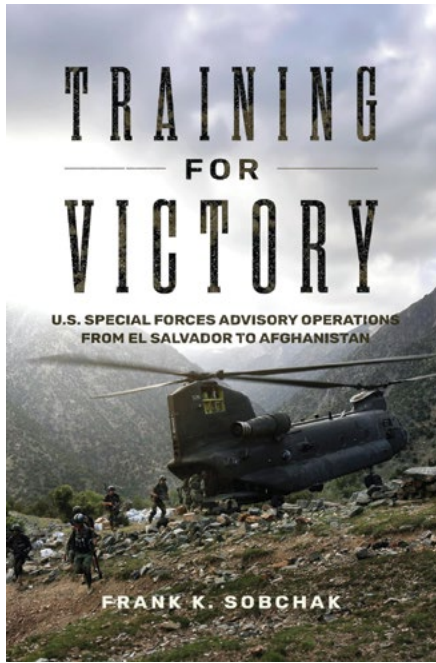




Training for Victory: U.S. Special Forces Advisory Operations from El Salvador to Afghanistan

Frank K. Sobchak
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Reviewed by Tobias Bernard Switzer

After nearly 25 years of security force assistance as a pillar of national security strategy, U.S. strategists and practitioners still struggle to predict when the tool will succeed in building up a partner nation's military and security apparatus to confront its threats. To date, the ability of any model of security force assistance to predict the results of an engagement has as much fidelity as a Magic 8 Ball.

Enter Frank Sobchak, the Chair of Irregular Warfare Studies at the Modern War Institute, with his book *Training for Victory*. In his research, a study of U.S. Special Forces advisory missions, Sobchak seeks to find the most important success factors for building capable host-nation special operations units.

Though Special Forces have advised in dozens of countries, *Training*

for *Victory* studies only five cases: El Salvador, Colombia, the Philippines, Iraq, and Afghanistan. To focus on the link between the advisory missions and outcomes, Sobchak tries to hold contextual factors constant by selecting cases where Special Forces built foreign special operations units from scratch to help the host nation deal with an insurgency.

Of the five, Colombia and Iraq stand out as exemplars, while the rest had mixed or poor results. To find out why, Sobchak looks at data about Special Forces missions and advisors and incorporates research interviews to measure five advising factors to see which were most critical in creating effective partners in combat: consistency in advisor pairing, language skills, partner-to-advisor ratio, the ability to organize the host-nation unit, and combat advising.

Training for Victory finds that the fourth factor—the ability to organize the host-nation special operations unit—is the one most strongly linked to combat effectiveness. In Iraq, Special Forces advisors had the latitude to choose the host-nation unit's leadership, screen out unsuitable candidates, and set training and deployment schedules. While the Colombians retained decisionmaking authority, they went along with most of their advisors' suggestions, ceding de facto control over many aspects of their special operations organization.

Surprisingly, Sobchak finds that high levels of language ability are not as important as the Special Forces community has believed. A lack of Arabic fluency did not prevent Special Forces from achieving spectacular results in Iraq. Special Forces advisors relied on just a handful of their teammates who could speak Arabic at a basic level, a few Iraqis who spoke English, and interpreters. Still, Iraqi special operations forces created after the 2003 invasion became a highly proficient counterterrorism unit.

In contrast, many Special Forces soldiers sent to advise Salvadoran special operations forces in the 1980s spoke fluent, if not native, Spanish, yet the units' performance was mediocre. Sobchak concludes that—counterintuitively—learning any language helps advisors understand

how to navigate other cultures and communicate with sensitivity, even if they have to speak through interpreters.

Crucially, *Training for Victory* hints at but does not fully develop a major point—that Special Forces advisors are soldiers who have been carefully screened and assessed for personality traits that thrive in unfamiliar cultures. Before they learn a language, Special Forces advisors already possess critical yet rare attributes, such as humility, curiosity, adaptability, and patience, among others.

The implication for the military Services is that they should screen candidates for military advisor, foreign area officer, and exchange roles based on personalities before sending them abroad. Matching language training with a military member who has suitable personality traits will give them the ability to flourish in many cultural contexts. No amount of time at the Defense Language Institute can fix inflexibility and impatience.

Sobchak's five advising factors can be read differently, however. None of them are independent variables; instead, they are indirect and partial measurements of two elusive variables that are the most important in advisor missions: influence and control. Four of the book's factors measure the advisors' influence—the extent to which advisors can persuade and shape the ideas and behaviors of the host nation's soldiers. These four—consistency in advisors, low partner-to-advisor ratios, language fluency, and combat advising—are factors that the United States can control, to an extent, and that yield greater influence over the host-nation unit.

The degree of sovereignty that the host nation yields to the United States—manifested in Sobchak's model as the ability of advisors to organize the unit—is control over key decisions. Although the United States can determine how much influence it wants to exert, the host nation alone decides how much sovereignty it will cede to advisors, and whether that will include the ability to determine the unit's commanders and leaders, selection standards, equipment, strategy, and operations.

