“Desert One turned out to be the defining moment that led to a sea-change in American policy in the 1980s: the spread of the principle of joint operations...”

Charles G. Cogan (2003)

**Introduction**

When Iranian students seized the United States Embassy in Tehran in 1979, the U.S. government was publicly exposed for not possessing the ability to execute a successful mission to rescue the 53 American hostages. Mired in the shadow of military failures in Vietnam and focused on countering the conventional Soviet military threat, the U.S. military simply did not retain a robust and integrated special operations capability to counter such an asymmetrical threat. After diplomatic options appeared to be exhausted, the Carter Administration ordered a military-led rescue mission, dubbed Operation EAGLE CLAW, which required the use of all four services and assistance from Central Intelligence Agency operatives in Iran.

The main actors in this mission were members of a newly formed Army counterterrorism unit known as Delta Force. However, this group of highly skilled operators lacked the ability infiltrate Iran without air assets provided by the Air Force and Navy aviation. A plan was developed to insert the Delta Force soldiers into a remote location inside Iran using Air Force C-130 aircrafts, where they would rendezvous with Marine helicopter pilots needed for transportation closer to Tehran. Unfortunately, three of these helicopters experienced various technical difficulties during the flight to the rendezvous point (known as Desert One) and ultimately the mission was aborted due to the decreased likeliness of success.

In the aftermath of the failed mission, various investigations were ordered to determine what went wrong and how to prevent such a debacle in the future. The most significant panel, the Holloway Commission, was a catalyst for substantial Department of Defense legislation which would eventually revolutionize American’s ability to conduct joint operations. Congress passed the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act in 1986, and subsequently the Cohen-Nunn Amendment, which directed the creation of U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). Although Operation EAGLE CLAW by itself was a tragedy, the resulting reforms created a template for joint operations the U.S. military executes across the globe today. This essay will identify how the lessons learned from the unsuccessful rescue mission led to improved inter-service operational effectiveness. By analyzing the structural and cultural changes within the Defense Department through observational research we can identify opportunities to improve interagency operations. This is vital to integrating all capabilities needed to counter the asymmetrical threats the U.S. faces in the Global War on Terror.

**Literature Review**

A wealth ofacademic literature based on historical findings concerning post-Operation EAGLE CLAW defense reforms exists due to its significance in subsequent defense reorganization. The way the U.S. military is structured and functions today is due in part to studies and investigations that resulted from the U.S.’s inability to conduct a joint operation to rescue the hostages. However, a great deal of scholarly publications are either narrowly focused on the failures of the specific rescue operation in 1980, or on the details of the resulting congressional legislation.

USSOCOM owes its very origin to the Cohen-Nunn Amendment to the Department of Defense Authorization Act of 1987, and is thus a frequent concentration of studies concerning lessons learned from Operation EAGLE CLAW. This benefits research on improvements in inter-service operational effectiveness since USSOCOM serves as a model for inter-service integration and collaboration, commonly referred to as “fusion.” Furthermore, a body of research exists on how USSOCOM has successfully evolved throughout its existence to prepare USSOCOM for its leading role in fighting the Global War on Terror today (Brown 2006). Conversely, there is a limited amount of literature which uses inter-service operational improvements following Goldwater-Nichols as a model for proposed interagency operations reforms, which is a topic of more recent interest to scholars and policymakers alike.

Cogan provides a thorough narrative of the fateful operation and its results based on his role as a CIA official for the Near East and South Asia from 1979 to 1984. After briefly contextualizing the history and state of U.S. Special Operations Forces, Cogan explains the situation in Iran and the U.S. military’s lacking capabilities which led ultimately led to the mission failure. Of note, Cogan points out the inability to prepare forces for asymmetrical or fourth generation warfare in the aftermath of Vietnam defeats would severely hamper the military’s ability to counter the threat in Iran (Cogan 2003).

Due to his position with the CIA, Cogan mentions the “tensions between civilians and military people,” but does not present recommendations for improving these relationships in his findings (Cogan 2003, 208). However, he does explain how “lack of confidence” concerning intelligence sharing between the CIA and the military was a glaring interagency operating deficiency (Cogan 2003, 211). Additionally, the military’s inter-service inoperability was exposed in detail, particularly concerning the helicopter flight portion of the mission. Cogan’s review of the mission’s aftermath summarized the Holloway Commission’s findings and remained focused on tactical deficiencies. The subsequent legislation which resulted in substantial Department of Defense reorganization is only briefly established, providing little insight into the greater implications.

