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The Sublime: The Paradox of the 7th Warfighting Function

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The Sublime: The Paradox of the 7th Warfighting Function

(Or why SOF cannot eat our function and have it too)

Grant M. Martin

Special Operations Forces (SOF) have a problem: in order to be more effective in the “human domain” we have to paradoxically dump the concept. The human domain, a conceptualization of the influence that populations have on military operations, is one way of viewing reality. Human populations, however, are characterized by different viewpoints and limiting oneself to only one view of the world can be disastrous if trying to make sense of things and initiate a desired effect. The trends within SOF, however, seem to be a growing reliance on process, bureaucracy, and metrics, all obstacles to breaking away from any institutionally-approved ways of thinking. In order for SOF to best contribute to operations within the human domain I assert that we have to do two things: 1) ensure our doctrine and concepts support a more nuanced and dynamic approach to operations at the conceptual level and, 2) mimic at the operational and strategic levels the same kinds of things that make us “special” at the tactical level. Actually making these things happen in the face of the current drawdown, our relatively recent infatuation with technology and the inexplicable application of physical domain concepts to the human domain, however, will be a herculean task.

The human domain implies the “social” realm: a dominion of non-visible abstractions that, although mostly falling outside of “the scientific” are nonetheless real, if real means to have an effect on others. Yet SOF, following the Army’s lead, is attempting to apply the physical domains’ constructs to this social domain. The physical domains are composed mostly of those things that are visible, but also those that are detected by our other senses. Although this is a simplification and perhaps disingenuous, one way of thinking about the two types of domains is to imagine an armored division battle as being one largely within the “land domain”. Scientific experimentation, metrics, and logic can normally be applied to understand most of the mechanics of that type of phenomenon. What the population of a nearby town thinks about the battle, however, and, more importantly, what they will do that could affect one’s objectives, fall more into the social realm. This is a realm consisting more of “social” facts (as opposed to “physical” facts such as artillery trajectories and tank speed), influenced more by language and culture, and largely constructed by the inhabitants as to meaning. Approaching the physical domain in more of an objective and logical manner may work, but approaching the social realm without relying more on multiple viewpoints and critical and creative thinking is a recipe for disaster.

In this paper I make the case that the concept of the human domain is a good one if it gets us to go much

deeper than our doctrinal and institutional methodologies normally take us. Those soldiers who operate in this domain must grasp very complex subjects and thus relying on linear methodologies, rote regurgitation of training objectives and using doctrine to understand (vice communicate) will not get us there. We must introduce at least our SOF soldiers to the concepts of the critical realist^[i] philosophy and to the practice of forming multi-paradigmatic views. We must also firmly ground and continuously educate them in critical and creative thinking. These aren't mechanized divisions we are attempting to outflank or terrorists we are killing in the human domain, these are very contextual-dependent groups of people whose values we are attempting to appreciate and either influence or employ to some effect. ^[ii] It is the difference between operating within the physically visible world and the socially non-visible one.^[iii] To best enable the forces that are engaged in this socially non-visible world, or the missions SOF call *Special Warfare*,^[iv] it is my contention that we must discard the philosophy the military normally uses and turn towards something Curtis White calls "*the sublime*" in his book *The Middle Mind*: less of a faith that science and data can unlock the puzzles of humanity and more of a reliance on art. ^[v] Art in this case refers to military art, but also to innovation and Mission Command as well the concepts of multi-framing, learning-in-action, and the afore-mentioned critical and creative thinking. The alternative, and the military's current preferred philosophy, is the technically rational approach. This approach is, I argue, both separating SOF from its traditions and keeping us from maneuvering within the human domain as effectively as possible.

The Problem: Assuming a Technically Rational Approach within the Human Domain

The Chief of Staff of the Army, General Odierno, allegedly said recently, "That is what I was missing in Iraq! The human domain!"^[vi] This conversation happened, supposedly, in the context of a discussion about the Army's Seventh Warfighting Function (WfF), which as a concept is still being worked, but would add a function to the Army's list of those six things it must now do to theoretically "maximize combat power".^[vii] When combined with the other functions- movement and maneuver, fires, intelligence, protection, sustainment, mission command- and welded together through leadership, the Seventh is supposed to enable decisive effects and ultimately success on the battlefield. What is the Seventh WfF? Right now it has yet to be named, although some of the early candidates have included Influence, Engagement, and Shape.^[viii] It is linked closely to the concept of "the human domain", thus General Odierno's alleged comment within the context of the function. As LTG Sacolick and BG Grigsby wrote in the June 2012 issue of *Army Magazine*:

"The concept of the human domain is the cognitive foundation of the 7th warfighting function's lethal and nonlethal capabilities to assess, shape, deter and influence foreign security environments."^[ix]

In plain English, the 7th WfF is all of the tasks and systems that military units would need to do or have to influence people, taking into account the "socio-economic, cognitive, and physical aspects of human activity".^[x] Of course, that does not leave too much left. If one thinks about it, the 7th WfF and the human domain, defined as "*the totality of the physical, cultural and social environments that influence human behavior to the extent that success of any military operation or campaign depends on the application of unique capabilities that are designed to fight and win population-centric conflicts,*" ^[xi] border on tautologies. That is, they encompass so much that they are rendered almost useless. What doesn't influence human behavior- even if one caveats it with "to the extent that success of a campaign depends on it"?

