



# SOF culture is the mission

Culture is key to special operations' transition to great power competition

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# Introduction

US SPECIAL OPERATIONS Forces (SOF) have always been different. From its beginnings in the cauldron of World War II, SOF has thought, acted, and fought differently. After all, it takes a special kind of person to parachute behind enemy lines to raise a resistance force as the early *Jedburgh* teams did; to scale 100-foot cliffs as the Rangers did at Pointe du Hoc; or to swim undetected for miles to survey beaches as the early frogmen did in the Pacific. Since the beginning, that difference—the singular focus on accomplishing the mission even in unique and unorthodox ways—has become the core of SOF culture and is a key component of what makes SOF successful at tackling the nation's most difficult missions.

Today, SOF is tasked with rebalancing its enterprise for great power competition while continuing to prioritize countering violent extremism. In [our previous article in this series](#), we examined what this shift would mean for SOF missions and capabilities. Such significant transformations are not easy undertakings. Research from defense, business, and even sports points to culture as an essential factor in any successful transformation.

As in the past, SOF's success in this transition toward great power competition will rest on its unique culture. Our research indicates that SOF culture is rooted in core traits common to all units, namely an unorthodox way of problem-solving and an unrelenting commitment to accomplish the mission. While the common core of SOF culture is precisely what enables it to be successful—and should, therefore, be relied upon—other secondary cultural traits may need to adapt to great power competition.

To get a deeper insight into SOF culture, our research team—many of whom are former SOF members—spoke with academics as well as current and former SOF leaders, primarily:

- Admiral (retired) William McRaven, former Commander, USSOCOM
- Command Chief Master Sergeant Gregory Smith, Senior Enlisted Leader, USSOCOM
- Command Sergeant Major (retired) Patrick McCauley, former Senior Enlisted Leader, USSOCOM
- Dr. Tone Danielsen, former Principal Researcher, Norwegian Defense Research Establishment

# Making SOF culture

FROM ITS MODERN beginnings in World War II, the most important elements of SOF's distinctive culture are a commitment to accomplishing the mission and an unorthodox approach to problem-solving. These core cultural traits are shared across the SOF enterprise regardless of unit, mission, rank, or other factors (figure 1). While culture is intangible and organic, SOF leaders have a variety of management tools by which they can influence culture, such as rigorous selection and assessment, training processes, complex missions, and strong leaders (see sidebar, "What is culture, anyway?"). As in any successful organization, culture is central to what SOF is and how it accomplishes its missions.

## Training and mission shape culture

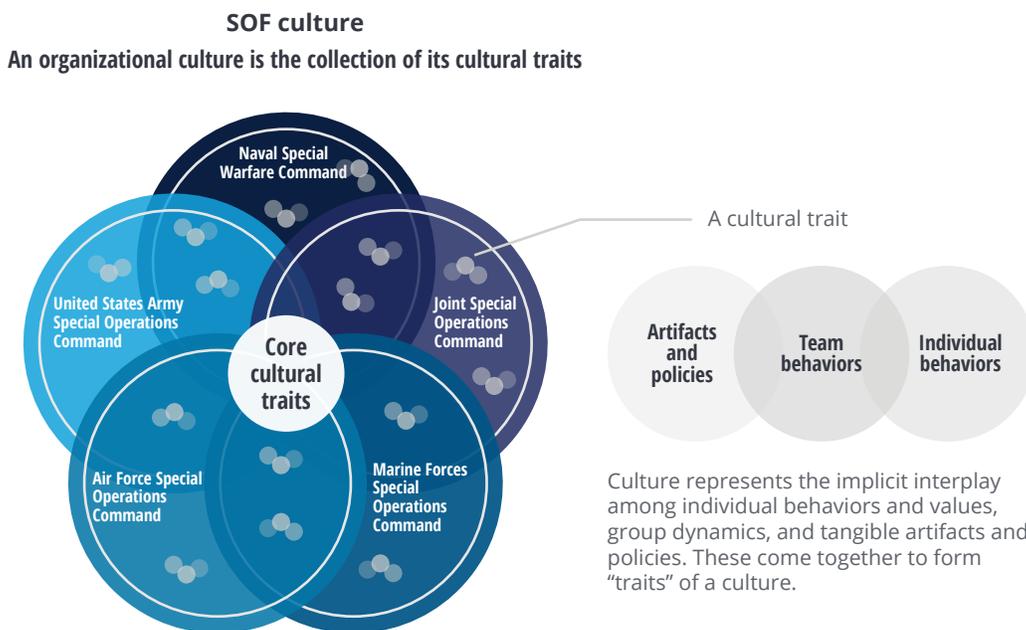
Admiral (ADM) William McRaven points to selection as the start of SOF culture. "Selection is about both finding the right people and also molding them into the common culture. Across the board, whether it's the Ranger culture or the SEAL culture, that culture is one of 'we're never going to quit until the job gets done.'"<sup>1</sup>