Reading Sobchak's evidence in this light, it becomes clear that U.S. advisors

need both influence and control to create combat-effective units. The host nation can offer up decisionmaking authority to the United States, but if the Services frequently rotate culturally unprepared advisors, the mission will not be able to use its leverage. Conversely, well-trained advisors that spend a lot of time with the host-nation unit will not be able to move beyond rapport without control over key decisions.

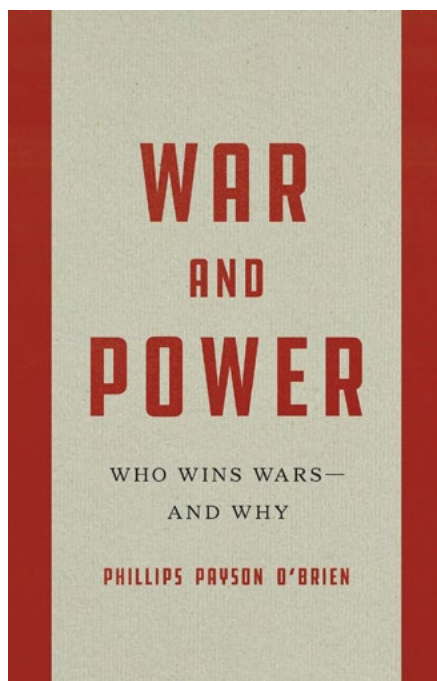
On the surface, *Training for Victory* appears relevant only to the special operations community, but a closer reading offers broader lessons to the larger security force assistance community and combatant commanders. Sobchak's framing of influence and control applies across the board. When building a foreign military capability—Special Operations Forces or otherwise—defense leaders must soberly assess how much influence and control they can assert in the advising mission.

Commanders should not wait for the outcome—the book's five cases averaged over 10 years, and in most, the work was left incomplete. However, influence and control are leading indicators of the mission's viability. Each of *Training for Victory*'s five advising factors was visible at the outset, or in the case of organizational control, emerged soon thereafter.

When the United States finds itself without the necessary influence and control of partner forces to reach its objectives, it should scale back its advising goals instead of accepting the physical and political risk that comes with combat advising and assisting. In those instances, more responsible alternatives are sending noncombat advisors to seek access and information about the host nation or withdrawing altogether.

Security force assistance is not a reliable strategy; it is a long-term relationship rife with uncertainty. Understanding the importance of influence, control, and time horizons can help the United States consider partners with forecasts better than "Ask again later."

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War and Power: Who Wins Wars—and Why

Phillips Payson O'Brien
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Reviewed by Frank Hoffman

In the run-up to the start of the Russo-Ukraine War in February 2022, numerous analysts from the U.S. Government and academic sources assessed whether Vladimir Putin would invade and, if so, what the likely outcome of a Russian invasion would be. The U.S. intelligence community accurately projected that Putin would invade, but the predictions about the war's outcome turned out to be wrong. Russia *did* invade, but Ukraine successfully deflected the brunt of Russia's aggression.

Why were the assessments about Russia's prospects for a quick victory so far off? Was it an analytic failure stemming from faulty knowledge or flawed metrics? Do we need to develop a more holistic methodology for comparing the power of protagonists? *War and Power* develops and applies such a methodology or framework.

Phillips Payson O'Brien, the author of this relevant and timely book, is a

professor of history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. In addition, O'Brien writes a provocative Substack newsletter and does podcasts on contemporary security issues. His previous works on World War II—*How the War Was Won* (2015) and *The Strategists* (2024)—are acclaimed for their serious scholarship. This current project draws on these superb histories for insights.

The central theme in *War and Power* is that God and fortune are not necessarily on the side of the biggest battalions. The war against Ukraine is just the latest example showing that there is more to success in war than having the most troops, tanks, planes, ships, or drones. The book is divided into two parts. The first half lays out a framework of five elements for assessing national power. States that possess these elements and successfully apply them are *Full Spectrum Powers*. O'Brien devotes a chapter to each element or pillar. The second half of the book strives to highlight critical distinctions during warfare. Here, the author employs examples from contemporary conflicts including the Cold War and Kosovo, as well as Iraq and Afghanistan.

O'Brien finds fault with the notion of Great Powers, which he finds places a few states on a pedestal and misrepresents the value of allies. Admittedly, the term "Great Power" comes with hints of hubris and relegates the majority of states to a second tier or worse. But it also relates to the historical impact of powerful states and empires that have shaped history. O'Brien's preferred substitute is Full Spectrum Powers, a concept that suffers from terminological defects and a strange oversight. While the term "Great Powers" connotes a rather exclusive club of major states, it implies scale and reach, not just breadth. Many nation-states have some capacity in most of the various elements of national power—think of capable middle powers today, such as France and the United Kingdom.

The first pillar of the spectrum is economic and technological strength: "The states that have been the most powerful over the past two centuries" and dominated have been "the economically largest and most technologically