Regardless of the construct's philosophical issues, why are Special Operations Forces (SOF) pushing for a

new Army warfighting function and why is the Army supporting SOF in doing so? As usual there are a multitude of reasons.^[xii] The most important reason has to do with the prevailing conventional wisdom within the military about why Operational Iraqi Freedom (OIF) seemed to go so terribly wrong. Sydney J. Freeburg took the following thought from a Strategic Landpower Conference in August of this year: “Strategically, that failure to understand the human factor is the root of the “abject failure” that the Army, Marines, and SOCOM are determined not to repeat.”^[xiii] This follows on the heels of the Army’s Field Manual 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* Manual and subsequent debates between the “COINdinistas”, such as John Nagl who have pushed for a “human-centricity” in contemporary war efforts, and those who would advocate that the narrative being sold on Iraq is flat-out wrong.^[xiv] In short, the U.S. Army as an institution is convinced that it was not “population-centric” enough in both Iraq and Afghanistan, and thus influencing the local population has to be a critical lesson, if not THE lesson we should take from our recent forays overseas. Other reasons include the drawdown in manpower and money as well as the way the military institution uses concepts to try to align disparate and bureaucratic organizations towards a common goal.^[xv]

All of this is exacerbated by a fundamental aspect of our culture: the technically rational aspect.^[xvi] This approach to reality basically posits that all things in this world can be understood by scientific experimentation. Its language is one of math and formulaic metaphor,^[xvii] its logic is the scientific method, and its philosophy is of the Enlightenment Period. This positivist^[xviii] philosophy would be bad if we simply believed it consciously. Unfortunately, most people in the military are unaware of their own philosophy- or, at the least, the institutional philosophy that their doctrine, planning constructs, and systems and processes are founded upon. This philosophy, for instance, leaves us enamored with metrics and attempting to quantify the unquantifiable. We are convinced we can measure everything we do, to the extent that we talk about things like “measures of effectiveness and measures of performance” as if “effectiveness” is something one can always measure (the problem of sufficient causation and original causes). That we attempt to measure things is but one example of a greater issue: most, if not all, of our constructs remain uncritically accepted on faith by the vast majority of our force. *Centers of Gravity* analysis, the *Military Decision Making Process (MDMP)*, and *Lines of Effort* tools are just a few examples of concepts that appear in military doctrine with few, if any, references. The force learns them, regurgitates them, has faith in them, and many defend them without question.

Knowingly or not, we in the military are governed largely by a system of systems that theoretically ties the President’s security strategy to everything the military does, from the way the Army organizes into brigades to the type of rifle infantrymen carry. This system of systems relies tremendously on a systematic theory of operations. The systematic theory is highly suspect, as the Soviet centralized system should have taught us. This reliance on systems and process instead of relationships and *coup d’œil*^[xix] genius does have some advantages, but it also must undergo fundamental reform every now and then as well as perhaps the brutal test of peer-to-peer combat to avoid the natural tendency to “over-bureaucratize”.^[xx] The U.S. military and SOF used to do this naturally prior to the Cold War by drastically drawing down the Army and doing away with SOF altogether after a war. Since the Cold War and especially since 9/11, the Army has stayed very large and SOF has grown even more.

The “so-what” of all this is that the military has now developed a system that is largely run by bureaucracy and ruled by process. Attempting social change of populations through military engagement throughout all of the activities leading up to and including war and its aftermath (human domain stuff) is arguably self-defeated by a bureaucracy. Until we can break away from our own institutionally-encouraged paradigms and consciously understand where our concepts come from and the weaknesses inherent within them, we should not expect to operate any better at attempting change in others than we have as of late. In fact, I would go even further and submit that without a fundamental cultural shift within

SOF, to include our growing hierarchical structure, we will fail to be any better at “human domain” activities than we are in Afghanistan today. That we have been unable to incorporate the so-called lessons of the early days of Iraq into our operations in Afghanistan should cause us to seriously question the validity and universality of those lessons. Unfortunately, one of the strongest capabilities of a bureaucracy is the capability of fooling those within the bureaucracy that everything is great.[xxi]