Command Sergeant Major (CSM) Patrick McCauley echoed those sentiments, suggesting it's not about finding the "best" people, but finding the "right" people who, "like chalkboards," possess the right core competencies to be trainable.<sup>2</sup>

FIGURE 1

### An organization's culture is the sum of many traits

— Services, components, and subcultures



Source: Deloitte analysis.

Their counterparts today agree. Command Chief Master Sergeant (CMSgt) Gregory Smith sees the enduring nature of the traits sought in selection as a sign of their importance in forming SOF culture: “If you look at our assessment and training plans on September 10, 2001, and you look at our assessment and training plans today, the people you will see are the same. It doesn’t matter the service, we are looking for an intense commitment to teammate, to individual fortitude, and a strong desire to succeed in a very ambiguous environment. That is what SOF is all about.”<sup>3</sup>

Within a SOF unit, the unit history, training, missions, and operating environments of that SOF unit shape its culture in important and unique ways. For example, a US Army Green Beret’s skills, training, and operating environment are different from those of the 75th Ranger Regiment. These differences lead to variations across SOF unit cultures. According to McRaven, SOF’s ultimate value is a product of the individual SOF unit cultures, which allow each unit to approach problems differently.<sup>4</sup>

## Mindset matters

Training and mission create a unique mindset. Dr. Tone Danielsen is an anthropologist who studied SOF for a decade and spent almost two years embedded in Norway’s naval SOF, the *Marinejegerkommandoen*, to complete an anthropological study of SOF. She identified what she calls the “SOF-ish” mindset: “the SOF culture requires an unconventional mindset that you stretch any border you can within the bounds of your orders; if you are entirely predictable, you are not SOF.” SOF needs to be prepared for high risk, uncertainty, and change. Their SOF-ish mindset—creativity, initiative, innovation, adaptability, and flexibility—is crucial not only to the personnel’s

survival in combat, but also for their organizational culture’s survival and development.<sup>5</sup>

CSM McCauley agrees that out-of-the-box problem-solving is an important aspect of SOF culture. He says unorthodox thinking includes “the bottom-up empowerment that you find within SOF; we empower the younger people to solve challenging problems, and then the enterprise uses those solutions.”<sup>6</sup>

Sub-cultures will exist in every service—Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines—and even within a service such as the US Air Force’s combat controller, pararescue, or tactical air control party communities. Yet, they will all share the SOF mindset, which in many cases can bind even international SOF units to each other more closely than to their own nation’s conventional forces.<sup>7</sup>

