

An Interview with

Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict

Thomas W. O'Connell



JFQ: For those who are not familiar with the breadth and depth of your duties, could you speak to your mission and responsibilities?

Secretary O'Connell: Title 10, Section 138 of the U.S. Code requires my position to provide civilian oversight of special operations activities of the Department of Defense [DOD]. As a principal staff assistant and civilian advisor to the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and the Secretary of Defense on special operations matters, I am responsible for ensuring that our Special Operations Forces [SOF] of the Army, Navy, Air Force, and now Marines are appropriately tasked and employed and that senior policymakers, to include our interagency partners, understand SOF capabilities as well as their limitations. I provide policy oversight of U.S. Special Operations Command [USSOCOM] programs and am dedicated to ensuring our elements continue to be the best trained, best equipped, most flexible, and effective fighting force available to our country. I consult closely with General Doug Brown, the commander

of USSOCOM, on a wide range of special operations policy issues. I am also an executive member and co-chair of USSOCOM's board of directors, the command's executive resource body.

In the interagency arena, I, along with selected members of the Joint Staff, serve as the Defense Department's representation on the Counter-Terrorism Security Group, the National Security Council staff body that considers national counterterrorism issues and potential responses. This oversight, advisory, interagency response, and consultation effort helps us shape a SOF program and budget that stresses force readiness and sustainability and provides sufficient force structure to meet the demands of the geographic combatant commanders and General Brown in his role as the supported commander in the global war on terrorism.

My office also works with other DOD components to institutionalize our capabilities for stability operations, which involve such tasks as providing basic security, humanitarian assistance, and essential ser-

vices, as well as rule of law and governance in failed or at-risk states of strategic importance. The recent issue of a new DOD Directive on Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction Operations underscores the importance that DOD attaches to this mission. The department must be prepared to fill critical gaps in stability operations when civilian partners are not available or when the security situation precludes civilian involvement. We are concurrently working with a range of partners, within the U.S. Government and among international and nongovernmental organizations [NGOs], as well as host nation counterparts, to bolster the capacity of civilian providers to satisfy these fundamental social requirements, which are critical to achieving long-term security in the current environment.

The recent passage of Sections 1206 and 1207 of the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2006 provides the department with new latitude. Both sections recognize the need for the Department of Defense to operate in close coordination with the Department of State on matters related to building partnership capacity and to provide DOD support for reconstruction, security, and stabilization assistance for foreign nations. Both Sections 1206 and 1207 authorize expenditures to support these two

On September 14, 2006, Col David H. Gurney, USMC (Ret.), and Dr. Jeffrey D. Smotherman of Joint Force Quarterly interviewed the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, the Honorable Thomas W. O'Connell, in his office at the Pentagon.

programs that provide the ability for other nations to counter threats against their government, to provide support to global efforts to combat terrorism, and to create those forces that serve to deny terrorists the ability to recruit, train, and plan their operations.

Finally, I oversee the department's counternarcotics mission. This is a two-pronged mission. The first mission is to detect and monitor aerial and maritime drug trafficking

have existed for some period, and they certainly started well before the events of September 11, 2001. The significant change over a period of years has been the extent of networking and support between different groups, which has increased the difficulty of dealing with them. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld understands the need to address an entire network structure along with the underlying conditions that provide

terrorists and insurgents who are much more transnational in their approach and networking than ever before. Another personal goal that I still hold and have not wavered from is to ensure that the forces available to us are used in the best manner possible. More often than not, this means thinking in nontraditional terms to ensure that we are able to address problems in a cross-cutting fashion whenever possible. One simple example is the leverage from our work in counternarcotics that helps attack terrorist finances and their means of smuggling contraband.

A third personal goal that I still hold from the day I took my oath is to ensure that our SOF, our civilian work force, and their families are given credit for their service to the Nation and that they are treated with dignity and respect. I always learn a great deal when I listen to them. They can be brutally candid and that can actually lead to powerful forces for change and improvement. One of the four SOF truths is that humans are more important than hardware. If nothing else, I hope that my legacy will be that I believed in and supported the human element in SOF.

JFQ: *The enemy in the war on terror uses a number of techniques to prevent the United States and its allies from bringing their superior technology and conventional forces to bear on them: they collocate with civilians and religious structures, target innocents, torture and murder captives, and commit suicide. Pundits say that we, just as the British did in the Revolutionary War, constrain ourselves with rules that will spell our defeat. Why are they wrong?*

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within the transit zone. To do this, we use DOD systems and work with nations in or near global smuggling routes to gather information on narcotics networks. We analyze the information and collate it with other sources of information available to the department and provide it to U.S. and foreign security forces to disrupt the networks.