If two things don't alert us to the possibility that there could be something fundamentally wrong, then possibly nothing will. Those two things are our inability to clearly articulate what it is we do within SOF and the afore-mentioned continued struggles in Afghanistan. *Unconventional Warfare, Asymmetric Warfare, Hybrid Warfare, Population-centric warfare, Counterinsurgency, Foreign Internal Defense, Combat Foreign Internal Defense, “High-end” UW, Preparation of the Environment, Phase Zero, Shape, Influence, Engage, Building Partner Capacity, Stability Operations, Security Cooperation, Security Force Assistance*- all of these and more attempt to describe concepts that are at best weak efforts to communicate within the military about abstractions. At worst they are used as paradigms with which our force must use when thinking about, planning for, and acting during operations. The problem is that we are attempting to put tacit knowledge- that which is hard or impossible to explain- into the same form (doctrine) as explicit knowledge- that which can be categorized, detailed, and made into a list. SOF and those involved in the human domain are a force seeking to “sense-make” the world largely in an explicit way, but the world we want to operate in is instead socially constructed and filled with tacit knowledge. Doctrine applied to the physical domains- made up of explicit knowledge- makes sense in some areas. [xxii] Doctrine applied to the world of tacit knowledge makes little sense and I would argue makes things more confusing. This fundamental characteristic of the social world, characterized by tacit knowledge, is both the key to moving forward in the human domain as well as ironically the death knell of the term, “the human domain”. We have to take a look at the paradox of the human domain before we can offer a way out of this conceptual mess we've made for ourselves.

The Paradox of the “Human Domain”

Ignoring for a moment that viewing reality through the lens of “domains” is only one way- and quite possibly a very bad way- of attempting to make sense of the world, the concept of the “human domain” has resulted in some confusion for many within the Army and Special Operations. Conversations I've had with many others about the “human domain” tend to revolve around two very confounding comments: 1) that the Air Force and Navy rarely- if ever- have anything to do with humans, and, 2) that when referring to ourselves we should use the term “human dimension.” That any organization attempting to be more nuanced and savvy in its approach and be more “population-centric” would refer to the human domain as “other humans” and our own selves as a “dimension” can only point to us being a slave to our own confusing doctrinal system (I submit when we attempt to indoctrinate abstraction (tacit subjects), we quickly run into these intellectual train wrecks). Likewise, the concept that the Air Force and Navy don't have anything to do with humans borders on the fantastical.

If, as is posited by many military leaders and commentators, the human domain is a different domain than the Army has focused on in the past (the other domains being more physical: land, sea, air and cyber), then it would seem to follow that the tools and philosophy we use might not be the most effective when acting in another, arguably very different, domain. For the purposes of simplification and clarity I will define the “human domain,” not in terms of its content (“the other”), but in terms of the missions or environment most closely related to the concept. When I think of the human domain I think of *Unconventional Warfare (UW)*[xxiii], *Counterinsurgency (COIN)*, *Counter UW*, insurgency, and the like. To add to those types of missions I would include any military operation in which either the objectives are very unclear and abstract or the operation is structured in such a way as to have a high likelihood of being

unbounded in scope and time. Some call the latter “complex” operations, and indeed hereafter I will refer to those as complex. This is juxtaposed with an operation like *Desert Storm* in which the objectives were clear and limited in both scope and time, even if they were limited somewhat artificially and ignoring the obvious connection to *Operation Iraqi Freedom*.

Thus we are left with two choices: either accept that the same conceptual tools and doctrinal concepts that we use for the physical domains can be applied with some minor tweaking to the human domain or approach with at least skepticism the idea that the physical and human domains can be understood using the same paradigms. Do we really believe that metrics, process, the scientific method, and formulae can be the primary guide for us in the human domain- even at the tactical level- and in any domain at the above-tactical levels? If not, if we believe that in the human domain (as well as the levels beyond tactical in all domains) things are highly dependent upon context, fraught with tacit knowledge, and fall more into the art side than the science side,[[xxiv](#)] then the preferred philosophy should be the critical realist philosophy. It is what makes bringing a “cookie-cutter” approach to COIN and UW to be such a terrible idea, and yet our bureaucracy forces us into these approaches at the operational and higher levels.[[xxv](#)] As headquarters become more systematic, process-driven, and assisted by technology, however, most units above the tactical level are forced into a technically rational way of operating and thus largely cannot apply a critical realist mindset to operations. Indeed, one could make the argument that in today’s uber-professional and regimented American military, the only levels in which critical and creative thinking routinely happen are at the tactical level.[[xxvi](#)]

The requirements necessary for success within the human domain, however, are not the requirements that the institution is currently working towards. The U.S. military has become more professional, more centrally-managed, more technologically-enhanced, and more regimented since the ramp-up for the Cold War saddled the American people with a relatively large professional force. That Special Operations is just now getting around in my opinion to being in the same boat is a reflection of two occurrences: the 1987 establishment of Special Operations as a 4-star command and the large growth in Special Operations since 9/11. These two occurrences arguably have brought Special Operations to a level similar to the rest of DoD wherein the most important priority among the hierarchy is the growth of the bureaucracy. This largely unconscious effect is to be expected: any large organization experiences it quite naturally.[[xxvii](#)] What should concern the American people and those within SOF, however, is how much capability we have lost to act within complex environments (i.e., the human domain) as Special Operations becomes more and more consumed by the exact same bureaucratic pressures that the conventional forces have long suffered from.

