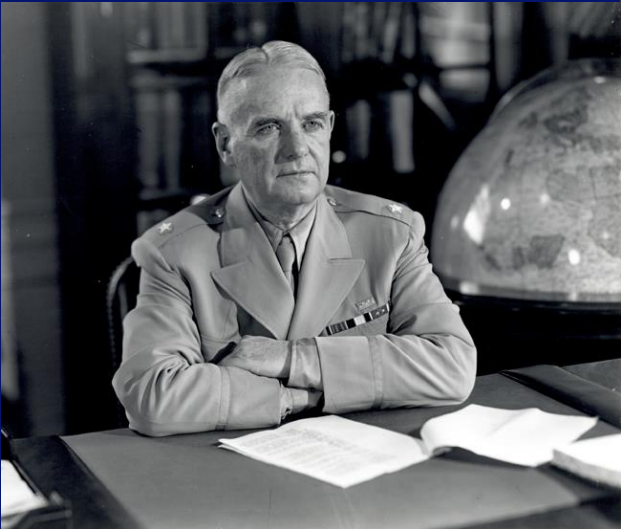# Joint Special Operations University

Center for Special Operations Studies and Research

General William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, the wartime head of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), 'broke the rules' during World War II, acting as an institutional entrepreneur and change agent.

Special Operations Forces as Change Agents

by

Jessica Glicken Turnley, Ph.D.

JSOU Press

Occasional Paper

March 2017

JSOU Press Publications are available to view or download at:

http://jsou.libguides.com/jsoupublications

About the Author

Jessica Glicken Turnley, Ph.D.

Dr. Jessica Glicken Turnley is a senior fellow at the Joint Special Operations University, U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), and principal investigator/past president of Galisteo Consulting Group, Inc., a consulting firm in Albuquerque, New Mexico. As a cultural anthropologist, Dr. Turnley brings a unique perspective to her work in national security, policy analysis, business and organizational development and culture change, and economic development. Her technical work includes projects involving the development of computational social simulations, analyses of the development and use environments of national security technologies, explorations of the socio-cultural dimensions of security and policy questions, and analyses of military structures and research institutions. She has served as a consultant and an on-staff technical manager at Sandia National Laboratories, and worked directly with many elements of the Department of Energy and other members of the national security community. She has worked on various projects for USSOCOM, directly for various parts of the Department of Defense (DOD), and provided support for other DOD organizations such as the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. She works with the intelligence community, as well as the Defense Intelligence Agency's advisory board. Dr. Turnley also works in technology-based and microeconomic development, marketing and public relations, and in risk communication and stakeholder involvement in public decision making, particularly in the environmental arena.

Dr. Turnley holds a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology with an emphasis in cultural linguistics from Cornell, a master's in social anthropology from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and a bachelor's in anthropology and English literature from the University of California, Santa Cruz. She was a Fulbright Scholar, an international educational exchange program created to foster understanding between different countries and cultures. Dr. Turnley spent her Fulbright time in Indonesia.

Special Operations Forces
as Change Agents

The ability to leverage social networks to move individuals and communities to a set of new values, and subsequently legitimate and institutionalize those changes, is a capability that Special Operations Forces (SOF) offer the military community. Well-positioned or particularly persuasive individuals from the SOF community have been able to use personal connections and social networks to catalyze and institutionalize change in a wide range of communities, stimulating individuals to coalesce around ideas presented through charismatic players. They have exercised this capability to act as change agents in the American military community writ large, creating new institutions and defining new players and their roles. At the tactical level, operators have used this capability to persuade local militias to switch sides, and create coalitions of friendly forces to execute strategic agendas in various theaters. Thus, this is a story of how SOF affect action both at the micro (mission) level that changes social engagement at local levels in mission-favorable ways, and at the macro (national institutional) level that can affect the structure of the military itself and the way a country engages in conflict.

Social movement theory and related ideas about institutional entrepreneurship can inform our understanding of these special operations capabilities, in both historical and recent contexts. Social movements are group-based engines of change that challenge existing power structures and produce new norms and solidarities around new (different) sets of social values through collective action.[1] Institutional entrepreneurs are actors who can mobilize resources from existing institutions to fill an identified, yet unserved need,[2] which often is defined around new values, such as those identified and highlighted by social movements. The institutional entrepreneurs thus create and establish legitimizing institutions and frameworks which operationalize the new values identified and developed through social movements. These two frames provide a better understanding of the ways in which a special operations capability to identify, guide, and succeed at institutionalizing norms new to a community will emerge at some specific place and time, whether that community is the U.S. military, a multinational counterterrorism effort in Africa, or a local capacity-building program in the Philippines.

