

# H-Net Reviews

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**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.

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In the prologue to *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces*, Mark Moyar states that his purpose in writing this history is to “stimulate insights into new environments, and illuminate pitfalls in paths that would otherwise seem free of peril. As the first comprehensive account of America’s special operations forces [SOF], it delineates the traditions of which special operators are justifiably proud, while demonstrating the need to build on those traditions in ways that harness tradition without being harnessed by it” (p. xx). Through the lens of SOF’s successes and especially its failures, and by examining various governmental entities’ (and presidential administrations’) misunderstanding and misuse of SOF, *Oppose Any Foe* ambitiously sets out to forge a way ahead for America’s SOF.

Chapter 1 begins with a historical account of the 1st, 3rd, and 4th US Army Ranger battalions on Gela, Sicily, which resulted in the surrender of Gela on July 10, 1943. *Oppose Any Foe* wastes no time describing the Rangers as heroic, patriotic, and fearless, setting the tone for the rest of the book: while SOF may have their issues, the men who make up those forces are not part of them. Subsequent paragraphs seem to contradict this characterization of the men who serve in special forces, stating with obvious admiration that “the toughness, independent thinking, and ability to improvise that Darby [William Darby, first commander of the 1st Ranger Battalion] prized were often accompanied by a penchant for barroom altercations, curfew violations, and general disdain for the regimentation of Army life” (p. 10). Chapter 1 continues with the history of the creation of the 1st Ranger Battalion and its training with British commandos in 1942.

The Rangers faced immediate resistance from the regular army, particularly General Lesley McNair, who warned against them sitting unused for lack of appropriate missions, manufacturing “unprofitable” missions, or driving the best soldiers out of the regular army (p. 13). Chapter 1 finishes with a brief chronology of various Ranger operations during World War II, focusing particularly on the D-Day invasions and an operation to free more than five hundred US prisoners of war from a prison in Cabanatuan, Philippines, in 1945. *Oppose Any Foe* describes successes and failures, often attributing failures to misuse of Ranger units or failure to support those units once they had achieved their initial objective. It is in chapter 1 that Moyer first contends that lack of support at the highest levels had adverse effects on the formation of troops which nevertheless prevailed: “The Rangers and Frogmen came into existence because of support at very high levels of the US government, but not at the highest level. The lack of presidential paternity was one of the principal differences between these forces and other American special operations forces of World War II” (p. 38). This statement sets up an animosity between presidents and military leaders that prevails throughout the book but that often is not supported by the research.

A note on research: *Oppose Any Foe* does not include a bibliography, and there are no footnote or endnote markers. The notes are at the end of the book, indicated by the page the reference refers to, with an excerpt of text to indicate where the citation would be. This is not standard format for history writing and makes it difficult to follow the research and interpretation of same. The sources for the most part are excellent but often a bit one-sided; and it must be noted, the author cites his own

writing in many places.

Chapter 3 outlines the creation of the 1st, 3rd, and 4th Raider Battalions (US Marine Corps) used across the Pacific theater of World War II and also discusses the US Navy's foray into SOF, the Frogmen. Moyar states that a Marine Corps special forces unit was suggested by Captain James Roosevelt but was implemented by Lieutenant General Thomas Holcomb, who echoed earlier concerns about the Ranger Battalion that the Raiders would siphon off the Marines' best leaders. Moyar continues his theme of lack of presidential support for these efforts by accusing President Franklin Roosevelt of blatant nepotism—"The eldest son of the president, Captain Roosevelt had at first been vaulted to the rank of lieutenant colonel by his father"—and stating that when it came time to decide how to implement these ideas, "President Roosevelt found the arguments of Captain Roosevelt more persuasive than those of the senior officer of the Marine Corps" (pp. 42, 43). No support for these statements is evident in the notes, and it also seems to counter the main theme: it was actually Holcomb who expressed concerns and showed a lack of support for the Raiders, but Roosevelt pushed ahead.