One example may assist in understanding the phenomenon. Recently US Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) introduced a new publication: the *SOF Operational Design Handbook*. This handbook borrowed much of its concepts from the Army’s Design Methodology (ADM). To this was added a few things arguably unique to SOF campaign planning as well as a very explicit link to the Army Special Operations (ARSOF) 2022 vision.[[xxviii](#)] To be fair, the writers of this first iteration of the handbook were given a very short timeframe with which to complete the project. Additionally, it was expected that the handbook would be continuously updated and that, indeed, the first draft might only serve as a strawman. The danger to SOF does not lie simply with the publication of the handbook: this is simply a symptom of a larger problem. The danger lies with ARSOF copying the U.S. Army’s use of physical domain approaches when it comes to the human domain.

To many, Operational Design has come to represent what is fundamentally wrong with recent U.S. Army concepts. In short, before the concept found its way into doctrine, the early *design* advocates raised suspicions that the hierarchical technical rationality within the military and specifically found within the

planning for and execution of OIF was an insufficient approach for the current operational environment. These advocates recommended the adoption of critical realism, multi-paradigmatic frames and the like. Our culture, however (largely influenced by the same hierarchy the early advocates found fault with), refused to entertain the notion that a technically rational approach is the wrong one for complexity. Thus, we faced a problem: design pointed to our philosophy as being the problem, but we were wedded to our philosophy. This conundrum was “fixed” by the Army at Fort Leavenworth by forcing the concepts of design, an anti-methodological approach, into a methodology!^[xxix] This has resulted in the doctrine seeming to contradict itself. For example, on the one hand the methodology implores professionals to critically think, but it then defines the specific ways in which one must think about war, a wholly uncritical approach. This is due in no small part to two incompatible philosophies that our institution is attempting to force together. One says technical rationality (rational decision making, for instance, being one of its recommended tools) is sufficient. The other says it is wholly wrong.

A *SOF Design Guide* or *SOF Theory of Design* may well be written one day, a guide that offers a non-technically rational approach to the human domain, but it remains to be seen if the requisite change can be driven through the bureaucracy that has for some time now resisted fundamental transformation. It is noteworthy that within the *ARSOF 2022* vision and related efforts, LTG Charles T. Cleveland, the commander of USASOC, calls for testing and experimentation of new and different operational planning constructs specifically with respect to Special Warfare.^[xxx] If Operational Design is seen by ARSOF for what it really is: a methodology best belonging to the physical domains (at the tactical level mostly), rooted in technical rationality, and in direct contradiction with the human domain concept, then it is possible that a more applicable text could be produced. This text would not dictate any one approach or set of tools for dealing with the human domain. Instead it would encourage critical and creative thinking, demand a multi-framed approach at the most fundamental of levels, and require “learning-in-action” or “reflective practice”.^[xxxi] The reflective practitioner is one who reflects critically on all that is done and is never too intellectually lazy to rely on institutional paradigms unconsciously- the professional within refuses such shortcuts. This practitioner further learns while doing, always able to revisit assumptions due to an intellectual humbleness with respect to the world. Multi-framing would be so ingrained as to be almost unconscious: a result of intimate familiarity with how humans make sense of their world through socially-constructed metaphors. Lastly, all of these capabilities would be used to develop an innovative approach to complex problems, those problems that are inherent when the military attempts social change.

This brings us to the paradox of the “human domain”. In order to be effective when dealing with things like social influence,^[xxxii] the requirements are literally something that SOF has been getting further away from being able to do since at least 1987, but especially since 2003.^[xxxiii] If we are to be more effective within the human domain, we must at the least question whether the Army’s physical domain approach is applicable to the human domain. Preferably we would rigorously experiment with different constructs and approaches as our norm. Most preferably, however, we would waste no time in adapting to the philosophical approach of the vast majority of the rest of the scientific world, to include most of the social sciences- and that is to a critical realist philosophy. This approach would by definition require the philosophy behind Mission Command, it would prioritize education and training over equipment and process, it would be comfortable with a more context-focused approach to complex operations (and thus maximize flexibility while sacrificing ease of communication, funding, and planning), and it would take advantage of SOF’s traditional strengths: it’s amazing capability at the tactical level. I call this approach *the sublime*^[xxxiv], borrowing the term from Curtis White’s book wherein he implores America to turn away from assuming science holds the answer to everything and instead to be “antagonists to the status quo in ... intellectual orthodoxy... [and to be] advocates for change...”^[xxxv]

The Solution: “*The Sublime*”

And so we are stuck in an awful position: we want our cake (a 7th WFF) and we want to eat it too. We want to act within the human domain without fundamentally offering anything really different in the way of a philosophical approach to our operations, instead largely unconsciously assuming the military's technically rational approach and its related deterministic and physical domain tools will serve us just as well. We will do all of this while we continue down a path that relegates us to being little better than our conventional brethren in terms of operational and strategic prowess. We select, train, and equip our forces "specially"- and we can see the difference at our lowest levels: the team level, but then we plan, promote, organize, and educate them at higher levels largely in the same manner as the conventional forces do. This is most likely well and good when SOF is engaged in doing the so-called "surgical strike" missions of which our nation (and our government to a large extent- to include USSOCOM) is enamored with as of late.[xxxvi] This is because, if anything, surgical strike missions are very limited in time and scope and their objectives are clear and unambiguous. If any kind of mission was conducive to a technically rational approach, it would be surgical strike missions.[xxxvii]