## Differences are key

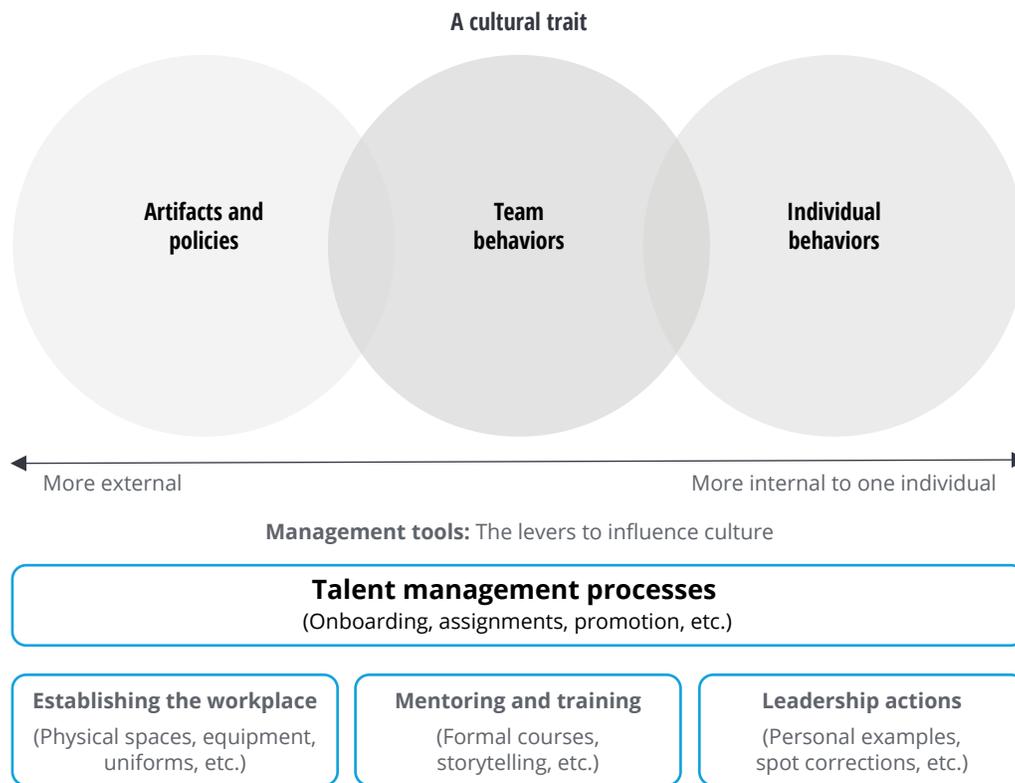
Despite some similarities in culture between SOF units, SOF culture is not an exercise in creating homogeneity. Quite the opposite: When unconventional and unpredictable action is one of the hallmarks of SOF culture, you simply cannot have everyone thinking the same way. Rather, a certain heterogeneity that the military terms “joint” is key to its mission success and for making SOF culture what it is. ADM McRaven captured it best, saying, “We do not want SOF to be fungible. We do not want a SEAL or an [Special Forces] Operational Detachment Alpha or a Marine Raider team to be interchangeable. They need to maintain some very unique specialties, and when we bring all those differences into a room, that diversity of thought, that diversity of ideas, that diversity of culture is what makes the joint SOF culture. That makes us successful; that’s the bottom line.”<sup>8</sup>

**WHAT IS CULTURE, ANYWAY?**

While culture seems to be an amorphous concept, it is made up of the objects, practices, conversations, and thoughts we have every day. Organizational culture is a complex mix of physical artifacts with individual and shared beliefs, each influencing the other. There are multiple elements to culture, both tangible and intangible. The uniforms, greetings, and even physical workspaces of SOF are cultural “artifacts” that serve as tangible reminders of intangible beliefs. Organizational culture is created and maintained by the constant interaction between those tangible artifacts, the group’s behaviors, and the behaviors and beliefs of each individual. For example, when members of the 75th Ranger Regiment salute a superior officer, they do so using a phrase coined during the D-Day invasion. That phrase has since become a unit moto and a cultural artifact, both serving as a tangible reminder of an organization’s culture but also reinforcing it through use. Culture change, then, is not an exercise in changing one thing, but a process for changing group and individual practices and beliefs over time (see figure 2).

FIGURE 2

**A variety of management tools can help organizations adjust culture**



Source: Deloitte analysis.

# “Culture eats strategy for breakfast”

— Peter Drucker<sup>9</sup>

CULTURE IS ONE of the most important elements that helps SOF accomplish the difficult missions that the nation expects of it. When those missions shift, culture also often must shift. Research has shown that organizational culture is the key to any successful mission transformation, be it in a private company, government, or the military. It takes a massive effort for a large organization to completely shift focus while staying at the top of its game. History is littered with companies and organizations that missed big shifts because they were good at one thing: Kodak famously invented the digital camera yet refused to shift from its then-profitable film business. Kodak certainly had a visionary strategy after all; they invested in R&D to develop the digital camera. Yet, its culture at the time was too focused on accomplishing the mission at hand—being the best film company in the world—to see the need to shift in a way that might unsettle what it was best at.<sup>10</sup> Culture ate strategy. The few organizations that have successfully shifted focus while staying at the top of their industry all have one thing in common: strong, yet agile, organizational cultures.