Thinking about operators and other members of the SOF community as leaders of social movements may give them an unexpected identity. However, characterizing them as change agents gives us explanatory frames we can use to talk about how institutions and communities change. It also illustrates how members of the SOF community have shown that they often serve not just as
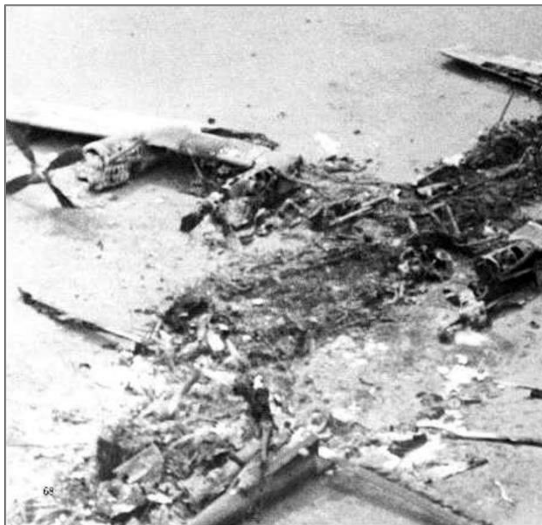
---

[1] Donatella della Porta and Mario Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, second edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

[2] Raghu Garud, Cynthia Hardy, and Steve Maguire, "Institutional Entrepreneurship as Embedded Agency: An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Organization Studies* 28, no. 7 (2007): 957.

catalysts for that change, but also, and just as importantly, as architects for the legitimating structures and communities that emerge after the change and help to ensure longevity for the new values and ideas.

The establishment of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in World War II, and USSOCOM and the Pentagon (civilian) position of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD [SO/LIC]) in 1986 stand as the two major institutional changes of the American special operations community. Both, arguably, could not have happened without the mobilization of social networks in critical places and in critical ways by charismatic or persuasive individuals. Both were stimulated by what were seen as existential institutional or structural flaws in the U.S. military.

In the case of the OSS during World War II, it was the course of the war that highlighted the need for a force that could operate in parts of the theater and in ways that were not open to the conventional military. The Congressional activity leading to the establishment of USSOCOM and ASD (SO/LIC) involved the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 and the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act of 1987 (which authorized other significant changes to the U.S. defense establishment, as well). The legislation was stimulated by the dramatic, very public, and high-consequence failure of Operation Eagle Claw in 1980—an operation designed to rescue American hostages in Iran. Instead, it led to the deaths of eight American servicemen and clearly illustrated the need for the U.S. military to change. These large institutional changes—the establishment of the OSS, USSOCOM and ASD (SO/LIC)—were initiated and guided by individuals who were able to create networks and mobilize resources in response to a deeply felt need, leading to profound changes in the institutions with which they were associated. That the military changed was not surprising. All organizations—even highly structured ones like the military or a community invested in a rule-based religious structure—are in a constant state of change. What was surprising, in both cases, was the extent and nature of the change.

Wreckage from the collision of an RH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter and a C-130 airplane during Operation Eagle Claw litters the desert after an attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran on 25 April 1980. Source: U.S. Air Force 1st SOW History Office.

How Organizations Change

There are three general ways in which organizations change, through: accretion of micro-interpretations of rules, deliberate change efforts, and disruptive activities of members or non-

members. The first two are incremental, while the third can be revolutionary. It is the third way that is the focus of this discussion.

All organizations change because of the behavioral variations of their members. All rules and procedures are interpreted slightly differently every time they are referenced or performed. The accretion of these micro-interpretations can, over time, morph into new practices which then become codified through changes in rules and procedures. In addition, many organizations have deliberate, active ongoing change management processes of some sort. Formal institutions like the military have clearly described processes for rule change. These processes use various techniques to analyze organizational performance against benchmarks such as efficiency, cost, mission and performance. Some focus on policies, others on organizational structure, yet others on procedures. Religious and other types of communities also have formal procedures for change. Individuals or groups of individuals, such as rabbis in Judaism and ecumenical councils in the Catholic church, are designated as having interpretive authority, always considering the impact of such interpretations upon the foundational or chartering values and norms of the community.