Special Warfare (SW), on the other hand, encompasses those units that are capable of long-term duration operations in denied areas to train indigenous forces.[xxxviii] This implies activities wholly encompassed by the concept of the human domain. SW forces would be engaged in social influence and, if savvy enough, they would be engaged in internalization efforts through participatory observation (encompassing action, observation, learning, and influencing- influencing both the observed and the observers). For the most part we have tactical-level teams who can do this now. I say "for the most part" because the education and personnel systems these individuals fall under are all less than desired, largely beholden to the conventional force's systems and with respect to education- are a lower priority within USSOCOM. [xxxix] To engage most effectively within the human domain- our SW forces should be supported with an education and training institution second to none. Risk can be taken in IT platforms, vehicles, C2 systems, and airframes. Risk cannot be taken in education and training if one is to prioritize SW. Of course it is very difficult to measure the impact of education and training on national objectives and it is near impossible to articulate the requirements for doing so, but I would argue this is more the result of our bureaucracy's requirements than it is our ability to articulate. Linear logic and metrics are required to justify and validate requirements; narrative and anecdote are abhorred by the bureaucracy. This is anathema to what is needed for building an SW force able to operate within the human domain, but alas we are beholden to a requirements process that is set up to facilitate the bureaucracy.

At the operational level we are sorely handicapped. In terms of our personnel system, at the tactical level we make up for the lack of flexibility by being able to rely on young, uninstitutionalized NCOs and officers who, because of the way they are normally deployed, we fortunately find it very difficult to micromanage. Thus they are able to remain mission-focused and results-oriented. At the operational level and "high tactical" levels,[xl] however, senior NCOs and field-grade officers are increasingly "institutionalized" and are thus progressively more intertwined within the bureaucracy in terms of how the organization thinks, plans, communicates, and acts. Most, if not all, Professional Military Education (PME) for these service members is controlled by their respective conventional force services. The personnel system promotes, evaluates, and selects SOF personnel for command under the same construct as the conventional force personnel.[xli] If SOF is to be successful at the operational and "higher tactical" levels, absent a personnel system that allows for flexibility and mission focus, we must incorporate at the very least a rigorous testing and experimentation program to assist us in finding the right tools and philosophical approach for operating in the human domain.

We cannot rest on the assumption that the tools developed for the physical domains, that were geared for the Industrial Age timeframe and grounded in an Enlightenment Era philosophy will serve us the best. Preferably we should take our cues from critical realism and multi-paradigmatic framing and reject the

notion that the social realm should be approached using mainly the scientific method and linear logical tools and processes. Instead we should inculcate in all our personnel (focusing on improving battalion and higher HQs) some of the same things they use naturally at the team level: a healthy disdain for micromanagement, a skepticism about higher HQ's understanding of things, a resistance to the conventional wisdom and any institutionally-preferred way of thinking, and an innovative passion that helps team members strive to come up with creative ways of approaching situations. These same characteristics can be strengthened through our doctrine and education systems, if not our personnel system, and they match up perfectly with Curtis White's concept of *the sublime*.

The sublime for Curtis White is about art. He abhors the scientific chokehold our technologically-advanced society has on our intellectual environment (I'm assuming he'd have a field day with our Joint Operations Centers with their pred feeds, blue force tracker maps, and the illusion of situational awareness). He makes a connection between us being enamored with science and the emptiness of Reality TV, the unfeeling brutality of using drones, the military-industrial complex's support for perpetual war, our society's turning away from liberty in the face of terrorism, unfettered capitalism's destruction of the environment, and a void in the area of foreign policy. *The sublime* for SOF, especially those within the Special Warfare framework, can also be art. I submit that art has a place in war, although many of us military types are a little uncomfortable about the word. Art, admittedly, forces one to take risk. It is very difficult to do: one must sacrifice ease of communication and planning as well as take on some threat to one's career. Writing a handbook to assist in *the sublime* is almost impossible, how does one tell a promising painter how to be a da Vinci? Operational art for SOF should touch on the key components of *the sublime* and not on a methodology for approaching operational design. The art of Special Warfare is a creative use of special groups of professionals who are educated and trained to see things from multiple perspectives, to critically think about one's institution's flawed view of the world, create something new that is highly context-dependent across the resource spectrum, and learns while doing. Art isn't something one does while coloring within the lines and SOF shouldn't be looking for a methodology to assist us with it. For the human domain, art is the key.