Chapter 3 describes the formation of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), starting with a blistering rebuke of Roosevelt's privilege and poor grades, which is used as a springboard to praise his classmate and founder of the OSS, William Donovan, a poor son of immigrants who clawed his way up the ranks without the benefit of wealth and privilege. Because the two men worked closely together and Roosevelt supported and admired Donovan, as is made clear by the research, this framing feels forced. The chapter's history of the OSS, which was the precursor to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), also neglects to mention the contributions of thousands of women to its formation, an oversight that cannot be chalked up to lack of information. Four thousand women made up one-fifth of the OSS staff, and yet none are mentioned in this history of the service.[1]

Chapter 4 is a brief history of SOF in Korea, initially told through the eyes of a Lieutenant Ralph Puckett Jr., given command of the 8th Ranger Company attached to the 25th Infantry Division. This company took Hill 205 on the Chongchan only to be overrun; of the eighty-five men who set out on this mission, only twenty-one survived, and they accomplished little for their sacrifice. Their story is told with energy and compassion, but an analysis of how this event advanced the cause of the formation of SOF does not appear. Moyar moves next to a

familiar refrain: the failure of a president to recognize the utility of SOF. "President Truman did not share Roosevelt's fascination with special units or secret warfare, and even had he shared it, he would have been handicapped by want of manpower and funds in a period of mass demobilization. Special operations forces came into existence in Korea because of tactical requirements identified by military commanders, requirements that in some cases would disappear before they could be met" (pp. 103-4).

In Korea, as in Europe during World War II, the Ranger companies were often unable to carry out the kinds of missions they had trained for due to unfavorable battle conditions. However, this section fails to support the case that the conventional commanders did not know how to use SOF, instead seeming to suggest that SOF are so specialized that they simply are not suitable for the vast majority of military operations. Such a suggestion, perhaps unintentionally, could be taken to support the conventional military's case that SOF siphons off the best soldiers from conventional forces for specialized units that are not (and cannot be) used to their full capacity. Extensive time and money had been poured into training that became obsolete as US and North Korean/Chinese armies settled into stalemate along the 38th parallel.

Chapter 4 continues with a history of the oddly named "Attrition Section," which employed guerrilla tactics and close coordination with a local resistance group (the Hwanghae) to chip away at the North Koreans and Chinese. The Attrition Section was not significantly more successful than the Rangers and had a very high casualty rate for what seemed like little return. One of the biggest factors in the Attrition Section's failure was a lack of cultural knowledge and understanding, something that often plagues SOF today. SOF operate almost exclusively in culturally sensitive areas, and it is particularly incumbent upon such forces to have a strong knowledge of the geography, language, people, and patterns of life in an operating area for mission success. Korea was the first place this would become obvious, but it was not the last. Korea also saw the debut of the CIA, born from the remnants of the OSS and breathed into life by the National Security Act (NSA) of 1947. Moyar describes the CIA in Korea as a branch or group within SOF rather than as part of the intelligence community, an interesting and not wholly inaccurate choice.

The creation and manning of the 10th Special Forces Group (SFG) (so named to fool any enemies into think-

ing there were multiple SFGs, although the 10th was the first) follows a similar pattern of facing stiff resistance from higher-ups and an inability to fill the ranks. This coincided with a move that grouped SOF together with psychological warfare under a common command, an uneasy marriage at best. The Rangers were simultaneously deactivated and the Psychological Warfare Center took over the training facilities at Fort Bragg. Familiar complaints about the lack of proper training and the poor attitude of the Special Forces surfaced, leading Moyar to observe that many of the men “were special only in the sense that no one else in the Army wanted them” (p. 117). Chapter 4 wraps up with the observation that President Harry Truman’s lack of interest in SOF meant that military leaders drove the revival of SOF; this meant no politicians “meddled” in SOF’s affairs, but the results were not noticeably better than when previous presidents had shown interest. It is not clear from the research that the ignorance and/or disinterest of the president was a driving force in SOF not living up to expectations, since to this point, SOF had experienced similar challenges under both sets of circumstances.