In neither of these two mechanisms of change—the accretion of micro-interpretations of rules or deliberate change efforts—are the dominant organizational or social logic or values of the organization or the community called into question. In the case of micro-interpretations, individuals follow rules and interpret policies as they believe the institution would like them to. Ongoing, institutionally sanctioned change efforts look for incremental, rather than revolutionary change, deliberately working within the given institutional framework. The purpose of these formal change efforts is to ensure the continuity of the organization as it is defined through its existing values and norms, and as it seeks to function in an ever-changing environment.

The third type of change mechanism is revolutionary. This type of change, by definition, challenges the fundamental social logic and values of the existing organization. It often manifests through collective action—individuals coalescing around a cause and acting in concert to effect change. This is a very different mechanism than individual activity in support of existing rules, or individual participation in formal, institutionally-sponsored change efforts. Support for revolutionary change arises from reaction to an event perceived by some as morally reprehensible, a recognition by some participants that processes, procedures, and rules of the current system are based on flawed values, or a perceived existential threat to the system. The impetus for change thus, is moral and emotional, not cognitive or calculated, as it is with formal change efforts, or absent altogether as it is in the behavioral accretion model.

Support for revolutionary change arises from reaction to an event perceived by some as morally reprehensible.

Social Movements

Social movements have been defined in a variety of ways ranging from "fundamental oppositions to the direction of historical processes" to "sustained interactions between challengers and power holders."[3] Note that the language in these definitions is confrontational or oppositional. And, in fact, a very important function of social movements is to provide a common language in which opponents of the status quo may talk about events and actors in oppositional terms, where language is defined it its broadest sense as a system of words, images, metaphors, and the like, which imbue events with certain kinds of significance.[4] Like the language around definitions of social movements, the language around the triggering or key events or constructs of those movements is often oppositional (what is bad about the current state of affairs).

For Operation Eagle Claw, for example, the language of (the absence of) integration provided the dominant conversational frame for descriptions of the event after the fact. Terms like the need for and the absence of interoperability, integration, inter-service communication, and the like are prevalent in accounts of the mission. These were framed in institutional terms as inter-service rivalry, absence of trust among elements, and so on. At a tactical or operational level, efforts to shift allegiances in conflict or pre-conflict zones focus on ideologies, where language also is often oppositional. The language of groups like al-Qaeda, to take another example, focuses around the corruption of the current system, with much less formal, deliberate attention paid to the structure of the post-apocalyptic caliphate.

Social movements are a means to provide access to resources for those who subscribe to the oppositional statements and their associated value sets. They are born from and capitalize on discontent with an existing structure and the values expressed through that structure. The sense of moral outrage helps make the risk worth the cost. This is true for broad social movements, as evidenced by the energy U.S. President Donald Trump and 2016 presidential candidate Bernie Sanders stirred through their presidential campaigns, as well as (as we shall see later in this discussion) movements that arise within institutions to effect radical structural change.

Recent analyses of social movements have focused on structural questions of the conditions and processes that allow strong motives or grievances to be translated into collective action[5]—how social relationships allow grievances to be collectively recognized and acted upon—and have moved away from psycho-social interpretations of participants' backgrounds as the critical operationalizing factor. Explorations of relationships and the dynamics of social networks thus

---

[3] Mario Diani and Doug McAdam, eds., *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6.

[4] David A. Snow and Robert D. Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research* 1, no. 1 (1988): 197–217, 613). "Rather, movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers."

[5] Andrew G. Walder, "Political Sociology and Social Movements," *Annual Review of Sociology* 34 (2009): 393-412.

have moved to center stage in discussions of social movements,[6] with a focus on the power of networks to recruit and organize. For example, Douglas McAdam's discussion of Freedom Summer, the project run in the summer of 1964 to register black voters in the American South, staffed by primarily white volunteers from the North, concluded that:

> …the ties they [the Freedom Summer volunteers] established with other volunteers laid the groundwork for a nationwide activist network out of which the other major movements of the era—women's, antiwar, student—were to emerge. In short, Freedom Summer served both as the organizational basis for much of the activism of the Sixties…[7]

The importance of social networks in social mobilization both within and outside of institutions provides opportunities for highly committed and/or highly skilled individuals to play a more central role than might otherwise be afforded by their organizational position.[8] For example, Army General William 'Wild Bill' Donovan, who led the OSS, was described by those who worked with him in terms that painted him as far larger than life.