Conclusion

Special Operations within the U.S. Military faces a crossroads. One way arguably leads towards relatively bigger budgets, more technology and platforms, and more intertwining of systems and processes with conventional forces. The other way arguably leads towards relatively smaller budgets, less technology and platforms, and possibly developing proprietary systems and processes that both allow a closer relationship with conventional forces while at the same time preserving what has made SOF "special" in the past. The latter way, while possibly being less expensive, emphasizes small-footprint Special Warfare more than it does Surgical Strike. It prioritizes education and training over platforms and technology as well as persistent engagement over drone strikes, direct action raids, and Hollywood movies. Perhaps most importantly, however, it calls for *the sublime* in order to harness what is natural to most SOF service members when they first enter the force, that is- critical and creative thinking, which, when added to a multi-frame approach and learning and reflecting-in-action allows greater effectiveness within the social realm of the human domain. The goal is not more money, more missions, or more personnel. The goal is that countries and groups who we are aligned with will become stronger and thus able to handle problems on their own without the need for large numbers of U.S. troops, which arguably get in the way of long-term progress anyway. Participatory Observation is the (social anthropological) "way", not "governance, development, and security," and critical realism is the philosophy, not technical rationality and relying on operational methodologies. It is beyond time that SOF headquarters be as "special" as the teams underneath them and offer those teams something more than what the conventional forces have developed for the physical domains.

End Notes

[i] Ana Purna gives a good description of critical realism on ehow.com (http://www.ehow.com/info_8770255_critical-realism.html): “The major themes are these: A reality exists independent of human conception and perception. The rules, laws, events and mechanisms of this underlying reality are at play in all of our observable experiences and events. In the natural world, this underlying mechanism refers to the natural laws that have visible effects -- for example, gravity or aging. In the social realm critical realism still can be applied, but it is not predictive. Because the underlying social rules and mechanisms are created by humans, they are constantly evolving over time and geography. Critical realism can be used to describe current or past situations. It cannot, however, lead to certainty about future outcomes.”

[ii] See Stan Wiechnik’s excellent article, “Political Legitimacy and Values” in the *Small Wars Journal*, 17 NOV 2013, for a discussion on the importance of values within the more “population-centric” missions as opposed to those subjects like “governance” normally found within our doctrine.

[iii] Although I understand the argument that the domains are not separate and indeed overlap greatly as well, in addition to other arguments for or against the concept, in order to make a point I will use them in their doctrinal form.

[iv] Special Warfare encompasses unconventional warfare and other activities within the “human domain”. It is juxtaposed with “Surgical Strike”- the other main component for how Special Operations currently differentiate themselves.

[v] White, Curtis, *The Middle Mind: Why Americans Don’t Think For Themselves*, HarperOne, 2004, 7.

[vi] In almost every meeting the author has attended on the 7th WFF, this anecdote is repeated, so even if GEN Odierno never said it, it has become part of the institutional narrative that he did.

[vii] Some recent doctrinal publications have not linked the Warfighting Functions to “combat power”, instead referring to unified land operations and describing them as either “destructive” or “constructive” in nature. Regardless, they are a formulaic-like approach linked linearly to the Army’s concept of how it intends to fight and/or influence and win the nation’s wars or keep wars from happening. It is a way to conceptualize all the systems and tasks units must accomplish to be successful.

[viii] My pick would be “*The Sublime*”, but, since that might not have enough of a “military” sound to it, would offer “social action” instead in order to emphasize the social aspect as well as the requirement for action. “Social learning-in-action” would emphasize the requirement to learn while we are acting, although “social entanglement” (merging “quantum entanglement” with social efforts) might be more descriptive of the reality.

[ix] Sacolick, Bennet S. & Grigsby, Wayne W, Jr., “Special Operations/Conventional Forces Interdependence: A Critical Role in Prevent, Shape, Win”, *Army Magazine*, JUN 2012, 39-40.

[x] U.S. Army, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-0, *The U.S. Army Capstone Concept*, 19 DEC 2012, 15-16. “Current doctrine does not adequately address the moral, cognitive, social, and physical aspects of human

populations in conflict. Since the purpose of military action is to affect the behavior of human groups in the operational environment toward a defined objective, the Army must improve the doctrinal representation of the operational environment and account for the socio-economic, cognitive, and physical aspects of human activity. Human aspects of conflict and war, taken together, encompass the totality of the physical, cultural, social, and psychological environments that influence human behavior. The success of unified action depends on the application of capabilities that influence the perceptions, understanding, and actions of relevant populations...

“To operate more effectively in the land domain while fully accounting for the human aspects of conflict and war, the Army requires a warfighting function to capture the tasks and systems that provide lethal and nonlethal capabilities to assess, shape, deter, and influence the decisions and behavior of a people, its security forces, and its government.”

[xi] Sacolick, & Grigsby, 39-40.

[xii] See Carl Builder’s book, *Masks of War*, Johns Hopkins University Press, FEB, 1989, for a description of why the services act the way they do.

[xiii] Freeburg, Sydney, J., “After ‘10 Years Of Abject Failure,’ Army, SOCOM, Marine Leaders Focus On ‘Strategic Landpower’”, *Breakingdefense.com*, 10 AUG 2013.

[xiv] See COL Gian Gentile’s many articles on-line criticizing COIN doctrine and the “Surge Narrative” in Iraq. Also see his book: *Wrong Turn: America's Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency*. New York: The New Press. 2013.

[xv] COL John Boyd famously said (and I paraphrase): “The military has a strategy. That strategy is to get more money.” Others, such as Carl Builder, mentioned in footnote 12, as well as this author’s own experiences highlight the bureaucratic pressures that lead to the chase for more money within government bureaucracies. Many times good intentions morph into concepts that are meant to communicate vision, but instead drive questionable acquisition and funding strategies.