*MIT Sloan Management Review* and Deloitte's Center for Integrated Research did a survey of 4,800 executives from nearly every country and industry and found that the most innovative companies all have cultures that promote delegation and decision-making at lower levels and

embrace ambiguity and change. This focus on culture is central to the strategic success of these companies. Nearly four times as many CEOs of companies that are digitally mature feel that their leaders devote sufficient time to thinking about culture and ethics compared to CEOs of companies just beginning their digital journey.<sup>11</sup> The same holds true in every industry whether business, the military, or sports. A selection of professional baseball, basketball, and football executives who oversaw turnarounds of losing franchises to winning records all agreed that culture was the most important aspect in their success.<sup>12</sup>

## Reorienting culture for a new mission

Great power competition is expansive in every way. The geographic scope is immense, the forces involved are massive and armed with the most advanced weaponry, and any action can have global consequences. The missions of the past decade occurred largely in permissive environments allowing large forces with large footprints. Any great power adversary will be better equipped, trained, and possess advanced military capabilities violent extremists don't. This expands the scope, scale, and speed of warfare, and may require military forces to have skills in technology, economics, and even diplomacy that they have previously not required.

Operating in this environment will likely change SOF's role as well. While SOF has been a focus of attention in recent conflicts, in many cases playing a leading role, great power warfare may find the roles reversed with SOF playing more of an enabling role. As CMSgt Smith puts it, "going forward, SOF could be the enablers, where for the last 20 years we have been the enabled force."<sup>13</sup>

That is not to say that the last 20 years of operations provide no utility in the transition to new missions. Far from it. Much of what has made SOF successful in counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions will still be important in great power competition. ADM McRaven

describes one of SOF's roles in great power competition as, "solving problems by pulling together the interagency and military in a way that nobody else can."<sup>14</sup> SOF was successful in places such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria not because of special equipment or new weapons systems, but because of its willingness to incorporate any outside entity, organization, or individual that could contribute to mission accomplishment into its SOF team. The cultural predisposition to accept input, ideas, and contributions not only from any level within but also external to SOF may well be SOF's best asset in adjusting to great power competition.

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## FEATURES OF THE GREAT POWER ARENA

As we discussed in our previous article, *Special operations forces and great power competition*, SOF faces significantly different landscape in great power competition. Core aspects such as the scope, scale, and speed of competition are all likely to be much different than found in familiar operations of the last two decades.

**Scope:** Adversaries are gaining an advantage by using entirely other means—without fighting directly, they are attacking democracy, stealing critical technologies, undermining alliances and institutions, and coercing partners.

**Scale:** Society, technology, and warfare are changing in ways that are revolutionary, not evolutionary. The great power arena will not be limited to battlefields, but include business boardrooms, epicenters of innovation, financial institutions, information mediums, and other areas critical to gaining influence, maintaining advantage, and asserting leverage.

**Speed:** Technology like the internet, novel forms of communication, and data processing have accelerated the pace at which information is collected, analyzed, and acted upon from boardrooms to battlefields. Great power competitors will have to compete in this hastened environment.

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# Don't let strategy become breakfast

WHILE SHIFTING ITS mission focus to address great power competition won't be new to SOF—SOF changed its mission effectively following 9/11—or require changing the core of its culture, this added focus will require some change to the secondary cultural traits across the enterprise. Even though culture reigns as one of SOF's greatest attributes, SOF leaders can't let it completely eat strategy for breakfast. SOF needs to strategically plan for how its people will operate and what they need to be successful, which includes evaluating culture.

Answers to those questions are going to affect the culture and the training pipeline. The trick is to recognize the shift before our current skills or training are obsolete.”<sup>15</sup>

**What does the special operator of tomorrow look like? What skills will they need? How will they use new technologies like artificial intelligence, cyber, small drones, and others?**

## It's going to take new skills and new people ...

Missions in great power competition—such as deploying a cyber payload against an adversary's communications network or covertly setting up an electronic warfare system on a tiny Pacific atoll—may look very different from today's SOF missions. Imagining the person executing those missions may conjure up images very different from today's bearded operator in a short-sleeve shirt and baseball hat. Certainly, some new missions will require new skills. But exactly what skills? And who will have them?

That is the question that CMSgt Smith has been pondering. “What does the special operator of tomorrow look like? What skills will they need? How will they use new technologies like artificial intelligence, cyber, small drones, and others?

