honored guests. The Vietnam-era men, most of them in their fifties, looked thuggish: guys without necks and occasionally with tattoos, guys you would not want to meet in the dark. The rest of the auditorium resembled a group of graduate students who happened to be in excellent physical shape.

The conflation of roles is not something new and futuristic but something old and traditional. The Army is essentially re-creating colonial expeditionary forces with men who are chameleons, modeled after the spy, linguist, and master of disguise Sir Richard Francis Burton. "Ambiguity," "subjective" and "intuitive" thinking, and decisions made when only 20 percent of the evidence is in are encouraged: by the time more information is available, it will be too late to act. Nor are cultural generalizations about what Fort Bragg instructors call "modal personalities" frowned on. For instance, I sat in on a class in which the instructor, an Arab speaker who had lived for years in the Middle East, said that because of the authoritarian nature of Arab militaries, Arab noncommissioned officers don't make decisions on their own. He added that rote learning and an emphasis on memory mean that Arab pilots do not always use manuals for preflight checks, as U.S. pilots do.

That is stereotyping. But commandos don't have the luxury of exploring individuals. A certain amount of generalization is needed to predict how potentially hostile forces may behave. The assumption at Fort Bragg is that despite war-crimes tribunals and Geneva Conventions, future adversaries will play by the rules even less often than present ones do. Terrorism, drug smuggling, money laundering, industrial espionage, and so on will all evolve into new forms of "conventional" warfare that provide authoritarian leaders with the means to wage war without ever acknowledging it.

For an army that will have to act secretly, unconventionally, and in advance of crises rather than during them, intelligence is critical. Indeed, the growth of Special Forces might be a crude indication of the collapse of any distinction between our military and intelligence services. Yes, the CIA itself might be done away with. What the CIA does, however, will not only grow in importance but also have the support of armed troops within the same bureaucratic framework.

Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Agency is akin to the CIA -- except that it has essentially its own private army. While Pakistan has grown weaker as a state, with near-anarchy prevailing in Karachi, its regional power has grown, thanks to the ISI. The Taliban religious movement in Afghanistan, for instance, in its recent sudden rise received help from the ISI, which wanted to resurrect trade routes through Afghanistan to Iran. This kind of influence may sound frightening, but it is efficient compared with what we have now.

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