The second mission is to train and equip U.S. and foreign security forces to build capacity to disrupt narcotics networks. This mission area fits neatly in the low-intensity conflict spectrum of activities and is critical to achieving long-term stability in the current strategic environment. The ties between narcotics traffickers, terrorist groups, and insurgent groups are clear; they assist each other in financing operations and in smuggling activities involving people and contraband, and are clearly networked to pose a threat to the security of the United States and to the stability and security of many countries in the world. Significant recent seizures and arrests conducted by the Drug Enforcement Agency and Coast Guard were assisted by Defense Department assets and activities, including the Joint Interagency Task Force-South at Key West, Florida.

JFQ: *We have been heavily engaged in the global war on terror or Long War for over 5 years now. Has the Secretary's mandate changed in the 3 years since you assumed your duties? Have your personal goals for this tour of duty altered?*

Secretary O'Connell: The phrase *Long War* can be somewhat misleading. The strategy and tactics used by terrorist and insurgent groups along with criminals

either active or passive support to terrorists and insurgents. The Department of Defense now has almost every activity working issues related to the war on terror: the Joint Staff, all combatant commands, the Services, defense agencies, and the DOD staff. This issue has transcended the original SO/LIC [Special Operations/Low-Intensity Conflict] charter. The proposed reorganization of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy will likely reflect an entirely new construct for dealing with the war on terror.

My personal goals have not changed since assuming my duties over 3 years ago. What was evident to me at the time was the need for increased cooperation within the Department of Defense, within the inter-agency community, and with our partners both domestically and overseas. We have helped to improve the level of cooperation with all of those elements. Cooperation is absolutely essential to make progress against



Coalition forces and civilians board Japan Air Self-Defense Force C-130 at Sather Base, Iraq

447th Air Expeditionary Group (Bryan Boucharid)

Secretary O'Connell talks with senior military advisor



JFQ (David H. Gurney)

Secretary O'Connell: The pundits are wrong because history has proven that despicable persons and groups that use the tactics you describe have never succeeded in maintaining control over a nation or population for any great length of time. As a democracy, and as a nation committed to freedom and dedicated to good governance with a sensible rule of law, we would be foolish to adopt the counterproductive tactics that our current enemy is using. The tactics used by our foes

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are abhorrent and will eventually cause the enemy to lose support and hopefully self-destruct. To hasten their demise, our national strategy calls for significant measures such as denying sanctuary and dealing with underlying conditions that may provide our enemy with temporary support.

In Iraq, our troops, in concert with Iraqi security forces, have the goal of establishing security to allow the government there time to mature and to institute good governance in their nation while rebuilding the economy and infrastructure of society. In-depth studies of successful counterinsurgency operations prove the need to avoid excesses and to follow sensible rules. In classic insurgencies, the insurgents usually offer an alternative to the government. What is the Iraqi insurgent alternative? Chaos? Anarchy? Sectarian violence?

Slaughter of their neighbors? At some point the Iraqi people should reject those alternatives outright.

JFQ: *General Brown has told us that USSOCOM has developed a series of plans to synchronize the efforts of the geographic combatant commanders in order to eliminate seams for terrorists to exploit. We have simultaneously received numerous manuscripts that call for a single unified commander for the Long War. Why do we not have one?*

Secretary O'Connell: As I previously stated, the term *Long War* can be misleading and open to misinterpretation. We do have a single unified commander for war. That person is the Commander in Chief. He exercises his leadership through the development of national strategies and tasks all the elements of the executive branch to contribute their part through the issuance of Presidential directives and Executive orders.

Our nation has been served well through separation of powers along with the attendant system of checks and balances. As it pertains to terrorism, dealing with networked terrorists means that we must consider regional as well as individual nation-state concerns as we attack the network. This requires an extended interagency approach that may emphasize diplomacy in one location, law enforcement elsewhere, and military intervention in another. USSOCOM took the lead in developing plans to address military operations to synchronize the war on terror. These plans also involved DOD, the Joint Staff, the combatant commands, and others including our interagency partners. These classified plans clearly recognize the need for an interagency effort to prosecute the war on terror. Synchronization of effort between the combatant commands on any issue breaks new ground. I am satisfied that USSOCOM has worked diligently and effectively with the other combatant commands and the Joint Staff to develop a methodology to synchronize the war on terror. In due course, USSOCOM will have to develop an interagency approach, and I believe they are already there.

