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Derek Leebaert, *To Dare and To Conquer: Special Operations and the Destiny of Nations, from Achilles to Al Qaeda*. New York: Little, Brown, 2006. Pp. ix, 673. ISBN 0316143847.

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“Special operations” in their modern sense grew out of World War II, matured during the “savage wars of peace” waged after 1945, and became the stuff of headlines in Vietnam. The emergence of “asymmetric warfare” in the last stages of the Cold War resulted in the metastasizing of special operations forces throughout the world. Governments seek to meet the new challenge in ways both cost-effective and sparing of the sentimentality that increasingly passes for morality in the era of 24-hour media. Armed forces seek to maintain or enhance their internal positions by developing special operations capacities. In the U.S., Army Special Forces and Navy Seals are being jostled for place by a Marine Corps willing to suspend its historic insistence that being a Marine is itself an elite status, and by an Air Force whose Special Operations Command is acquiring a formidable ground combat capacity.

This is an ideal background for Derek Leebaert’s path-breaking effort to establish for special operations a root structure going back to the beginnings of organized war. Professor of Government at Georgetown and frequent consultant and commentator on security issues, Leebaert is best known for *The Fifty-Year Wound*,¹ his eloquent presentation of the Cold War’s hidden costs to America. The present work develops an even more provocative thesis. Leebaert deploys a body of evidence unusual alike in breadth and depth to support the proposition that special operations have not only achieved particular victories, but have brought down entire political systems by finding and exploiting the hairline cracks and hidden weaknesses in conventional security systems.

Special operations are protean. While usually smaller in scale than their main-force counterparts, they are defined not by size, but by what Winston Churchill called the “Commando idea”: guile combined with courage and imagination (24). Nor does a special operation involve a single dramatic blow. On the contrary, they can continue for years. Special operations may find their best chances for success in speed and shock. Or they can involve patient waiting. Special operations can be mounted from outside or seek support from local allies.

Special operations depend on surprise and finesse. Here Leebaert’s metaphor is the humble seesaw. A heavy person on one end can be moved by placing someone even heavier on the other—the usual playground pattern. Or the fulcrum can be so adjusted that even a lightweight can elevate the bruiser across from him. Leverage, in other words, is the essence of special warfare—leverage usually obtained by careful planning, extraordinary risks, and exceptional temperaments.

¹ *The Fifty-Year Wound: The True Price of America’s Cold War Victory* (New York: Little, Brown, 2002).

Special forces are seldom conducted in a vacuum. Leebaert does not deny the relevance, indeed the importance, of traditional military forces in special war's success. Time and again, however, special operations will have general consequences far exceeding the original scope of the operation: consequences, Leebaert argues, of the unorthodox thinking and behavior that underlie successful special warfare.

Such a broad template requires a corresponding spectrum of supporting evidence. Though Leebaert concentrates on the West, he draws on examples ranging from the semi-mythical world of the Trojan War to the descent on Afghanistan in 2001. His chronologically organized format is strongly anecdotal and highly colorful. Readers can open the book almost anywhere and find a page-turning narrative of war-making outside the matrix. Sometimes the examples are obvious: the low-intensity operations against the British from the Canadian frontier to King's Mountain during the American Revolution; the Middle Eastern campaigns of Lawrence of Arabia; the contributions of Merrill's Marauders and the British Chindits to victory in the China-Burma-India theater of World War II. Other case studies are imaginative. The conquests of Mexico and Peru are presented as classic special operations—"lightning strikes" carried out by "tiny, flexible, focused—and absurdly confident—forces" (149) that changed the history of two continents. The eighteenth century is accurately described as a period when unconventional operations by "sharp and self-reliant outfits" (251) began challenging the dominant paradigms of mass and method. The U.S. Army during the Mexican War employed a broad spectrum of special operations techniques, from the use of new technical capacities like highly mobile field artillery to the employment of local bandits as agents and auxiliaries.

Leebaert is also particularly successful in developing the unconventional aspects of such general conflicts as the Napoleonic Wars. He highlights the expansion of "special tasks" like kidnapping and assassination in the wake of the French Revolution. He demonstrates the contributions of technology to the special operations aspects of the nineteenth century's wars of imperialism—particularly their contribution to sustaining high quality, relatively small, forces in uncongenial environments as opposed to committing large numbers and seeing them eroded by disease and privation.

Inevitably, a work with this kind of approach scatters neologisms on almost every page. Some are provocative. The medieval world's "small-unit killers" like Muslim Assassins and Anglo-Scots border reivers, motivated by the subjective factors of religion and honor, do stand comparison with contemporary groups. Others are questionable. Presenting Alcibiades as applying special operations first to the defeat of Athens, then to Sparta, during the Peloponnesian War juxtaposes the fifth century BCE and the twentieth century CE and strains both time frames beyond their limits. Some are amusing, like the characterization of seventeenth-century buccaneers practicing "naval special warfare" featuring small-craft, brown-water operations prefiguring today's SEALs and SBS. And other neologisms are misleading. In neither their Imperial Roman nor their early modern versions can marines be described as special operations forces in Leebaert's sense of the term. And, in passing, the French in fact paid careful attention to the ethnic origins of recruits for the Foreign Legion during the First Indochina War, in an effort to prevent its domination by Germans, Nazis or otherwise (502).

This sort of academic nitpicking, however, is inappropriate. Leebaert is not seeking to write a narrative history of special warfare. His intention is to present special operations in a broad

historical context and to establish the criteria for their success through a broad spectrum of examples serving almost as archetypes. His rationale becomes apparent in the work's final chapters. Here he moves from a broad-stroke approach to specific critiques of U.S. special operations. He describes initial reluctance to engage in the field during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations, followed by an enduring tendency to see special operations as an all-purpose, low-cost, minimum-visibility solution to the complex, often contradictory, security problems of a superpower confronting thermonuclear war, guerrilla campaigns, and now terrorism.

Special warfare as depicted in the body of the book is not a panacea. Nor is it a random process. It depends heavily upon planning and focus: the ability to exploit as policy opportunities won in the field. Jurisdictional disputes can be fatal. Leebaert is particularly critical in that context of the CIA, which he sees as seeking to control special operations despite its massive shortcomings in its own primary responsibility of securing and disseminating accurate intelligence. Even apart from the Langley influence, American special operations have been characterized in both military and political contexts by an ongoing struggle for control, accompanied by corresponding efforts to deny responsibility for failures and—as Afghanistan and Iraq suggest—increasingly for incomplete successes as well.

To Dare and To Conquer raises a still deeper question. Special operations, for all their glamour, are by their nature ruthless—indeed, one quality feeds the other in popular imagination. Leebaert's indictment of the "fantasy vision" that special forces can compensate for policy failures and poor decision making can be balanced by consideration of the "dirty hands problem." Might the often unpleasant realities of special operations encourage de facto, perhaps de jure, American abandonment, on both moral and pragmatic grounds, of an approach to war-making whose disproportionate efficacy has been so eloquently described in these pages, but which the nation finds difficult to apply and control?