## ... Which means diversity of thought and skills

In some sense, diversity is not news. Diversity in the form of “jointness,” or bringing together all the services, is already a SOF competency. In fact, ADM McRaven sees the recent success of many former SOF operators taking on positions of leadership outside of SOF as proof of its prevalence in SOF culture. “SOF personnel are brought up with the value of diversity of people, of thought, even of the interagency. All of these traits just happen to be what makes a good commander, and SOF personnel have been steeped in that form of jointness.”

Expanding from jointness to even wider definitions of diversity can significantly increase the diversity of thought that is so important for a future where near peer adversaries make familiar ways of

operating impossible. Norway's experience with their *Jegertroppen*, or hunter troop, provides one example. The soldiers of this all-female SOF unit go through much of the same training as their male counterparts, and aside from being better shooters on the whole, they also bring new approaches to problems. In one training evolution designed to induce an ambush, forcing exhausted trainees to fight their way out, instructors were intrigued to see female trainees recognize the situation and simply avoid the ambush area entirely. It was the first time in nearly 30 years that a trainee class had not stumbled into the ambush—the female warriors had outthought their male instructors.<sup>16</sup>

Diversity doesn't necessarily mean every SOF member needs to be capable of jumping out of airplanes or kicking in doors, and neither does it mean lowering the bar. As ADM McRaven notes, SOF requires diversity across the enterprise that "maximizes what SOF members bring in terms of skill sets." In great power competition, missions will likely require a much broader spectrum of skills than countering violent extremism does. Diversity is a means to ensure the force is populated with operators who *collectively* possess the necessary skills, experiences, and characteristics to successfully meet the new scale, scope, and speed in the future great power arena. The challenge for SOF leaders will be to determine how to achieve that kind of diversity.

## Flexibility and introspection from every individual

Great power competition does not demand complete and wholesale change of SOF culture, but nor does it allow everything to remain the same. While commitment to mission and an unconventional mindset must remain, a new mission demands some new secondary cultural traits. As one example, decades of targeting extremists in uncontested theaters have inculcated a strong action-oriented bias across the SOF formation—an approach that may not translate well to the more nuanced, strategic landscape of great power competition. The current commander of USSOCOM, GEN Rich Clarke, has encouraged SOF leaders to "shift from a bias toward action, to a bias toward understanding." Successfully merging the old with the new requires each individual to be flexible and introspective.

CMSgt Smith describes the tension between the old and the new in SOF culture as a push and pull between competency and character. "When you are the most competent at something, you rarely want to change because you are the best. That is where character comes in: You have to have the introspection to know when you need to change and the discipline to do it. If you're unwilling to be introspective and evolve based on whatever our nation needs, we will not have a place for you in SOF."<sup>17</sup>

# Barriers to culture change

CULTURE CHANGE AND introspection can be difficult for any organization, let alone one that is constantly deployed across the globe.

To provide more time and space for that introspection, SOF leadership has worked hard to reduce and right size ad hoc forward deployed command and control structures, enforce and achieve dwell ratios, reinvigorate validation of OCONUS operational requirements and stem the extraneous demand on SOF for missions that can be accomplished by conventional forces, allies, or partners.

However, the shifting strategic environment is still pushing the SOF enterprise into a dilemma: it must focus on countering violent extremism, yet continue to prepare for great power competition. Called the “innovator’s dilemma” because these two demands call for very different approaches, this has tripped up some of the strongest organizations precisely because they were the strongest.<sup>18</sup>

According to CMSgt Smith, “because about every five years is a generation inside the military, SOF is on its fourth generation of operators focused on countering violent extremism.”<sup>19</sup> These are operators who’ve “grown only to know deployment schedules,” leaving them with little time to think introspectively about the unit, its culture, or its collective performance outside of the deployment.<sup>20</sup> Operational tempo and an existing culture that emphasizes completing the mission before all else has essentially left the SOF community without the ability to take a proverbial breath and think more critically about how mission cadence is affecting their teams, units, and enterprise. Such introspection is what CMSgt Smith deems critical

for any winning team.<sup>21</sup> Yet, the SOF community has had little time to do it.

