



An Interview with Richard D. Clarke

JFQ: What are your priorities as commander of U.S. Special Operations Command [SOCOM]? Have these changed since you took command in 2019? If so, how and why?

General Richard D. Clarke, USA, is Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command.

General Clarke: When I came into command, I had some thoughts about priorities and where to take the command, having just come from the Joint Staff. I was also given some great guidance from Secretary [James] Mattis who put me in the position. I sat down with all the commanders and

the senior enlisted leaders, and we set the priorities.

Those priorities have largely remained unchanged: compete and win for the Nation, preserve and grow readiness, innovate for future threats, advance partnerships, and strengthen our force and family. While I would argue that the operating environment has changed in those years—and it's now clear that China is our pacing threat—these priorities are timeless for SOCOM going into the future.

JFQ: As you know, SOCOM has three Department-wide coordinating authority roles: countering violent extremist organizations [CVEO], countering weapons of mass destruction [CWMD], and the Internet-based military information support operations [MISO]. How do you see global security challenges affecting the ability of special operations forces [SOF] to perform these missions and your ability to stay ready and modernize?

General Clarke: It's important first to talk about how coordinating authority is supposed to be executed and what a coordinating authority even is. The way I look at coordinating authority is that it is to lead planning, assess, and provide recommendations. And in that role, I provide those recommendations in those three areas you just brought up. But every Service and every combatant command is critical to helping address CWMD, CVEO, and Internet-based MISO—or WebOps. They all know the information space is important.

I think we can all agree that terrorism and violent extremism aren't going away. They're still threats. But we must approach countering these threats in a sustainable way because in the long run, they are not as important as the pacing threats or those near-peer threats we're seeing today with Russian activities in Ukraine.

For the CWMD threat, I think we should all be more concerned about where that is. On the nuclear basis, everyone's seen the buildup that China has undertaken with its nuclear capabilities. For the first time in our history, we're going to have two near-peer nuclear threats.

But then look at the chem-bio [chemical-biological] aspect. On the bio side, all you have to do is look at COVID-19 and what the pandemic has done to our nation. Then if you look on the chem side, the bar has been lowered on two fronts. One is the barrier to entry. Terrorists have used sarin and mustard gas in Syria and Iraq. And we know for a fact that the capability for terrorists to use chemical agents is there.

Then we've had state actors—like Kim Jong-un—using it against a family member. There have been several instances that prove the Russians have used it against political adversaries of the Russian government outside their own soil—in a U.S. Ally's territory. We all are sure that the landscape is changing and that we must in fact prepare the joint force for those possibilities.

Finally, the other important coordinating authority is WebOps or MISO. This is critical to campaigning in the gray zone because it's below the threshold of conflict. As everyone is aware, misinformation and disinformation are being sown by many of our competitors, and the problem is only growing. We have to be able to see that in real time. But we also have to be able to counter with all elements of statecraft.

I think we're seeing great examples of that today where we, as a government, are releasing intelligence to show malign behavior and are going public with it. And once it's been released publicly, it's then being reinforced in the information space by many. It's a great example of how information operations are going to remain critical going forward—as you look at integrated deterrence and

detering our adversaries. We've all studied deterrence theories, and it is as much in the mind of the person you're trying to affect. That is important.

JFQ: Special operations are so heavily dependent on the quality of the people who carry out these missions. How are your units leveraging the diverse talents, skills, and backgrounds of your special operators and their partners while performing their missions?

General Clarke: SOF truth number one: Humans are more important than hardware. We continuously come back to that. That fact will remain inviolable. We are going to continue to recruit and retain the best talent that our nation can provide.



Special operations forces from Cyprus, Greece, Serbia, and United States board Greek CH-47 Chinook during ORION 21, June 3, 2021 (U.S. Army/Monique O'Neill)



Special Warfare Combatant-Craft Crewman candidates from Basic Crewman Selection Class 111 low-crawl under obstacle during “The Tour” at Naval Special Warfare Center in Coronado, California, June 1, 2020 (U.S. Navy/Anthony W. Walker)

Today’s challenges continue to show that the number one SOF value proposition is our people. It’s the culture of who we are—our innovative problem-solvers. We’ve been emphasizing that they’re part of a cohesive and disciplined team that’s going to accomplish some of our nation’s hardest missions.

Those dedicated and trusted professionals are forward, fighting in combat zones, but also working with allies and partners. And they’re conducting the WebOps MISO. It’s emphasizing the whole of our force.

What we’re trying to do at all times is tap into our nation’s incredibly deep pool of talent. And we welcome anyone who wants to join our formation who is capable of meeting our standards—from all walks of life.

A lot of people think about SOCOM as just the military component. In addition to 70,000 Active-duty members, we also have 10,000 civilians who are part of this team. Some of them deploy with us,

but a lot of them are technical experts—whether it’s in acquisition, technology, or procurement of our special operations equipment. We have talented professionals throughout—to include our artificial intelligence and machine learning experts that are coding and helping us develop new capabilities across the board.

