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Linda Robinson, *One Hundred Victories: Special Ops and the Future of American Warfare*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2013. Pp. xix, 311. ISBN 978-1-61039-149-8.

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In *One Hundred Victories*, Linda Robinson, a senior international policy analyst at the RAND Corporation, assesses how US Army special operations forces (SOF, or Special Ops) have evolved and adapted, particularly to the realities of fighting the Taliban and working with friendly forces in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2013. She draws on her field research there and elsewhere.¹

In her preface, Robinson writes that, by failing to kill or capture Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora in 2001, US special operations forces “missed a huge opportunity” and “did not capitalize on this moment ... to define a game plan, a way ahead that would envision a conclusive endgame to the Afghan conflict” (xvi). This seems an unfair judgment, since formulating any “game plan” was the prerogative not of SOF but of their commanders in Washington. Indeed, she asserts that “The biggest reason for the missed opportunity was an institutional one,” since SOF “had no fully staffed, theater-level command ready to step up to the task” (xvii). The blame for this lay with top Pentagon planners, not the men on the ground. Robinson is providing here the framework for her overall narrative, which culminates with the formation of a unified Special Ops command in July 2012. Since it is only in her last chapter that she forecasts the future of SOF² and American warfare, many will find the book’s subtitle misleading.

One Hundred Victories reads like an insider’s compilation of stories and anecdotes gleaned from SOF personnel in war zones. Each chapter has a simple title (“Hitting Targets,” “The Burdens of Command,” etc.) and focuses on events in a particular Afghan province.³ The black-and-white photographs gathered in the middle of the book show mostly Special Ops personnel, their Afghan counterparts, meetings with village elders, checkpoints, and observation posts. Twenty-one pages of endnotes are followed by a five-page selected bibliography and an index. At the beginning of the book is a “cast of characters,” listing their ranks and command acronyms.⁴

Robinson uncritically accepts officially reported statistics. For instance, in a glowing account of the Afghan local police, 22,000 of whom were trained by US special forces, she relays without comment that “they had successfully defended their posts 88 percent of the time” and experienced an “attrition rate ... [of] only 2 percent” (250). Elsewhere, she accepts as gospel the assertion that 10,000 insurgents were taken off the battlefield in 2012 (241). These figures, of course, reflect well on SOF.

To the author’s credit, however, she does not whitewash the dubious record of some in the Special Ops community. She labels Maj. Jim Gant, a self-styled Lawrence of Arabia, as “closer to Colonel Kurtz of *Apocalypse Now*” (219). Gant reportedly oversaw unauthorized missions across the border from his base in Kunar province, in the northeast of Afghanistan. He drove a Kawasaki dune buggy with antlers in the front and allegedly kept on hand in his compound a supply of drugs and alcohol as well as a mistress (a former *Washington Post* reporter). Gant’s superiors eventually went after him, but his defenders claimed his bad behavior stemmed from head injuries caused by IEDs and other explosions.

1. See her *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (NY: PublicAffairs, 2004) and *Tell Me How This Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way out of Iraq* (NY: PublicAffairs, 2008).

2. For a fuller discussion of the subject, see Linda Robinson, “The Future of U.S. Special Operations Forces,” Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 66 (April 2013) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1424.htm.

3. Indicated on a too small chapter map. It would have been better to include a single large map of Afghanistan with clear labels for relevant cities, provinces, and geographical features.

4. E.g., CFSOCC-A = Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan. The book is riddled with acronyms familiar only to specialists.

Brigadier General Chris Haas wanted to throw the book at Gant, but Gant had many supporters in the higher ranks, which may have helped him stave off a court-martial. He spent months at Fort Bragg awaiting the outcome of the Article 15-6 investigation. No charges were brought in the end, but he was relieved for cause and ejected from the US Army Special Forces. One general said, “Breaking the arrows [the crossed-arrow symbol of the Special Forces] is a very serious step.” He was taken off the promotion list for lieutenant colonel but allowed to retire with his pension—and to face whatever personal fallout would come with his wife and his family. (220)

As for the reporter/mistress, the US Embassy had to send personnel to remove her from the compound, because, absurdly, the elite Special Ops commandos tasked with subduing the Taliban and training friendlylies were not allowed to physically deposit this unwanted civilian guest on a helicopter and send her back where she came from.