[xvi] See Donald A. Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Temple Smith, 1983. Also see Papparone, Chris, COL (ret.), PhD *The Sociology of Military Science*, Bloomsbury Academic, 8 NOV 2012. In this book Dr. Papparone explains how the military thinks institutionally and links it to the technically rational mindset. Technical rationality (TR) is closely linked to positivist philosophy and is the antithesis of critical realism: TR assumes the social world can be treated the same as the physical world in terms of philosophical approaches and using the scientific method can gain knowledge about it that can be exploited in action in the future.

[xvii] One example of formulaic metaphor found within military doctrine is the formula for combat power. Combat Power= mission command+fires+intelligence+protection+sustainment+movement & maneuver+leadership. Combat Power is, in and of itself, an abstraction, but the military has given this abstraction a formula to make it more real and quantitative, theoretically taking the ambiguity out of assembling functions together for the making of war and allowing a more checklist-like approach.

[xviii] Positivism is a philosophical approach that assumes an objective world in all aspects and that

humans can discover that objective world through the scientific method. It borders on a religion and has been rejected by most disciplines (<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/positivsm.php>). Its antithesis is “post-positivism”, or, as many prefer to call it- especially within the military- “*critical realism*”.

[xix] The idea that one can tell at a glance what needs to be done and, although usually applied to looking at terrain, some, including Clausewitz, have used it to describe something beyond just terrain.

[xx] Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Free Press, 1968. Merton described many of the problems that are endemic to bureaucracies: "trained incapacity" resulting from "overconformity", defending of one's own entrenched interests rather than acting to benefit the organization, resisting change to established routines, emphasizing formality and process over relationships, and trained to ignore context and circumstance.

[xxi] I would assume Jean Baudrillard, from his *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), would have a field day with how we have conducted Afghanistan. Mentioned as inspiration for *The Matrix* films, one might compare the military's paradigm to the Matrix: we are locked into it, but unaware of its existence.

[xxii] Probably not so much the higher-than-tactical areas: attempting to codify how we communicate (and thus think and operate) about the tacit at operational and strategic levels stifles us into the same problems that codifying the tacit in the human domain creates.

[xxiii] UW is defined by US SOF as support to resistance (insurgent) forces to overthrow or disrupt a government or governing entity. It is often seen as the opposite of Foreign Internal Defense (FID), an umbrella term encompassing COIN.

[xxiv] Just to head off any protests, I realize this dual-natured description is disingenuous, however I am constraining myself to the two choices our society presents us with and their respective approaches.

[xxv] The Village Stability Program incorporated into Afghanistan, starting out a very promising concept, was quickly seized upon by the bureaucracy and forced into a “one-size-fits-all” construct that ignored the need for local nuance. In some areas of Afghanistan it made perfect sense, but in other areas it did not.

[xxvi] The tactical level (young NCOs and officers) seems in my experience to have largely remained mission-focused and results oriented. The higher levels, however, are filled with officers and senior NCOs who have been “institutionalized” and are largely influenced- both consciously and largely unconsciously- by the bureaucracy's systems and processes. The centrally-managed personnel system, the system of intellectual communication (doctrine-based), the acquisition and resources system (JCIDS), and the hierarchical nature of the military have combined to produce a largely “tail wagging the dog” sort of institution. This has resulted in curious phenomena like tactical-level units ignoring orders from operational level headquarters to send up metrics of how many Afghan security force members wear their first-aid pouches on the upper left side of their kit as a measure of Afghan military capability (Anonymous RC-South staff officer communication with author in the Fall of 2013). Even our own COIN doctrine- which implies that that type of activity is counterproductive, cannot rescue us from the technically rational system, of which it is, ultimately, also a part of.

[xxvii] Merton.

[xxviii] USASOC, *ARSOF 2022*,
http://www.specialoperations.org/ARSOF2022_vFINAL%5B1%5D.pdf

[xxix] Then-Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Commanding General, General Martin E. Dempsey, according to one anonymous School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) instructor, told the SAMS authors of the draft design publication that it was “too long, had too many big words, and didn’t have any of our current doctrinal concepts like *Center of Gravity* in it.” Whether this is true or not, shortly thereafter Dr. Jack Kem wrote a short design booklet (*Design: Tools of the Trade*) that linked design to doctrine and as soon as LTG William B. Caldwell IV left Fort Leavenworth for Afghanistan and took Dr. Kem with him, the original draft authors quickly published *The Art of Design*, Student Text 2.0, which attempted to undo the changes that TRADOC reportedly had ordered.

[xxx] USASOC, *ARSOF 2022*. LTG Cleveland calls for the “establish[ment of] a Special Operations Campaign, Design and Theory Office at SWCS which will partner with the School of Advanced Military Studies and other advanced schools for military operational art” as well as “Develop ARSOF concepts, [and] validate through robust experimentation.”