Chapter 5 begins with a brief background on President John F. Kennedy, following a by-now familiar refrain of denigrating a president by dismissing him as a privileged insider unable to understand the struggles of more worthy men—comparing Kennedy to Donovan just as had been done with President Roosevelt. Kennedy would never work with Donovan, and the comparison of the men has little or no context. However, Moyar admits Kennedy had redeeming qualities—prior military service and an appreciation for SOF. Kennedy pushed for increased counter guerrilla and counterinsurgency training in all branches and at all levels in the services, and even among senior civilian officials. Kennedy’s interest is dismissed by Moyar (as it was dismissed by some contemporaries) as a childish fascination with gadgets, and Kennedy and his brother Robert were referred to by one source as “Boy Scouts with guns” (p. 125). It seems presidents could not win; if they were too enamored of SOF, they were dismissed as non-serious fanboys. If they paid SOF no attention at all, they were ignoring an important and vital component of the service. The Kennedys’ fascination led to the Green Berets, widely seen as publicity-seeking showboats who tarnished the reputation of the SOF for years to come. US involvement in Vietnam, just beginning in earnest during this period, did nothing to dispel this impression.

Vietnam also led to the creation of SOF in the US Air Force (4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron) in 1961

and the US Navy (SEALs) in 1962. One of SOF’s indisputable success stories was a joint paramilitary program with the CIA to train the Montagnards, an ethnic minority in the Vietnamese central highlands). This program is still studied at SOF schools, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Special Operations School in Belgium.

The assassinations of Ngo Dinh Diem and Kennedy changed the face of warfare in Vietnam. The first emboldened the North Vietnamese and the second put Lyndon B. Johnson in office, a president much more concerned with domestic issues than foreign affairs. President Johnson stymied resistance operations in Vietnam and restricted covert warfare in North Vietnam, the specialty of the recently created Studies and Observations Group (SOG); according to *Oppose Any Foe*, he was another disinterested president failing to understand and use SOF’s full potential.

Chapter 5 spends some pages discussing special operations in Laos, echoing the disappointment of SOG officers hampered by the US State Department due to Laos’s stated neutrality in the conflict. Of course the North Vietnamese were violating that neutrality, but the author gives no thought to the political and social implications of the US similarly violating this neutrality, seemingly only concerned with whether or not SOF had enough bases of operations. There is no acknowledgment of the diplomatic issues connected with increased US military presence in Laos and Cambodia—as if the US military existed and operated in a vacuum. History does not bear out the claims of the importance of using Laos to prosecute the war, and *Oppose Any Foe* does not make the case that allowing SOF greater access would have resulted in a different or better outcome. In fact, there was not much of a case for the need for SOF at all; one of the few SOF missions Moyar mentions is the failed rescue attempt of pilot Lieutenant Robert Wood in 1966. Wood was captured and held as a prisoner of war until 1973. Psychological Operations (PsyOps) had an even worse track record, and is only discussed for about a page.

The Navy SEALs had better luck but suffered many similar problems, including lack of cultural knowledge and language skills. SEALs admired the Provincial Reconnaissance Units (PRUs), South Vietnamese units under the control of the CIA, but while this connection is mentioned, it is not described in detail. Chapter 5 notes that the SEALs sought South Vietnamese partners and were drawn to the PRUs, but the author does not say if a partnership or some sort of cooperation eventually hap-

pened.

The most famous SOF operation in Vietnam was the attempted rescue of prisoners of war from Son Tay in November 1970—which was a total failure, since the prisoners had been moved four months earlier. The author makes much of the fact that the operation had been planned to a “T,” but it suffered from several problems during execution, including one of the initial landing forces landing in the wrong place and no prisoners being rescued. President Richard Nixon—referred to as “Tricky Dick” in the text—gets credit for being willing to give it a shot, but nothing about this incident supports the main contention of the book. *Oppose Any Foe* blames Vietnam and a general misunderstanding of SOF for the draw-down of SOF rather than the dwindling military budgets that occurred throughout the 1970s, and discounts as erroneous the claims “that counterinsurgency and its SOF champions had doomed South Vietnam by diffusing resources that should have been concentrated on the conventional war. SOF personnel and their supporters countered that the United States had lost because hidebound Army officers had adopted a conventional military strategy against an unconventional adversary, misusing SOF in the process” (p. 153). No alternative interpretation of the United States’ loss in Vietnam is offered.

President Kennedy is given the credit for the growth of SOF but also the blame for the lowering of standards which that growth engendered. The author then accuses President Johnson of using SOF for his own personal gain in a convoluted passage lacking in evidence. *Oppose Any Foe* claims that SOG “caused the enemy considerable tactical grief through its cross-border operations into Laos and Cambodia, but like the CIDG [Civilian Irregular Defense Groups] program, it could not exert strategic sway” (p. 155). Moyar highlights acts of individual bravery but concedes that most missions were both tactical and strategic failures, as evidenced by the eventual (and inevitable) end of US involvement in Vietnam.