We’re going to recruit and retain a very diverse force with cultural and language expertise. Inherently, we are also a joint team. If you come to SOF, you know that we’re “born purple.” I’d say we integrate with the joint force at a lower echelon than any other force.

JFQ: How do you see the special operators in relation to achieving the concept of jointness? What is the working relationship between your command and the Services that provide the capabilities you task? Do you see areas where the Services and National Guard might better leverage what special operators bring to the joint force?

General Clarke: As I said a moment ago, many say that if you come into SOF, you are born purple. We inherently work as a joint team, and we bring joint and combined solutions at a lower echelon than any other part of our joint force. This was born out of Operation *Eagle Claw* with the failed rescue attempt [of American hostages in Iran] that brought about our modern-day SOCOM.

It also addresses the realities of our adversaries’ malign behavior because we must come together to see and understand. And we need to build access and placement to reach locations that small teams can access—but with a joint capability that can help solve those problems. Because our forces are inherently joint, they can reach back into the best of the Services and bring in those lessons learned and those experiences from both the SOF and the conventional sides of the force.

One thing that we must be aware of is that SOF can’t be the easy button or the solution to everything. There have been

times when it's just more convenient or easier to say, "Let's get SOF to do it." We have to stick with our core missions.

We shouldn't be put into a conventional-type fight when we're not the appropriate tool. Back in World War II, a Ranger battalion was completely wiped out in Italy because it wasn't properly employed. If we're not careful and observant, the same type of activities could take place today. We always have to be very cognizant of that.

JFQ: As a combatant command with unique Title X authorities to develop a budget input for DOD [Department of Defense] and to direct spending, what has been your experience with Congress in advocating how you train and equip your force?

General Clarke: We as a force are more integrated, credible, and capable than ever before and that really stems from the steadfast support of Congress. Congress established SOCOM in 1987. That was against the recommendations of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. As I discussed earlier, this was born from Operation *Eagle Claw* in 1980. Senators [Sam] Nunn [D-GA] and [William] Cohen [R-ME] realized it, and they legislated it.

If you read the history of how SOCOM was created, the Services did not want to give up their own individual special operations forces that had been created. Congress realized that it needed to strengthen joint interoperability, especially for high-risk missions. Needs were emerging as terrorism was popping up around the globe.

But what Congress did that specifically made SOCOM special was the unique acquisition authority that it directed—with specific funding that didn't have to go through the Services. That was really the power behind what created SOF.

Every time I talk to Congress, I talk about their key role in this—but then how much we value the oversight of Congress along with the civilian DOD side, specifically an ASD (SO/LIC) [Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity

Conflict]. Congress directed its standup at the same time for that oversight aspect. That's an important part that aligns with the Constitution—with civilian oversight and a military accountable to civilian leadership. Congress asks me tough questions all the time, and they should. When we get congressional delegations into SOCOM headquarters—and to all our subordinates and overseas—we welcome those visits.

While we're a very small part—about 3 percent—of the DOD budget with about 2 percent of the force, Congress still pays an incredible amount of attention to us, and they should. The American public and Congress must trust in special operations forces, and we must sustain that every day.

JFQ: Many conflict zones are not traditional ones and labeling these situations has become a popular industry with names such as gray zones, asymmetric warfare, and competitions short of war. How does your command describe these challenges and plan to account for them?

General Clarke: None of us should be surprised by this. Our rivals have studied us, and they know that we have incredible and overwhelming power in our joint force. They won't challenge us directly. We expect them to seek advantage through asymmetric means. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't just keep moving along without paying attention.

SOCOM's position is that we can operate in this gray zone and counter our adversaries. We're born out of this. Go all the way back to our roots with the OSS [Office of Strategic Services] in World War II, when small teams jumped into France and helped the resistance forces.

That's one example of using asymmetric capabilities. Because at the end of the day, this is about undermining adversary confidence. They are going to think twice that their aggression can succeed or that it will be easy.

What SOF does is present multiple dilemmas. We expand those options to threaten what an adversary may hold

dear. We can place some of those adversary assets at risk. We can fight in the war around the edges without having to be directly involved. We set the conditions for that today.

Think about a place like the Baltics right now. We've been working with our Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian partners for decades in Afghanistan. But we're also with them right now in their countries training alongside them, looking at their resistance capabilities, and continuing to think about how they could, in fact, resist as nations.

I think this will be a great lesson as we look at potential conflict zones around the world—to be there before they start. Building those capabilities with our allies and partners presents an unmatched advantage. We have the culture and language capabilities and the understanding of what irregular warfare could be. For competition in the gray zone, it's not just our adversaries contending there, but SOF and the joint force can compete there as well.

JFQ: Can you discuss how you see the impact of technology that used to be solely available to nation-states and their militaries but is now available to anyone who can buy it? What ways are you working to operate in such a world?

