

## **Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces**

Mark Moyar

New York: Basic Books, 2017, 402 pp.

In recent years, special operations forces (SOFs) have assumed a prominent role in the ongoing U.S. global war on terrorism (though that term has fallen out of fashion). In the campaign against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), SOFs are fulfilling a number of significant responsibilities: launching periodic raids against high-value terrorist targets; providing tactical advice to partner forces from advanced positions; and coordinating fire support for lightly armed irregular forces on the front lines. Moreover, those activities extend beyond Iraq and Syria. A small SOF contingent is on the ground in Libya. The Pentagon has deployed an SOF task force to the Horn of Africa and Yemen, and special operators make up a significant portion of U.S. troops remaining in Afghanistan. Without a doubt, SOFs are enjoying something of a heyday within the U.S. military.

In *Oppose Any Foe: The Rise of America's Special Operations Forces*, Mark Moyar clearly demonstrates that the current stature of SOFs within the U.S. military is rather exceptional. He provides a comprehensive history of the institutional evolution of U.S. SOFs and their operational contributions from the Second World War to the present. In doing so, he paints a picture of an entity in search of a role. Largely unappreciated by the conventional military leadership through most of their history, SOFs have frequently been employed in situations for which they were ill suited and poorly equipped.

For readers who enjoy detailed narratives of military operations, *Oppose Any Foe* will be quite entertaining—although the inherent drama of those operations is frequently compromised by Moyar's penchant for bizarre similes that distract more than they illuminate. Moreover, some readers (myself included) would prefer a more detailed discussion of the politics driving the employment and institutional development of SOFs. One of the most interesting aspects of the history of SOFs is the “intense rivalry between special operations forces and regular forces,” which Moyar highlights as an enduring challenge. Unfortunately, skirmishes within the Pentagon receive much less attention than those on the actual battlefield.

Although *Oppose Any Foe* is a history, the book is clearly oriented toward the future, highlighting a number of important questions that have yet to be resolved. First and foremost, Moyar questions the extent to which SOFs should be expected and tasked to address the myriad security challenges currently facing the international community. In the wake of the massive interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, numerous experts (both inside and outside government) have suggested that SOFs provide a means for effectively addressing a range of security challenges with a relatively “light footprint.” Particularly as the U.S. campaign to roll back the Islamic State has gradually succeeded, more and more observers have suggested that SOFs should be used in a similar fashion to combat future challenges “by, with, and through” local forces.

Yet Moyar contends that Obama “administration strategists had not given adequate consideration to the strengths and limitations of SOFs before hoisting them to the apex of the world’s most powerful military.” On a basic level, he highlights the necessity of identifying a sustainable level of activity for relatively small special operations forces. There is a broad consensus that the number and frequency of operations imposed on SOFs in recent years has strained readiness and morale within the units. As Moyar points out, since SOFs have already increased from 38,000 to 70,000 since 9/11, it is questionable whether they can either expand further or maintain the current operations tempo without degrading the elite capabilities that distinguish them from conventional forces.

Furthermore, the strategic utility of SOFs remains an open question. One theme that recurs throughout *Oppose Any Foe* is that SOFs have frequently achieved tactical successes but struggled to exert strong influence over strategic outcomes. For example, on first impression, the ongoing anti-Islamic State campaign would seem to represent an exception. SOFs have played a crucial role in dislodging ISIL from most of the territory it had seized in Iraq and Syria. On a broader political-military level, however, it remains to be seen whether the campaign will foster enduring stability and security—the absence of which invited the Islamic State onslaught in the first place. In other words, even when SOFs can win a war, it remains to be seen whether they can secure the peace.

An even more important question, however, is whether the United States’ current reliance on SOFs ultimately serves the national interest. It seems that one of the primary reasons the White

House has employed SOFs on such a significant scale in recent years is that they provide a convenient means for conducting military operations in numerous countries largely from the shadows. Deploying relatively small contingents of SOFs enables the White House to conduct a perpetual global war on terrorism without engendering much attention (or pushback) from the American public.

There are two risks to such an approach, however. The obsession with low visibility introduces a risk that SOFs will be employed in circumstances for which they are ill-suited and poorly equipped. Even more important, an overreliance on SOFs has the potential to subvert the American political process. The American public has the capacity to act as a powerful brake on ill-conceived military adventures. If a president can sustain a military operation only by hiding the United States' role from its citizens, one must question the ultimate wisdom of that enterprise. As Moyar suggests, "Presidents, being highly political animals, will continue to face temptations to use special operations forces to serve political agendas. For the good of the republic and the special operations forces, they would be well advised to resist those temptations."

Brad Stapleton  
Alexandria, Va.

### **Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States**

James C. Scott

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, 312 pp.

The subsistence farmer of cereal grains has been the most common human type in recorded history. Indeed, the 21st century may be the first recorded century during which subsistence farmers did not predominate. Or so we may hope.

But how did we become subsistence farmers? Recent archaeology suggests that the process was anything but easy and that states played a central role in the necessary subjugation of unruly waters, lands, plants, animals—and people. And a process of subjugation it most certainly was.

Early in recorded history—and in the tantalizing era that came just before it—something momentous took place, something that you probably never learned about in school: the state *invented* and *imposed* the subsistence farming of cereal grains. In the process the