Chapter 6 details the creation of Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) and Special Operations Command (SOCOM), focusing particularly on Delta Force. Delta Force’s main missions were hostage rescue, hijack rescue, embassy security, and raiding, essentially the reincarnation of the Rangers. Delta Force’s first planned mission was the rescue of the hostages taken in Iran in 1977. President Jimmy Carter initially tried diplomatic and economic pressures, but when these were unsuccessful, he asked for a briefing on military options, something he expressed reservations about. This briefing impressed

Carter and helped him get past his reservations enough to authorize a rescue mission. The mission, designated Operation Eagle Claw, was a miserable failure. Moyar’s conclusion is that “for critics of SOF, Desert One [sic—Desert One was the name of one of the bases of operation not the operation itself] proved that the special operators were not as good as advertised, and that special operations could not solve strategic problems. For proponents of SOF, it showed that the special operators had been thwarted by the military’s reliance on an ad hoc organization with poor internal communications and inadequate aviation assets. A review group of six senior military officers, commissioned by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff [David C.] Jones, agreed with the latter assessment, and as a remedy to the disease of ad hocery [sic], the review team proposed the creation of a Counterterrorist Joint Task Force with permanently assigned staff and forces” (p. 171).

Chapter 6 then discusses the conception and command of SEAL Team Six, with an odd endorsement of its commander, Richard Marcinko: “According to Marcinko’s autobiography, the admirals were drawn to him not only by his hard work, but by a shared predilection for locker-room banter.” Later Moyar writes, “A heavy drinker, Marcinko tested prospective Team Six members for their aptitude in the consumption of alcohol. One recruit was offered a beer at 7 a.m., and when he declined, Marcinko warned him that unwillingness to drink in the morning might make a man unsuitable for the team” (p. 173). The author never questions if these recruitment criteria—a fondness for profanity and a tendency toward alcoholism—might have had more to do with SOF’s many failures than presidential misuse of the forces.

Chapter 7 briefly discusses the NATO mission in the former Yugoslavia and the mission to fight the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia/Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) rebels in Colombia, but the bulk of the chapter is an overview of the incident in Somalia described in the 1999 book and 2001 movie *Black Hawk Down*, yet another failure of SOF ascribed to the interference of an ignorant president (President Bill Clinton in this case) and his staff (Les Aspin comes in for some particularly harsh criticism). Moyar also cites the lack of armored vehicles and tanks; this chapter is where the unusual citation style really affects understanding. The notes are confusing, hard to follow, and make it very difficult to see the reasoning behind his conclusion that “only large-scale counterinsurgency operations, requiring far more troops than the

JSOC possessed, stood a chance of defeating this sort of popular insurgency” (p. 218). If true, the claim that better equipment would have changed the outcome seems unsupported.

Chapter 8 talks about 9/11 and the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, blaming the failures of SOF on hesitancy to use them properly after the disaster in Somalia, and stating that “in Iraq, the absence of insurgents comparable to the Northern Alliance and the large size of the Iraqi armed forces demanded the use of America’s conventional forces, leaving SOF to play supporting roles.” Moyer contends, with respect to Afghanistan, that “the principal contribution of SOF to this Taliban’s overthrow was technical—the guidance of precision munitions by the Special Forces and their Air Force tactical air controllers in support of rebel military attacks” (p. 262).

Chapter 9 discusses SOF’s foray into counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, continuing the theme of chapter 8’s discussion of Iraq: “For most of the special operations force, however, the main activity in Iraq would not be assistance of Iraqis in counterinsurgency, but rather surgical strikes against insurgent leaders, and activity that in official parlance was labeled ‘counterterrorism,’ or CT for short” (p. 270). Moyer then points out another possible reason for the lack of support of SOF but does not examine it in detail: “Special operations forces did not always feel obligated to provide advance notice to the regular Army and Marine Corps commanders in whose operational areas they conducted raids. Appearing out of thin air in the middle of the night, they shot uncooperative Iraqis inside houses or hauled preeminent citizens away in handcuffs before vanishing as quickly as they had come, leaving behind physical and political messes for the regular commanders to clean up” (p. 273).