Robinson also vividly details the dangers certain SOF units faced after S. Sgt. Robert Bales went on a shooting rampage in March 2012, killing sixteen Afghan civilians outside the gates of Camp Belambay in Kandahar Province. He was part of a conventional infantry unit attached to a Special Ops team to provide security. Immediately after the incident—which Robinson calls “the My Lai moment of the Afghan war” (147)—the outpost was put under lockdown and local Afghan officials began trying to calm villagers who wanted revenge. The author accepts with obvious relief the subsequent finding that “no evidence” (148) implicated any SOF member in the breakdown of discipline. Bales had been drinking with members of his squad (despite the alcohol ban), but none of them were in special forces. Surprisingly, according to Robinson, there was “little fallout” from the Bales incident for Special Ops missions in the Kandahar region (148).

Robinson’s enthusiasm for US “nation-building” initiatives in Afghanistan will strike most Americans as overly optimistic.⁵ She may be thinking of local defense and security training measures—as she puts it, “village ops” (31)—but she seems to take for granted that SOF worked on “projects such as renovations of mosques and provision of medical care” (18). Readers will be surprised to learn that “Village Stability Operations” in Afghanistan were largely inspired by a book on the American pacification program during the Vietnam War (26). Robinson has little to say about “insider attacks,” in which members of Afghan police or military units attack their own or American personnel. But her sentiments can perhaps be deduced from her preference for the term “so-called ‘insider attacks’” (150, my emphasis).⁶ In general, then, Robinson applauds the ongoing American efforts in creating Afghan Special Ops forces, which numbered 8,500 by the time her book was published.

So what exactly is the future of Special Ops and American warfare? Robinson concedes that SOF are unlikely to be deployed on the scale of the 13,700 troops and 17,000 support personnel sent to Afghanistan. But do the achievements there set a precedent for the training of friendly locals to conduct their own counterinsurgency operations? President Barack Obama, in a speech at West Point in May 2014, announced his proposal for a Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund, a \$5 billion initiative to help other countries fight terrorism. The *New York Times* reported that “The goal is to train and equip foreign security forces, so they can conduct counterterrorism operations with little American involvement.” However, the *Times* cautioned that, though the plan sounds “sensible,” “many things can go wrong” with a program that “seems too heavily dependent on military responses.”⁷

Although Pentagon officials have traditionally preferred conventional force operations, their use of SOF has grown steadily since the 1980s. Of the 27,000 US troops that participated in Operation Just Cause in Panama (1988–89), 4,500 were SOF. In Desert Storm (1990–91), 9,000 SOF were deployed.⁸ Against that

5. According to a CNN/Opinion Research poll (Dec 2013) eight of ten Americans were opposed to the continuing US military presence in Afghanistan. See Aaron Blake, “Afghanistan More Unpopular Than Vietnam,” [Washington] *Post Politics* blog (30 Dec 2013) – www.miwsr.com/rd/1425.htm.

6. It is telling that “insider attack” does not appear in the book’s index.

7. “Fighting Terrorism with More Money,” *NY Times* (16 June 2014) A18.

8. Roger Chapman, “Special Operations Forces,” in *Spies, Wiretaps, and Secret Operations: An Encyclopedia of American Espionage*, vol. 2, ed. Glenn P. Hastedt (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2011) 730–31.

background, the great reliance on SOF after 9/11 in Iraq and Afghanistan comes as no surprise. Although Robinson does not come close to envisioning an American military comprised mostly of Special Ops troops, she seems unaware of how difficult it is to increase the proportion of elite to conventional forces. She would do well to ponder certain Special Operations Forces Truths: “SOF cannot be mass produced”; “Quality is better than quantity”; and, regarding the creation of foreign special forces able to manage their own struggles against extremists, “Competent SOF cannot be created after emergencies arise.”⁹

From a historical perspective, Robinson’s insights about the fight in Afghanistan are hardly novel. She writes, for example, that “What was profoundly different about the latter years in Afghanistan was that special operators were tasked to engage deeply with civilian populations in remote areas and then to lead those willing to bear arms” (262). This evolution in the Afghan War is remarkably similar to that of SOF during the Vietnam War. To say that “A deeper issue that surfaced in Afghanistan was a lack of appreciation for what political-military warfare is” (264) again evokes the Vietnam experience. The common problem is the tension between the desire to equip people to fight their own battles and the fear of appearing to be imperialistic. This circumstance exposes a contradiction in Robinson’s advice that American forces should draw on the wisdom of Lawrence of Arabia (267).

One Hundred Victories offers a contribution to both military science and military history. Although it is unlikely to be selected for use in college classrooms, researchers interested in the Afghan War will value it for the primary source material Linda Robinson has gathered through careful field research and firsthand observation.

9. United States Military Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations*, Joint Pub 3-05 (17 April 1998) II-3 - www.miwsr.com/rd/1426.htm.