



Grey Wars: A Contemporary History of U.S. Special Operations

by Nancy W. Collins.

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In the words of Eliot Cohen, “elite units of the guerrilla, counter guerrilla, and commando type offer politicians in democracies both a tool of policy and a source of fantasy.”¹ In *Grey Wars*, military historian Nancy Collins² chronicles the development of US special operations from the late 1970s to recent actions in Afghanistan, the Middle East, and elsewhere. She tells a story of disastrous defeats, shattered hopes, and strategic shifts, and also explains how the 9/11 attacks spawned idealized superheroes of the global war on terrorism.

Collins chose the title “Grey Wars” for a reason. Since World War II and the Cold War, warfare has evolved in a grey zone between peace and war in its traditional sense. Hence, the growing need for a flexible, well trained military able to succeed in the absence of clear distinctions between war and peace, friend and foe, warrior and non-warrior.

Collins tracks the development of US special operations beginning with the revolutionary shifts across the Middle East from the late 1970s onward; 1979 stands out as a “year zero,” marked by a Muslim religious awakening and the advent of modern jihadism. Hostage takings were already a manifest threat, as evidenced in Munich (1972), Entebbe (1976), and Mogadishu (1977). The year 1979, however, saw hostage seizures as well as the assassination of the US ambassador to Afghanistan in Kabul and the occupation of Mecca by a radical Muslim sect. These episodes culminated in the occupation of the American embassy in Tehran and the ensuing attempt to negotiate the release of fifty-three US citizens taken hostage there. Eagle Claw, a complex and risky rescue operation, was aborted after two helicopters broke down and a third crashed with a C-130 transport aircraft in the Iranian desert, killing eight US soldiers.

The debacle at Desert One produced a major shake-up in the US special operations establishment. The failure to build a hostage rescue capability “on the fly” soon sparked “major investments in U.S. counterterrorism capabilities—and a new form of U.S. Special Operation Forces” (27).

However, that next hostage rescue operation never materialized. Instead, by the early 1990s, the Cold War was succeeded by numerous conflicts in ungoverned spaces along the “conflict crescent” from the Horn of Africa to Central Asia, via the Balkans and the Middle East. In 1993, a US military contingent, augmented by a special operations task force, deployed to Mogadishu as part of a United Nations effort to stave off the consequences of the Somalian state collapse.

Feuding clans and an expanding mandate, however, drew a UN force deeper into the ongoing civil war. A spiral of violent encounters climaxed (3–4 Oct. 1993) when US special operators tried

1. *Commandos and Politicians: Elite Military Units in Modern Democracies* (Cambridge: Harvard Ctr for Int'l Affairs, 1978) 101.

2. Collins is a senior fellow at West Point's Modern War Institute and chairs the Defense and Security Seminar at Columbia University. *Grey Wars* is her first book.

to capture local warlord and strongman Mohamed Farrah Aidid during a high-level meeting of local clan leaders. The hunt turned into a disaster when two helicopters were shot down and nineteen soldiers were killed in a major blow to the US special forces establishment.

As portrayed in Mark Bowden's book *Black Hawk Down*,³ a former undersecretary of defense advised: "Don't let these SOF guys go through the door because they're dangerous.... They are going to do something to embarrass the country" (54). The United States vowed never to get involved in a large-scale manhunt again. That vow lasted less than ten years. After 9/11, the United States soon settled on a military response against those responsible. "America's finest warriors; the force of choice; and the hallmark of U.S. national security in the twenty-first century" (63) were charged with destroying the al-Qaeda network and, ultimately, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

While the global war on terrorism steadily expanded, 9/11's mastermind was conspicuously absent. Collins follows Usama bin Laden from Afghanistan to Sudan, back to Afghanistan, and then into hiding after 9/11, eventually in Abbottabad, Pakistan. She details the action that led to his killing by a Navy SEAL operator.

The Abbottabad raid seemed to vindicate US special operations forces and the massive resources spent on wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere. The author titles the chapter on the raid "America's Superheroes." But the killing of bin Laden did little to alter the situation on the ground. At the time of the raid, al-Qaeda had already been beaten militarily and bin Laden rendered irrelevant to the war on the other side of the Afghan border. Several US military leaders believed that the fight had transitioned from "known and understood enemies to more splintered adversaries and enemies dispersed among civil populations across metropolitan centers and rural lands" (165).

The war in Afghanistan redefined US special operations, as the lines between conventional and special operations dissolved. They developed an ever more expansive portfolio with a stress on active capture/kill operations. Hence, Collins views the next stage of special operations through the lens of combat in the Tangi valley in Afghanistan.

In April 2011, US Army operations at Combat Outpost (COP) Tangi were abruptly ended. The futile grind of years of continuous fighting had been "an exercise in absurdity" (170), as one soldier put it. COP Tangi was not abandoned, however. Instead, American special operators took over the fight. Just a few months later, in August 2011, an Army CH-47D Chinook helicopter, call sign Extortion 17, was loaded with thirty US and eight Afghan soldiers for a capture/kill operation. During the chopper's final approach to the landing field, a rocket-propelled grenade hit it, killing all thirty-eight men aboard. Less than a month later, COP Tangi was abandoned to the Taliban.

It was another setback, but this time the strategy remained unchanged and the fight continued in various place around the globe. This represented "a strategic risk-and-management approach to terrorism—a problem to be managed rather than a war to be won" (207).

Collins adopts the vantage point of the combatant commands—Special Operations Command and Central Command respectively—both located at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida. She paints a picture of life at the base that will be familiar to anyone who has visited a high-level military command: orderly, purposeful, precise, and meticulous. It is also utterly detached from the chaos and confusion of battle. An industrial-scale production of PowerPoint presentations creates an illusion of understanding and control, when in reality the enemy always has a say.

3. Subtitle: *Operation Gothic Serpent* (NY: Atlantic Monthly Pr, 1999).

Counterinsurgency may seem like an appealing theory but considering the chasm between available resources and its social, economic, and military requirements, it is also utterly unrealistic.

Collins covers more recent events—the rise and fall of the Islamic State and the killing of Qasem Soleimani—but only summarily. Threats emanating from other states and great powers appear only on her book's second-last page. Considering that state or state-sponsored irregular and hybrid threats are dominant features of international security and that special operations have assumed new roles to counter these challenges, these are issues the author should have discussed in more detail. And, too, by an irony of fate, *Grey Wars* appeared only weeks before the fall of Kabul and the Taliban's recapture of political power in Afghanistan.

These reservations aside, Nancy Collins has written an articulate, comprehensive, and thoroughly documented (with seventy-seven pages of endnotes) exposé of US special operations over the last four decades. *Grey Wars* makes it abundantly (and painfully) clear that the operational excellence of special operations forces does not easily translate into strategic results or political victories.