In addition to high operational tempo, the SOF enterprise has seen significant growth since 9/11 in both people and resources. A greater abundance of resources and a growing sense of SOF’s importance as the “go-to” military tool for countering violent extremism has the potential to undermine its culture. ADM McRaven notes, “We had every piece of equipment imaginable, and, to some degree, I think that affects the culture in a negative way. Resourcing is a balance, but I do think it can take a little of the humility away from SOF operators.”<sup>22</sup> The recent USSOCOM Comprehensive Review from March 2020 found that a sense of entitlement started as early as selection, noting that the “special treatment and facilities” during assessment and selection programs “possibly foster an unhealthy sense of entitlement.”<sup>23</sup> Dr. Danielsen sees this as exposing a potential imbalance in the underlying priorities of SOF. “The first SOF truth is ‘humans are more important than hardware.’ To honor this truth, SOF needs to start investing far more in their ‘software’—the people and culture—not only more hardware.”<sup>24</sup>

The growth in personnel poses an equally fundamental challenge to SOF culture. The culture is largely transmitted one-on-one during selection, training, and missions. Growth in end-strength can thus make it more difficult for experienced SOF leaders to effectively reach every operator and impart hard-earned cultural lessons across the SOF enterprise. The result is that it’s often difficult to strike the right balance between confidence and humility. According to ADM McRaven, “...we want SOF operators to have a little swagger but always

be smart enough to realize that the enemy is good too.”<sup>25</sup> As a student of special operations history, McRaven suggests that “historically, those operations that failed did so because they were not conventional enough—that is, not disciplined or deliberate enough. You can be unconventional in your thinking, but you need to be rigid in planning and execution. If you get cocky or complacent, war will kick your tail.”<sup>26</sup>

This sentiment was shared by CSM McCauley who notes that hubris is a very dangerous thing and that leaders needed to message that.<sup>27</sup> That balance can be hard to hold when SOF operators are constantly deployed, constantly the center of attention and resources, and often away from the senior leadership responsible for holding individuals accountable.<sup>28</sup>



# Accomplishing the cultural transformation mission

**W**HAT CAN SOF leaders do to ensure SOF culture retains what makes the organization so valuable while adding what is necessary to succeed in the great power competition mission?

The short answer is doubling down on the aspects of SOF culture that have always made it successful: commitment to accomplishing the mission and thinking differently to solve problems. If leaders can sustain that cultural core, junior personnel will innovate to find solutions. Then the organization simply needs to effectively empower those junior personnel to adapt to any new mission or challenge and embrace diversity, allowing some cultural traits to change naturally in the process. As CSM McCauley puts it, "SOF doesn't respond to change, it drives change."<sup>29</sup>

## Cultivate the right individual traits

### Stay humble

Each of our interviewees agreed that humility and an eagerness to learn were critical to SOF. Knowing that no matter how good you are at a task, that there is always someone better somewhere or something new to be learned, is at the center of what allows individual operators to find the balance between confidence and humility.

- **What SOF can do today:** Leadership needs to find ways to support humility and a desire to learn in their troops. Showing is always more effective than telling, so rather than courses in introspection or mindfulness, leadership should

exhibit those practices and make room in their everyday practices for self-reflection and even a healthy dose of productive self-criticism.

### Reduce the burden

Introspection is difficult when you are on the front lines dealing with the task at hand. As CMSgt Smith describes, "The max press of the last 20 years has meant SOF has not been able to take the time and space away to find that introspection." That time and space also allows for more one-on-one time with leadership, an important mechanism for culture transmission in organizations like SOF where shared experience is such an important factor.

- **What SOF can do today:** Changing tempo also requires changing the incentive structure. Time overseas and training courses completed can't set the benchmark for what makes a good or promotable SOF operator. Near-peer warfare will require rounded SOF operators whose training, experience, and education extend outside SOF to reflect an appreciation for the breadth of the challenge posed by great power competition.

### Tell the right stories

Most military units are still oral cultures, and their stories contain their collective memories. SOF operators are often great storytellers and their stories and what they tell are vital. "Leaders are the custodians of culture," as CSM McCauley puts it. The stories leaders tell—whether about their own hard-earned experiences or others' positive actions—are important to communicate what SOF is all about.