[xxxi] Paparone, Christopher and Reed, George, “The Reflective Military Practitioner: How Military Professionals Think in Action”, *Military Review*, MAR 2008, 66. Learning, or reflection,-in-action, is described (in italics) after its antithesis in the article by a quote from Donald A. Schon: “Professionals become- locked into a view of themselves as technical experts, [and they] find nothing in the world of practice to occasion reflection. They have become too skillful at techniques of selective inattention, junk categories, and situational control techniques, which they use to preserve constancy of their knowledge-in-practice. For them, uncertainty is a threat; its admission a sign of weakness. *Others, more inclined toward and adept at reflection-in-action, nevertheless feel profoundly uneasy because they cannot say what they know how to do, cannot justify its quality or rigor.*”

[xxxii] And what we’re really talking about is internalized social change. There are three types of social change or influence according to some: compliance, identification, and internalization (Kelman HC, “Compliance, Identification, and Internalization: Three processes of attitude change”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 1958, 51-60.). Compliant change is change that is forced onto others, they “comply”. Identified change is that which results from others identifying with those wanting the change. Internalized change, however, is that change which comes from within- whether perceived or not. This type of change is more likely to last and is what we are talking about when we talk about the Human Domain and its related Warfighting Function (WfF): the 7th WfF. Within Internalized Social Change, the social anthropological method of “Participatory Observation” is closest to the function of what SOF, and others acting within the “Human Domain” would be involved with: one would literally be involved in participatory action, observation, learning, and influencing- the emphasis being on “participatory”: meaning that one would be influenced just as much as “the other” being observed.

[xxxiii] I would argue SOF played catch-up after 2001 and that it wasn’t until 2003 or a little later that the “tactical” level headquarters (Group- although I dispute that a deployed Group HQ is “tactical”) began mimicking the bureaucracy of its higher headquarters.

[xxxiv] White, Curtis, 7. Mr. White might be horrified to see his term associated with the military, as he is decidedly “anti-militarism”. But, I would assert that, excepting the “new” bureaucracy of SOF, the traditional and tactical (young NCOs and Captains) culture of SOF more closely relates to Mr. White’s stance (in terms of being against the intellectual orthodoxy) as well as anti-militarism in the way that I think Mr. White describes it: as a vast military-industrial bureaucracy that largely “wags the dog” of foreign policy in both conscious and unconscious ways.

[xxxv] *Ibid.*, 24.

[xxxvi] Surgical Strike is usually associated with Special Mission Units that conduct Counterterrorism and limited strike, short-duration Direct Action hits. Its SOF opposite, Special Warfare, is usually associated with Unconventional Warfare and COIN, but in truth includes those operations of long duration and limited footprint wherein a politically sensitive situation precludes a large foreign force on the ground. If SW was as important, the amount and quality of education that soldiers get who are involved in SW would be similar in per capita spending as those in SS get for their specialized training and equipping. Similarly, the personnel and acquisition systems of SW forces would be more flexible and geared towards SW’s mission as opposed to being largely beholden to red-tape and bureaucracy (SOCOM’s acquisition system for SW forces is arguably just as cumbersome and ineffective as the Conventional Force’s).

[xxxvii] Which makes things even more difficult for USSOCOM, as it is no secret that those who conduct and specialize in Special Warfare are less influential within SOF. Thus, a philosophy that fits the more influential part of USSOCOM will have a difficult time being superseded by one which is esoteric, politically and professionally risky, and at odds with the rest of the military.

[xxxviii] USDA, *Special Operations*, ADP 3-05, 2012, 8.

[xxxix] Some will argue vehemently that SOF values education, but in my experience the resources spent on education are a far cry from what is spent on equipping. The difference is that equipment is easy to count, education is not. The bureaucracy loves its metrics.

[xl] Although I think it is terrible to see war in terms of three “levels”: tactical, operational, and strategic, I use these terms for communication purposes. But, this is a great example of where using CF terminology and philosophical constructs is hurting SOF: CF submits that tactical goes up to brigade level and even possibly division. Therefore many in SOF will call a Special Forces (SF) Group a tactical level organization. But, I would submit one’s level- if seeing things that way helps- should be based on the context as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach.

[xli] For just one example of how this affects SOF: US Army Special Forces (SF) majors are compared to Conventional Force (CF) majors for promotion to lieutenant-colonel as well as battalion command. SF majors who are not selected to be S-3 operations officers for a Group (brigade-level organization) are rarely considered competitive for tactical command, however SF Groups do not fight as Groups, normally SF fights as teams. CF brigades, however, DO fight and maneuver, and their battalions also fight and maneuver, therefore the comparison and job experience of the two are not the same. SF majors would offer SOF much more and gain greater experience if their main job was as a Theater Special Operations Command (TSOC) planner in my opinion, or perhaps a more broadening experience like working in an embassy or at the State Department. But, because we are compared to CF Army officers, SF officers- who

don't need a lot of coaxing to stay at the battalion and group level anyway, are arguably robbed of a much more valuable experience because of the need to meet Army evaluation requirements. In addition, they are more likely to remain fixated on the "hyper-tactical" level of operations.

About the Author



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