> General Donovan himself was a mobile unit of the first magnitude. Space was no barrier to him—the Sahara Desert was a little strip of sand, the Himalayas were a bank of snow, the Pacific was a mere ditch. And, what is more, Time was no problem. Circling the globe, according to good evidence, he would catch up with Time and pass it. No one was at all surprised if he left one morning and returned the previous afternoon. But more elementary than this…was General Donovan's power to visualize an oak when he saw an acorn. For him the day was never sufficient unto itself: it was always teeming with the seeds of a boundless future. Like Nature, he was prodigal, uncontainable, forelooking, and every completed project bred a host of new ones.[9]

By several accounts, James (Jim) Locher III's role in developing the ideas and formalizing the Congressional language and amendments that ultimately resulted in the establishment of USSOCOM and ASD (SO/LIC) went far beyond what might be expected of someone in his Congressional staff role. He was the lead author on the defense reorganization report that laid

---

[6] Diani and McAdam, Social Movements and Networks.
[7] Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 5.
[8] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*.
[9] OSS Assessment Staff, *Assessment of Men: Selection of Personnel for the Office of Strategic Services* (St. Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 2006 [1948]), 10.

much of the foundation for Goldwater-Nichols,[10] and the primary author of the actual legislation. He then continued to work to legitimate the institutions and processes he was instrumental in establishing through legislation by, for example, teaching courses at the military's professional education institutions on joint doctrine, and later serving in the special operations civilian role the legislation created, the ASD (SO/LIC).

And, of course, T.E. Lawrence, the British Army officer who became the central figure in the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire and who is a larger-than-life figure today, served in a very personalized role. One biographer points out that, midway through his campaign on the Arabian Peninsula, Lawrence himself realized the locus of his power in his personality: "He had discovered that his name, his impatience with routine, his unorthodox opinions about war, and even his appearance were weapons more powerful than guns, swords, and high explosives."[11]

Coalitions, Networks, and Bureaucracies

It is important to point out that networks of the type found in the groups engaged in collective action are not the same as the networks that are suggested by formal programs such as the Global SOF Network. The Global SOF Network, and other formal programs designed for cross-institutional engagement, might be more usefully described as coalition-building rather than network-developing activities. Social networks are connections between individuals who connect because of some perceived similarity. The focus is on the connection. As a consequence, social networks require action on the part of participants—they only exist when a connection is alive. One 'participates' in networks, a verb requiring action; one does not 'belong' to networks, a much more passive verb that is associated with organizations.

Because of their requirement for action on the part of individuals, social networks are highly unstable. Any given individual may move in and out of a relationship over time. In coalition dynamics, on the other hand, the actors' identities and loyalties remain with their home institution or organization, where membership is defined by the more passive and hence more stable 'belonging.' In a coalition, organizations come together in contingent, instrumental alliances; that is, alliances for particular purposes with the actors acting not in terms of individual agendas but as representatives of the agendas of their organizations.[12] A memorandum of understanding between organizations, for example, describing bounded areas and mechanisms for collaboration is a tool of coalitions, not social networks. Coalition-based alliances dissolve once the coalition's goal is met (they are contingent) and individuals return to their home institutions, which continue to serve as their primary locus of identity. "Actors instrumentally share resources in order to achieve

---

[10] *Defense Organization: The Need for Change* Staff Report to the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate, 99th Congress, 1st Session, 1985. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015011556266.
[11] Michael Korda, *Hero: The Life and Legend of Lawrence of Arabia* (London: Aurum Press, 2011), 295.
[12] Della Porta and Diani, *Social Movements: An Introduction*, 24.

specific goals, yet do not develop any particular sense of belonging and of a common future during the process [of coalition-building and engagement]."[13]

Clearly, organizations and individuals within organizations engage in multiple ways simultaneously. All organizations, whether they are formal like the U.S. military or informal like a village in Afghanistan, operate through rules and structures, and relationships.[14] Individuals in the Global SOF Network, for example, engaged with others in the coalition as representatives of their organization, whether it was a SOF unit, or USSOCOM, or the military. In addition, they may have concurrently developed personal relationships with their counterparts in other organizations. The two relationships, although they may have been between the same individuals, served different purposes and were instantiated in terms of different frameworks for interaction.