Chapter 10 describes SOF’s arguably most successful mission, the raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound, which resulted in bin Laden’s execution. The author’s disdain for President Barack Obama is unmistakable, illustrated by the following: “A few hours after receiving confirmation of the raid’s success, he went on television to deliver an address that achieved instant notoriety for its profusion of first-person references” (p. 304). When presidents did not take enough interest in SOF, they were ignorant of the full potential of the forces. When they, like Obama, took full ownership and responsibility as the commander in chief for a controversial military operation, they were trying to claim credit for having planned the whole thing. Moyer’s rhetoric raises the question: what is the perfect amount of respect for and support of

America’s SOF? That question is not really answered.

Moyer does have some ideas, however. He criticizes America’s all-volunteer force as unable to maintain the momentum of multiple deployments and argues that the hardships of same fall disproportionately on SOF operators. And despite criticizing Obama for resting on the laurels of the killing of bin Laden, Moyer notes, “When confronted with congressional staffers, Pentagon officials, conventional military officers, or State Department diplomats who asked for information or raised objections, [General William] McRaven’s [commander, US Special Operations Command] emissaries in Washington had a tendency to ignore them, or to brush them off with a reminder that Special Operations Forces had killed Bin Laden” (p. 311). It seems Obama was not the only one willing to use that mission as leverage. SOCOM’s problems were just beginning; in 2013, questions were asked about how SOCOM was spending its funds after numerous whistleblower complaints, and after an inquiry, Congress restricted funds and forced cuts to the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) and other SOCOM initiatives. (Note: The author served as a senior fellow at JSOU and as a consultant for USSOCOM.)

The chapter goes on to describe both successful and unsuccessful SOF missions to rescue hostages and concludes with a short discussion of the Obama administration’s ending of the restriction of women in combat roles. *Oppose Any Foe* quotes many SOF operators who vehemently disagreed with this decision, stating: “For the special operators, of whom so much was still asked, the indifference to their opinions was another indication that the White House’s love affair with special operations forces was over” (p. 324). While it is true that a RAND Corporation study noted that 85 percent of survey participants opposed letting women into SOF, the study made an important observation: “We note an overarching caveat to the findings. Our effort was designed to elicit speculation as to the impact of the integration into women in SOF so as to gauge the extent of challenges and a deeper understanding of the concerns of SOF personnel. This speculation was not based on actual experience of SOF personnel, because women are not in those units.”[2] SOCOM Commander General Joseph Votel released a video addressing the topic, saying in part, “We need a wide range of exceptional people to be combat effective and to help us address the complex security problems of today’s environment. After weighing and considering the rigorous analysis ... I have determined that there is no compelling analytical data that would support an exception of policy for special operations.”[3]

Moyar seems to feel that government officials do not show the proper deference for and/or understanding of military men and downplays any complaints as unfounded or politically motivated. The bulk of the book's conclusion is an argument about how effective SOF could be if only they were left to do their thing, allowed to grow exponentially, were properly supported with heavy weaponry and equipment, and not asked too many questions. Beyond that, no real solutions are offered, and the promotion of secrecy (in all things, not just in regard to operational security) is problematic in light of Congress's duty of oversight. The author does acknowledge this duty and advocates for as much openness as can be "safely" maintained.

As to the book's stated purpose, to set forth a history of SOF, "while demonstrating the need to build on those traditions in ways that harness tradition without being harnessed by it," it is not clear that this book does that (p. xx). It discusses, in some detail, the successes and failures

of SOF over the years, and the perceived ignorance and self-serving nature of (primarily Democratic) presidents, but offers few real solutions beyond letting SOF be SOF. A comprehensive account of America's SOF it may be, but it does not offer solutions to the real problems that SOF face in a constantly adapting operational environment.

#### Notes

[1]. See Elizabeth P. McIntosh, *Sisterhood of Spies: The Women of the OSS* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998).

[2]. Gayle Tzemach Lemmon, "Special Ops Survey Showed 85% Opposed Serving with Women," *Defense One* (December 4, 2015): <https://www.defenseone.com/business/2015/12/special-ops-survey-showed-85-opposed-serving-women/124194/>.

[3]. Ibid.

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