JFQ: *Is terrorism today really low-intensity conflict? If so, does WMD [weapons of*

mass destruction] proliferation not threaten to make it high intensity?

Secretary O'Connell: Terrorism is a tactic or a method that is eminently suited for use by individuals or small groups. When conducted in this manner, terrorism is low-intensity conflict as it falls short of warfare with another nation-state. Terrorist use of WMD still would fall into the category of low-intensity conflict, although the results might cause a large number of deaths and have other impacts on our infrastructure or government. The use of WMD would be elevated to a high-intensity conflict—that is, war against one or more nations—when another nation or nations sponsor the use of WMD by a terrorist group or use it against another nation.

JFQ: *Would you like to see any changes in joint professional military education [JPME] emphasis for developing military professionals prompted by the war on terror?*

Secretary O'Connell: I very definitely would like to see changes. I commend the Joint Staff and the Services for reviewing what needs to be done and for directing ongoing modifications to JPME. In short, more education is needed on the phenomena of terrorism and insurgency, on future threats and how to deal with them, and how a joint, combined, coalition, and interagency approach to these threats can provide a way ahead. We need to educate our leaders better in different approaches to terrorism and insurgency and to demonstrate how they can blend coalition efforts with our own forces. The use of civil affairs, information operations, to include psychological operations, and building partner capacity are important subjects embodied in counterinsurgency operations. In conjunction with USSOCOM, we have worked to ensure that education, not just training, remains a significant priority. The Joint Special Operations University has expanded its offerings to address shortcomings and has actively reached out to the senior Service schools to increase education on these types of subjects.

My office also oversees the Regional Counterterrorist Fellowship Program, which seeks to develop an international network of counterterrorist practitioners through a variety of educational offerings. Since the beginning of the program a few years ago, over 7,500 foreign military and governmental

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officials have participated in its offerings. We clearly recognize the fact that coalition efforts are more critical to a successful strategy than are unilateral operations.

JFQ: *In the war on terror, everybody seems to be a Monday morning quarterback. Some of our allies pay lip service and then row gently in the opposite direction for parochial interests. Few learn of our greatest successes, and pundits seem outraged only on the enemy's behalf. How is morale in this environment, and is this not increasingly reminiscent of public disenchantment during Vietnam?*

Secretary O'Connell: We certainly have had our share of Monday morning quarterbacking, but there has also been a very strong and significant body of people who support our efforts against insurgency and terrorism. Often, their efforts to learn lessons, to adapt, and to improve are construed to mean that they are against our efforts. That is unfortunate, and I urge my staff to be open-minded and to accept constructive criticism.

With respect to our allies, we can easily forget that they may not have the resources to sustain efforts. We also sometimes forget that democratic countries have the right to determine their own paths. We often fail to see how other nations continue to support efforts to quell insurgency and terrorism. Here are three short examples: the United Arab Emirates has done excellent work in providing troops to Afghanistan along with sponsoring reconstruction efforts in that country, Lebanon, and other locations. France and Canada are fighting alongside our troops in Afghanistan. Japan pushed the legal limits of their constitution by placing troops in Iraq.

As for morale, there is absolutely no comparison between Vietnam and what is happening today. Our troops are challenged with a high operations tempo and repeated deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. There are psychological stresses associated with that tempo. However, their morale is still high. In part, this is attributable to the dedication found in our all-volunteer force. In addition, I know of numerous efforts where the American



Reconnaissance Marines during freefall parachute training in Djibouti, Exercise Image Nautilus

U.S. Marine Corps (Robert A. Strifke)

public is very quietly supporting our troops and their families in many ways. The polls show that the public is still behind our military, unlike Vietnam, and that the extent of antiwar sentiment is far less than what was seen in Vietnam. There is an amazing support network among the American people that operates largely below the radar screen and out of the media spotlight. To see an example, go to www.americasupportsyou.com. One of the high honors of holding this office involves attending SOF funerals at Arlington. When you look into the eyes of survivors and listen to their words, you detect no sense of quitting. In fact, there is an inspiring sense of wanting to get the job done. Morale is very high.

dealing with many disparate and complex issues that require a large number of governmental agencies, different countries, numerous private companies, and NGOs to achieve our goals. Warfare is inherently inefficient because the environment is difficult to control and is subject to the vagaries of human interaction. Whereas we can attain a high level of efficiency and coordination in a controlled environment, such as the manufacturing sector, we cannot expect the same degree of coordination and efficiency in warfare. Nonetheless, one of the attributes displayed since 9/11 is the ability to work toward better coordination of effort. We have made good progress, but we should not accept the status quo and should seek continual improvement. Another key element is the absolute ability of U.S. personnel to innovate when it comes to combat. I am continually amazed at their creative approach to very tough situations. No other armed forces in the world can match their creativeness.