> *Organizations and individuals within organizations engage in multiple ways simultaneously.*

Organizations that focus more heavily on rules than relationships are known as bureaucracies. The U.S. military is often used as an example of a rule-based or bureaucratic organization.[15] Organizations that focus more heavily on relationships are known as network-based organizations. Many terrorist groups, from the Weather Underground in the 1970s to today's fundamentalist religious groups, are network-based.

As mentioned earlier, networks are highly unstable, so consequently, network-based organizations are fluid and can change rapidly. Bureaucracies, on the other hand, were developed to control and standardize behavior in the name of efficiency. Thus, they tend to be highly resistant to change. For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to point out that bureaucracies also have consequences other than the efficiencies that they were initially developed to create. Through the standardization and regulation that they require, as well as their focus on function, bureaucracies erase the individual. They focus attention on organizations: brigades and battalions become the actors of consequence, not individual sailors or soldiers.

Creativity and SOF

So, where in a community that prizes standardization (the U.S. military) and sees organizations as its primary unit of action is there a role for the special operations community—which has been known for flouting the rules, and which focuses heavily on the individual operator, not the organization? Operators may grow beards, not wear uniforms, and often are casual, such as when they address superiors. Creativity, not standardization, is prized in the special operations

---

[13] Ibid.

[14] Jessica G. Turnley, *Retaining a Precarious Value as Special Operations Go Mainstream* (Hurlburt Field, FL: JSOU Press, 2008).

[15] James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1989).

community, and the individual operator, not the unit, is privileged.[16] But, perhaps it is exactly these characteristics—creativity and the privileging of the individual—that allowed the emergence of special operations as we know it today, and which hold the seeds of future, major institutional changes.

Creative individuals are those who can put together seemingly unrelated ideas from different knowledge domains or domains of practice, whether in front of an easel, on the battlefield, or in a policy meeting. An entrepreneur is a creative individual able to exploit opportunities in the business world. One who can do the same within an organization is an institutional entrepreneur; he does not challenge the organization's values, just its structure and processes.

General Donovan's search for air support for European special operations during World War II, including parachuting guerilla warfare teams and intelligence agents behind German lines and dropping supplies and munitions to French resistance fighters, is a good example. The

OSS agents are dropped behind German lines from bases in England and North Africa after its leader, General Donovan, 'broke the rules' to acquire air support during World War II. Source: Central Intelligence Agency

American Joint Chiefs of Staff approved his request to use air support if he could find it, but refused to direct resources for him. General Donovan thus affirmed that flying air cover was within the value set of the institution (the U.S. military); he just needed to find assets, which he did by working his personal networks. Through Air Force Brigadier General Edward Curtis, a good friend and the trusted Chief of Staff to Air Force Lieutenant General Carl Spaatz (commander of the Northwest African Air Forces), General Donovan was able to persuade Lieutenant General Spaatz to commit planes and crew. General Donovan ultimately was able to convert B-17s and their crews, formerly used for high-altitude formation bombing, to low-altitude, single-flying aircraft suitable for special operations infiltrate/exfiltrate missions.[17]

General Donovan 'broke the rules' to acquire what he needed. He was then able to establish a mechanism for the recognized need to continue to be served in the future. The group of re-

---

[16] Some will argue that the basic operations units of SOF are the small teams—the ODAs and SEAL teams, for example. I mean here that the service identity lies in the operator, not the team or the unit. When one thinks of 'special operations' as a military force, it is the operator, not the ODA, that comes to mind.

[17] Bernard Victor Moore II, "The Secret Air War Over France: USAAF Special Operations Units in the French Campaign of 1944" (Master's thesis, Air University, Maxwell AFB, May 1982), 14-18.

purposed B-17s and their crews became the nucleus of the Special Flight Section attached to the 12th Air Force's Fifth Bombardment Wing,[18] and arguably set the stage for today's Air Force Special Operations Command.

SOF as Institutional Entrepreneurs

Exercising creativity in this way positioned General Donovan as an institutional entrepreneur. Institutional entrepreneurs are actors, often charismatic individuals, who act as champions for an idea or a process to fill a need current institutions are not designed to address. They are adept at leveraging the resources of existing institutions, and often access and mobilize personnel through their own networks,[19] as did General Donovan. They frequently work behind the scenes to accomplish their ends. They then socialize the new structures and processes in accepted and familiar language to confer legitimacy. Successful institutional entrepreneurs both break the rules associated with existing institutional logics, and create and subsequently institutionalize alternative rules and practices.