In 1997, Holzworth provided one of the most thoughtful, comprehensive, and forward-leaning papers analyzing Operation EAGLE CLAW’s impact on the U.S. military based on historical findings and intuitive reasoning. Holzworth’s analysis significantly presented the failed mission as “a catalyst for a revolution in military affairs in America” which “contributed to the development of *jointness*” (Holzworth 1997, 2). The background information provided an insightful account of the Carter Administration’s bureaucratic culture and the effect on its decision making. Likewise, Holzworth portrays the pervasive parochial culture in the U.S. military post-Vietnam. This information aids the reader by identifying issues that would ultimately lead to interagency inoperability. Also of note, the Carter Administration’s foreign policy shortcomings were identified to provide greater context of the national level decision making conflicts at that time (Holzworth1997, 6). These conflicts, in part, would reduce the mission’s opportunities for success by constraining options for a military that lacked preexisting joint doctrine and Special Forces capabilities.

The most significant drawback to Holzworth’s research is that it predated the Global War on Terror and thus lacks any comparisons to interagency problems that have resulted. Additionally, the issue of integrating military capabilities with civilian agency’s assets in the aftermath of Operation EAGLE CLAW is not addressed, as Holzworth remains focused on the military’s lessons learned from the Holloway Commission.

Other scholarly essays reviewed concerning the consequences of Operation EAGLE CLAW were focused less on the historical account of the mission and more on what changes still impact interagency operations today. The former commander of USSOCOM, General Bryan D. Brown, publicized how capability gaps identified by analysis of the mission’s faults led to Defense Department reforms that have “improved interagency planning and coordination for Special Operations and low-intensity conflict” (Brown 2006, 39). Due to its relatively recent publication and Brown’s experience as commander of SOCCOM, his paper also takes into account what effects these improvements have had on the Global War on Terrorism. A noteworthy development mentioned by Brown is USSOCOM’s creation of a Joint Interagency Coordination Group, which “exercises command and control of war on terror operations” (Brown 2006, 39). Also created was the Special Operations Joint Interagency Collaboration Center, which “was created to integrate global information requirements and facilitate information sharing with appropriate agencies.” By “linking priority Department of Defense and non-DoD agencies, this center provides a means for rapid information exchange an analysis” (Brown 2006, 40). These joint interagency initiatives are an example of how USSOCOM can serve as a model for fusing military and civilian organizations’ operations.

However, Brown’s historical findings are inherently biased by his position, and serve to promote the achievements of USSOCOM. Particular details on how USSOCOM’s Joint Interagency Coordination Group has improved interagency operations are not provided, but additional information on this group would be useful to study.

Similarly, through scholarly research and intuitive analysis Braileypromotes the successes of Special Operations Forces due to their inherent ‘joint’ nature (Brailey2004, 17). He identifies Special Operations’ routine “close conjunction with other civil government agencies (such as customs, national police elements, and intelligence agencies), international organizations (such as the United Nations or NATO) and even non-governmental organizations” (Brailey2004, 17). Of particular relevance, Brailey notes how Special Operations Forces were a key component of interagency cooperation during the search for weapons of mass destruction at the beginning of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Despite “considerable organizational and cultural barriers,” many of the concepts concerning the future use of Special Operations and joint war fighting doctrine he identified are still applicable to asymmetrical threats today (Brailey2004, 29). However, Brailey does not identify any potential weaknesses of the Special Operations Forces’ joint war fighting doctrine, or any related intelligence sharing stovepipes which have occurred during the Global War on Terror.

Additional available literature concerning the lasting results of Operation EAGLE CLAW concentrates on improving interagency effectiveness, and largely promotes the success of Defense Department reforms. In an essay related to interagency operations and counterinsurgency, Smith implies that legislation similar to the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act is necessary to promote interagency cooperation. Following Goldwater-Nichols, specific education on joint operations and assignments to joint billets became prerequisites for officer advancement. A similar initiative for interagency operations is suggested as a solution. However, Smith does not provide any information on any limitations or feasibility of such training and doctrinal reforms. (Smith 2007).

Similarly focused on improving interagency reforms, Kelleher notes that in the interagency cooperation spanning “humanitarian assistance, combat operations, and nation building” is needed for success in asymmetric warfare (Kelleher 2002, 104). He suggests “traditional lines of authority must be overcome,” interagency conferences should be planned, and shared planning efforts should be introduced in order to build relationships between military and civilian officials (Kelleher 2002, 110). Kelleher points to the existence of inter-service rivalries leading to failure at Desert One as an example of problems that could arise from interagency rivalries. However, his essay is also built mainly from intuitive analysis and does not provide any case studies to substantiate his suggestions.

With limited available literature on the specific research question, but an adequate quantity related to the general research topic on the bureaucratic culture within the Department of Defense that caused inter-service deficiencies, the author will attempt to explain how inter-service reforms can be applied to interagency operations. Contrasting the successes of USSOCOM with the failures of interagency organizations, additional literature will be developed to determine which aspects are applicable.

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