There are other efforts not only within DOD but also at the interagency and international levels to improve coordination. A few examples are the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organization, the National Counter-Terrorism Center, and the Atlantic Alliance efforts in Afghanistan.

JFQ: *The President has observed that "the United States will not wait to be attacked again, but will go after the terrorists where they live." Why is it that we have yet to see USSOCOM leading an effort as a supported combatant command?*

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JFQ: *Numerous Federal agencies, allies, and partners in industry are working unique aspects of the war on terror. Are these disparate efforts as coordinated as possible?*

Secretary O'Connell: Of course not. There is always room for improvement when it comes to coordination of effort. We are

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There are elements of USSOCOM that have been supported by forces assigned to another combatant command. Some are

classified missions. In addition, USSOCOM and the Joint Staff have worked diligently on a series of Executive orders that have been coordinated with the other combatant commands and signed by Secretary Rumsfeld. These are also classified. There seem to be any number of speculations about what *supported* means and how a supported operation would manifest itself. The term *synchronize* has a

powerful military definition. The nature of the conflict we are involved in today extends across combatant command geographic boundaries and involves numerous small operations. These operations are frequently clandestine in nature and are not visible to the public. They are occurring, they are succeeding, and USSOCOM is being supported as necessary. The President and Secretary of Defense have characterized the nature of the Islamic threat we face. I fully agree with them. The dark vision of tyranny shared by a few fanatics has boiled over across the world. The strategy of overseas engagement is bold and correct. USSOCOM will have much more to do over the next decades.

JFQ: *"The most intractable safe havens for terrorists tend to exist along international borders in Asia, Africa, and South America where there is ineffective governance," according to a fact sheet issued by the State Department. Should we feel obligated to observe sovereign borders when the host nation is ineffective?*

Secretary O'Connell: The President has stated, "Nations that harbor or support terrorists are equally guilty as the terrorists, and will be held to account." America does have ways to assist nations that have had historical success. They range from urging international participation, such as peacekeeping forces

in Lebanon, unilateral aid from the United States to a particular country, assistance in training and equipping their security forces, to softer options such as the use of civil projects to increase popular support for the existing government. All of these options respect sovereignty. In some cases, there may be great difficulty in providing direct help to a failing or failed state. Somalia is an example. Our attention in that type of situation may well swing toward containment of a conflict within that country's borders and to stem the spillover into surrounding nations.

JFQ: *What is the greatest challenge on your near-term agenda?*

Secretary O'Connell: Other than getting my wife to finish the remodeling of our home in Maine that is over budget and behind schedule, I want to build a DOD team that is capable of supporting the department across a wide range of issues. The SO/LIC staff has worked extremely hard to develop new authorities. Now we have to use them wisely to advance our capabilities to defend the Nation and eliminate our enemies.

JFQ: *We often see the President jogging with injured veterans and Secretary Rumsfeld visiting recuperating Servicemembers at Bethesda and Walter Reed. What*

special moments have come your way in the present conflict?

Secretary O'Connell: As I mentioned earlier, I have had the high honor to join USSOCOM flag and general officers in paying tribute to our fallen SOF personnel during Arlington funerals. On one recent occasion, I watched about 300 members of the 5th Special Forces Group from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, attend the Arlington funeral of a fallen member. This was a special occasion, as the deceased Special Forces noncommissioned officer was what we call an "X-ray" or a "walk-on" to the Green Beret family. A Sudanese native, this young man received his college degree from a prestigious west coast university and decided to enlist with Army Special Forces. After completing all his training, this Arabic-speaking Muslim served with the 5th Special Forces Group in Iraq, where he was killed in action during an assault on a terrorist position. The sight of so many Special Forces Soldiers standing in spit-shined boots and green berets interspersed among Muslim mourners at Arlington as they raised their hands in prayer struck me as a uniquely American military moment. I wanted to be able to tell Americans and my DOD colleagues what this moment signified. I just wish I had the skill and perspective to do so. **JFQ**

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Members of counterdrug unit board C-26B operated by Florida Air National Guard

U.S. Air Force (Shelley Gill)