The ability of the special operations community to 'get stuff done' by developing social networks and then leveraging those personal relationships can translate into a valuable asset for institutional change and development, as well as an ability to succeed at positive engagement for specific missions or tactical activities. There are many historic examples of special operators who successfully worked 'outside the institutional box.' Well-known examples include General Donovan, as described earlier, and David Stirling of the British Special Air Service (SAS), both of whom created new organizations or units that later became 'mainstreamed.' John Arquilla, professor and chair of the Department of Defense Analysis at the Naval Postgraduate School, suggested that it was through social networks that SOF were able to be effective in recent actions in places such as Djibouti and the Philippines.[20]

The case of T.E. Lawrence, a.k.a. 'Lawrence of Arabia,' who is often held up as the prototypical innovator of this type, is an interesting one. He actually was a failed institutional entrepreneur. Although he broke the rules by using local militia in the service of the British agenda, he was unable to institutionalize the capability. His abrasive personality was counterproductive in any effort to mobilize others to adopt his approach. Recognition of his success by his contemporaries was grudging, and only in the face of incontrovertible tactical victories such as his taking of Aqaba, a coastal city in Jordan. And, Lawrence's tight regional focus on the Arabian Peninsula did not provide him the vision necessary to effect large institutional change, nor even the ability to transfer his own skills to a different theater. His performance in a later posting to

---

[18] Ibid.

[19] Steve Maguire, Cynthia Hardy, and Thomas B. Lawrence, "Institutional Entrepreneurship in Emerging Fields: HIV/AIDS Treatment Advocacy in Canada," *Academy of Management Journal* 47, no. 5 (2004): 657–679.

[20] John Arquilla, "To Build a Network," *Prism* 5, no.1 (2014): 23–33.

India's Northwest Frontier (today's Pakistan) was abysmal.[21] However, just as failures in the world of business may be the precursor for later successes, Lawrence's failure laid the groundwork for what later became one of the hallmark capabilities of special operations: the ability to work 'by, with and through' local populations.

As Army Colonel Bill Coultrup put it while serving in the Philippines as part Joint Special Operations Task Force – Philippines (JSOTF-P), which operated from 2002 to 2014, long after the capability to work with local populations was institutionalized, "[We're here to] help the Philippines security forces. It's their fight." Colonel Coultrup also attributed the success of JSOTF-P, which had an almost exclusively non-combat mission, as arising from "civil-military operations to change the conditions that allow those high-value targets to have a safe haven … We do that through helping give a better life to the citizens ... that's our network."[22]

The veterinarian for JSOTF-P, administers a deworming medication to a cow at a Veterinarian Civic Action Program held in collaboration with the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Source: USSOCOM Pacific photo by LTJG Theresa Donnelly.

The story of the introduction of a special operations capability to the U.S. military during World War II championed by General Donovan, and its subsequent institutionalization in USSOCOM managed by Jim Locher in 1987, provide interesting cases of successful institutional entrepreneurship, stimulated by moral outrage and carried out in oppositional environments. Both cases were stimulated not by technocratic or cost/benefit analyses of organizational needs, but by moral imperatives.

In the case of the OSS, it was the absence of a special operations capability, seen by some as critical to success in the conflict in Europe as exemplified by the British SAS. Successful introduction of the special operations capability to the American military meant changing what it meant to prosecute a war. As a consequence, fully incorporating special operations into the U.S. military mindset was not easily or automatically accomplished once the tactical imperatives of World War II ended. As Army Colonel Aaron Bank, first commander of the U.S. Army Special Forces, put it:

---

[21] Michael Korda, *Hero*.

[22] Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, *Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America's Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda* (New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 2011), 195–196.