- **What SOF can do today:** Finding and telling positive stories internally is an important way leadership can amplify the positive outliers and reinforce the positive aspects of SOF culture. Telling stories outside of SOF is equally important. Finding the right stories to tell the general public is critical in building public trust and attracting the next generation of SOF. Will future SOF candidates, candidates not traditionally assessed and selected—such as hackers, native linguists, women, and other underrepresented groups—be able to imagine themselves as members of SOF? That path is being paved today by the hundreds of women who already serve in SOF units at the tactical edge. Leadership should define a vision of the future SOF that shows where the force is headed and what kind of individuals it seeks to fill its ranks.

## Create a listening and learning organization

### Align all elements of culture

Culture is most effective when all the elements mutually support and reinforce each other. When the tangible artifacts and policies of the organization reinforce the desired group mindset and skill set, they encourage healthy individual behaviors. When these elements are out of alignment, it can stress individuals, lead to poor organizational climate, and ultimately compromise mission performance. This becomes even more important as SOF tries to balance the shift to great power competition while not abandoning its current missions countering violent extremist operations, requiring different units to perhaps take on different missions and different cultural traits.

- **What SOF can do today:** Much like an after-action report can identify misalignment between planning and execution of a mission, SOF leaders should conduct culture audits

more frequently and at different levels to help ensure that all the elements of culture are properly facilitated for a unit's assigned mission. Building on the recent SOF Comprehensive Review, culture audits and systematic cultural self-reflections can help the SOF enterprise solve the "innovator's dilemma" and become an *ambidextrous organization*, one that can both efficiently execute today's tasks while preparing to innovatively tackle tomorrow's, even when they require very different capabilities.<sup>30</sup>

### Get an external perspective

Finally, we all find it difficult to see our own situations objectively. CMSgt Smith used an analogy from the Commanding General of US Air Force Special Operations Command, Lieutenant General Slife, who compares it to "no longer noticing the ugly yellow wallpaper in your house."<sup>31</sup> Much like the wallpaper, it often takes someone coming in from outside to remind you that maybe yellow paisley is not the best color for a room. While a good interior decorator can provide that external perspective for your home, a good social anthropologist and tools such as organizational network analysis can help adapt organizational culture.

- **What SOF can do today:** External perspectives can help leaders effectively communicate needed change to the group. The constant rotation of leaders in the military can often lead to personnel simply waiting out change they don't like. If leaders want their changes to be implemented, it is critical to use anthropologists, organizational behavior specialists, surveys, and tools such as culture assessments to develop an accurate understanding of the current culture.

SOF is truly unique. From the Air Commandos, frogmen, Jedburghs, and Rangers of World War II through to today, SOF's culture has made it successful. For decades, its core culture has

allowed it to adapt to different missions: from World War II to Cold War competition, to counterinsurgency operations in Vietnam, post-Cold War stability operations, and up to the post-9/11 era. Ultimately, SOF is made up of problem-solvers who thrive on being relevant to

the hardest problems facing the nation. Senior leaders can ensure that SOF successfully transitions to the future operating environment by continuing to empower SOF operators to innovate and explore unique solutions, while keeping the force aligned with its core cultural values.

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### **GENERAL CLARKE ON A FOUNDATION FOR SUCCESS**

Current USSOCOM commander, GEN Rich Clarke, has frequently extolled the core cultural traits of the joint SOF community provided that they are underpinned by discipline, accountability, and appropriate priorities. Speaking to newly graduated Navy SEALs last year, GEN Clarke guided them to embrace the SEALs' cultural focus on teamwork but to "never allow a disordered loyalty to an individual or team to obscure the values, commitment, and trust with [their] service, with SOCOM, and with the nation."<sup>32</sup> Throughout his tenure in command, Clarke's most pointed message to SOF has been on the importance of the trust engendered by unwavering character and competence.

As previously noted, stringent SOF selection and accession processes provide fertile ground for cultivating both character and competence. During USSOCOM's recent Special Forces Industry Conference, GEN Clarke reiterated the need to stringently prioritize SOF activities in order to sustain a force that is ready, adaptive, and disciplined. On the topic of USSOCOM's Comprehensive Review, Clarke emphasized the importance of balancing preparation for employment and deployment with a commitment to grow ethical SOF who exhibit sound judgment.<sup>33</sup> At its core, the results of the Comprehensive Review will further increase SOF's investment in developing current and future leaders. While discussion on future conflict frequently focuses on technology, SOF's approach to preparing for the ambiguity of tomorrow's challenges remains firmly committed to their first and most enduring organizational truth: Humans are more important than hardware.

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## Endnotes

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