General Clarke: There's multiple examples. Right now, one of the most pressing threats is the UAS [unmanned aerial systems] threat. These are the IEDs [improvised explosive devices] of the future. Everyone remembers 2003–2004 when the number one killer of our forces was IEDs—first in Iraq, and then it transitioned into Afghanistan. Now, an IED has wings and it can move. The wire that connected that IED or the remote device is now harder to defeat.

We're seeing our adversaries really pick up their game in this area—again starting in Iraq. You can clearly see where this technology of small UAS can grow. That's one example that is concerning.

We're also developing technologies and capabilities to counter them and then looking where we can be "left of launch" to

disrupt supply chains, transportation, [and] development before it's too late. Then we only have to defeat them "right of launch" when we're trying to shoot down the final UAS that could be coming at our forces.

The future of UAS leads to another technology—AI [artificial intelligence] and machine-learning. One example of using those and UAS together would be in swarming and remotely operated or independently operated technologies. We're really looking hard within SOCOM, training leaders in artificial intelligence and in machine-learning and exploring capabilities to counter those technologies.

The final technology I'll talk about is in the information domain. Our adversaries compete at very low cost, using misinformation and disinformation. We've got to develop technologies to counter those efforts by using AI and machine-learning to immediately identify and counter those messages before the narrative gets wide distribution. All of those are really important in today's environment.

JFQ: U.S. Special Operations Command is also unique in that it is the only combatant command with an education mission that is embodied in the Joint Special Operations University [JSOU]. How will your command leverage this evolving professional military education capability to your advantage?

General Clarke: Go back to our founding and that unique authority where we are required to oversee SOF-unique training. That's why we have a JSOU. That is tied to the broader joint education and training mission. That's still SOF truth number one: Humans are more important than hardware.

We must invest in those people by continuing to train and educate those innovative problem-solvers. JSOU sharpens the edge of SOF by investing in our junior leaders by training and developing them.

They're also specifically looking at the priorities of this command and where this command needs to go. They're developing coursework that is specific to those problems. And that unique training includes some of the

coordinating authorities—teaching specific classes on CWMD or teaching classes on the gray zone, campaigning, and integrated deterrence.

Because JSOU is on the SOCOM campus, it is deeply integrated with the staff. Our J5 and our JSOU president are closely linked for that thought process and for the development of the future SOF force. It's incredible what they're doing there. JSOU is involved in all our commanders' conferences to see where the command is going and how to be linked. I consider it one of SOCOM's most important resources in the training, equipping, and development of our force.

The other thing that JSOU does in addition to teaching is they do detailed research looking deep into some of our most vexing problems. As I talked about earlier with the J5, they're helping us solve those problems. That research is a big advantage for us, and some of it is cutting-edge. There's a huge ecosystem of civilian education programs and institutions that can really help us. They're going to places like NDU [National Defense University], but also going to Carnegie Mellon or the Fletcher School at Tufts to bring in expertise—whether on counterterrorism or WMD. JSOU really helps us in those areas, too.

JFQ: How will the rise of the U.S. Space Force affect your command and special operations forces? As a force highly dependent on what the Space Force provides, what opportunities do you see for your command to assist in how the Space Force evolves?

General Clarke: Space is a critical domain. SOF is and will remain reliant on space-based capabilities. But I also want space to view SOF as an enabler to space in the future.

I do think that a great triad can exist between cyber, space, and SOCOM. As I told Secretary [Mark] Esper as we were discussing operations in space, I said that I'd recommend we don't talk about *in* space, but we talk about this *for* space. The space capabilities start here on the terrestrial side. We have to protect our own capabilities, but we could also hold

adversaries' terrestrial base capabilities at risk.

SOF's unique access and placement can provide those opportunities in the future. We realized the importance of space and the need to continue to work very closely with SPACECOM [U.S. Space Command] and the Space Force to provide those capabilities for the joint, all-domain warfighting aspect.

JFQ: As a graduate of the National War College who has obviously been successful in your post-joint professional military education experience, looking back on that year, what advantages did National Defense University provide you? What would you recommend to the faculty to consider when developing strategy related courses for future leaders like yourself?

General Clarke: First, I thank NDU for that great year in 2006–2007. I had just finished about 5 years focused directly on combat. I had conversations about those experiences not only across the joint force but also with interagency partners and allies—to reflect on where we were going, where we'd been, and where we were going in the future. That exposure for me to all elements of our national command and infrastructure as well as our international partners was invaluable.

I had some world-class instructors who stretched me. But it was also a time to reflect and think. What I found was that year was just one step of what must be a lifelong investment in the profession and in continued study as a military professional. You cannot remain static. You must continue to read and develop. I have found that I read and study more in each subsequent year. The National War College gave me some ideas and gave me some frameworks to help look at problems into the future. JFQ