UW [unconventional warfare] had proved itself during WWII as a companion of conventional warfare—a necessary supplement whenever the employment of conventional forces would not be feasible or would be embarrassing. I wondered when it would obtain full recognition by the military leaders of the great powers.[23]

In fact, it took until 1987 for UW to be fully institutionalized and legitimized in the U.S. military through the institutionalization of the special operator. The addition to the U.S. military community of a policy organization and a combatant command dedicated to special operations legitimated the special operator, adding new players to the military playbook. No longer 'an Army guy who did additional things,' the special operator now had status in his own right, and there were new actors with authority and agency in the Pentagon on both the military and civilian sides. It is important to realize that this change—the move to full legitimization for special operations (along with many other changes to the defense establishment)—was stimulated by an event that prompted moral outrage: Operation Eagle Claw, mentioned earlier.

Institutional Entrepreneurs as Social Activists

The ability to catalyze change gets particularly interesting when looking at institutional entrepreneurs in the light of social movements, another change mechanism. As described earlier, recent looks at social movements focus on the social relationships that allow discontent to be translated into collective action. This emphasizes the role of networks in recruiting and organizing people to share resources in pursuit of an idea or premise that stands in opposition to mainstream beliefs. The focus is on the ability to generate collective action around an oppositional idea.

This brings us full circle to the institutional entrepreneur, also an agent for change. Like the activist, the institutional entrepreneur engages in oppositional environments. For the institutional entrepreneur, arguments usually surround the appropriateness of the task and the ability of the given structure to accommodate it, while in the social activist arena, the arguments are based on the inherent (im)morality of particular ideas or courses of action. Thus, in social movements, arguments are at the level of cultural tropes or ideologies, not institutional structures, and the focus is on persuasion ('hearts and minds'), not institution-building. The institutional entrepreneur uses networks

> *The institutional entrepreneur does not challenge the value of the institution, just its ability to accomplish certain tasks.*

to recruit and organize individuals to accomplish tasks already perceived as important by an institutional subcommunity, but outside the structural capabilities of existing systems. The institutional entrepreneur does not challenge the value of the institution, only its ability to accomplish certain tasks. New structures are created to support new tasks, and to get those

---

[23] Aaron Bank, *From OSS to Green Berets: The Birth of Special Forces* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986), 188.

structures legitimated and accepted by the very communities that may initially have resisted them. The activist, on the other hand, uses networks to recruit and organize individuals to create new value structures, and challenges the moral basis of the existing institution.

The institutional entrepreneur as social activist takes action one step further, capturing the oppositional activity of a social movement in language and cultural frames that are familiar enough to existing structures to be accepted. The failure of the Arab Spring activists in Egypt to institutionalize, and ensure continuity for their reforms is a good example at the country level of the pitfalls of using only part of the change paradigm. The activists were successful in getting Egyptians to hear a moral call and mobilizing the population to collective action against the government through the protests in Tahrir Square. However, they failed to institutionalize their revolution, and soon lost the government through an election to the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that was well organized from an institutional perspective, but which shared none of the activists' values.

Activists, Entrepreneurs, and SOF

Militaries are famous for being highly structured and regulated organizations. There are rules on what to wear, how to talk to people, how to stand, and how to fight. Such regimentation is necessary to ensure that the use of force is controlled, and that the friction generated by the uncertainty of the battlefield can be addressed. As large organizations, modern Western militaries find that the standardization provided by bureaucratic rules and structures contributes to efficient operation (although, of course, it also can lead to organizational pathologies): managing several hundred thousand of individuals through personality and persuasion would not be possible or effective.

The special operator, and, by extension, all the members of the special operations community in place to enable SOF, is now legitimated as a military player in Western militaries. SOF bring to the military the potential for change, realized through an ability to create, stimulate, and work through social networks and the power of individual personalities. That potential can be activated in the service of tactical operations, working 'by, with and through' local populations in pre-conflict and conflict areas to serve a national agenda. It also can be activated in the service of large institutional change: If SOF are given the freedom to act creatively and take advantage of connections and relationships, they can mobilize networks around both the crystallization of new values and associated institutional change. Leaders must take caution, however, to avoid formalizing and centralizing what works best through informal and locally developed mechanisms. Treating the global SOF network as policy or as a program, for example, may be the first step in diluting its effectiveness as a change mechanism, and eliminating the opportunity for SOF to contribute as fully as they might otherwise. Stepping aside and allowing members of the SOF community to individually create and activate relationships in the service of clear values-based agendas may yield unexpected innovation and creative results, leading to significant change at the mission/tactical level, and perhaps also at the level of the broader institution.

Joint Special Operations University
Center for Special Operations
Studies and Research
7701 Tampa Point Blvd.
MacDill AFB, FL 33621