



**SPECIAL OPERATIONS TODAY:  
FSR INTERVIEWS  
LTG CHARLES CLEVELAND (RET.),  
FORMER COMMANDING GENERAL, USASOC**

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Lieutenant General Charles T. Cleveland, an Army Special Forces Officer, relinquished command of the United States Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) and retired after 37 years of military service on 01 July 2015. He previously commanded the Special Operations Command Central and Special Operations Command South as well as the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North during Operation Iraqi Freedom. LTG Cleveland is a native of Arizona and a 1978 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. His military awards and decorations include the Defense Superior Service Medal and the Legion of Merit Medal.

**FSR:** *Are you concerned that an increase in the use of SOF [Special Operations Forces] in high-profile and sometimes unavoidably political circumstances erodes the division between strategy and tactics in the national security paradigm? That US policymakers are or will become addicted to quick results and no longer have the political will to develop and pursue longer term, more comprehensive solutions?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think that is potentially a valid concern. I'm not sure I see it evidencing itself yet. I'm not certain that the use of SOF has reached that point. I do think that the reason SOF is being used is important to examine and that it may point to issues about how we look at our security challenges. I think that that's what we are trying to do at USASOC [United States Army Special Operations Command]. We're trying to frame this discussion. You mentioned earlier the connection between strategy and tactics. This is a critical space that we refer to in our doctrine as the Operational Level of War. It is in this space that the art of campaigning resides. It is in this space where we describe how our tactical actions will achieve those strategic goals set by our policymakers. The Army has done significant work in its schoolhouses to train its planners to think creatively about 'wicked' problems facing the nation and to develop novel solutions. As part of our ARSOF 2022 efforts at USASOC, I asked the question, "How well do we understand what we're facing, and how prepared are we in SOF for prosecuting these new types of campaigns? And where do we train our SOF Campaign Planners who will develop our SOF Operational Art?" It was clear that we had to mature the SOF profession, especially in this vital space between tactics and strategy. Not only that, but we needed to write our own doctrine in order to stand as equals with our peers in the conventional army and further the discussion about how we should be approaching these complex challenges and what SOF's role should be in these new campaigns.

**FSR:** *As a quick follow-up, do you feel that this understanding that you are treating a symptom and not a cause in a lot of these operations is widely shared and understood across the various aspects of government?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I'm an Army component so I am limited in my current capacity in how much I talk to those outside the Army. I'm not so sure that it's universally a concern yet. I'm not sure that other government agencies or other folks see the problem the way we see it. In part what we are trying to do here [leading a discussion at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy] is create the dialogue for that. We have had some successes, however. We have hosted semi-annual strategic war-games called Silent-Quest, in which we explore future threats and approaches to dealing with those threats. The idea being to integrate the findings of these exercises into our capabilities development and strategic planning processes. One benefit of hosting these events has been the significant participation we have enjoyed from the interagency. We have had individuals like Ambassador Thomas A. Shannon, Counselor to the Secretary of State, attend and provide crucial insights and feedback to help mature our thinking. In the end, there are various perspectives on the threats to our security and their root causes. One's perspective is understandably shaped by where one sits in the nation's security and diplomatic apparatus. The key for us has been to continue to drive a vibrant dialogue to forge common understanding.

**FSR:** *In a recent series of meetings at the RAND Corporation, you stated: “I don’t think we completely understand the fight that we are in and that this is unlike anything that we’ve confronted in our past.” After 14 years of conflict and war, what do you think needs to change for the US writ large, and within your community to reach the necessary level of understanding these wars?*

**LTG Cleveland:** To get to understanding about what we are currently confronting, we have to take off our blinders as military professionals and look at the security problem. Our premise is that the economic, social, political, and ideological trends in international competition are converging among State, Non-State actors and others in a new type of security paradigm. As you mentioned in your question, we’ve been in a particular type of combat for 14 years. Our thinking at USASOC is that the security problems of the future will not necessarily resemble those of the past. It is in this context that we feel that SOF forces are uniquely capable, through our persistent global engagement, to shape things well before crises develop. The fact of the matter is, that we are in competition with various state and non-state actors for physical, cognitive, and moral security of populations and increasingly, in this hyper-connected world, the notions of sovereignty and identity”. We have to develop a portfolio of new approaches to impose a cost calculus on our adversaries in this space, but first we must recognize and accept that the security paradigm that we grew up with has changed fundamentally. Our efforts to drive the discussion of Operational Design and explore a SOF variant of Operational Art that I mentioned earlier are aimed at just this problem.

**FSR:** *You were also recently quoted as observing that the US has exquisite capabilities to kill people, while what it needs are exquisite ways to manipulate them. Are you concerned then that the counterterrorism aspects of SOF have in recent years been prioritized over other capabilities, such as MISO [Military Information Support Operations] and Civil Affairs? If so, what is driving that imbalance, and how can a constituency be built for possibly expanding other capabilities?*

**LTG Cleveland:** SOCOM [US Special Operations Command] is still fairly young in terms of its history, 27 years. One must remember that the command was established with the specific goal of providing the nation a set of highly developed tactical tools that could operate at unprecedented levels of proficiency, and when applied, would episodically achieve strategic effects.

As the post-Cold War international order has become more and more chaotic, and the threats to the nation have become more complex and asymmetric, we have found ourselves militarily engaged in much longer duration campaigns, and these campaigns necessarily have multiple dimensions to them. There are Influence, Governance, and Capacity Building lines of effort to these campaigns for which our Special Forces, PSYOPS and Civil Affairs units are purpose-built.

Though these capabilities have long been part of the USASOC portfolio, they have only recently risen in prominence as we find ourselves winding down two large scale conflicts and committed to myriad smaller persistent engagements across an increasingly disordered security landscape. There is an element of this problem that is simple education. The hyper-focus on counterterrorism aspects of SOF is not intentional. We have to better inform our policymakers and national security thinkers about the broad continuum of SOF capabilities that USASOC provides the nation. We need to help them rediscover what SOF has been doing since its inception.

Influence operations are a great example of this. We need to put more resources against further developing this capability, but we must also show our policymakers how effective influence operations can be. An unfortunate choice of words when I said, “Manipulate”, but

that is precisely what we sometimes must do, especially when competing with something like ISIS, which has an amazingly effective information campaign that is drawing Western youth to its black banner. You absolutely have to compete in the information wars, and against an enemy like ISIS, you have to win. Effective influence operations, properly integrated with our other special operations maneuver capabilities, are critical to our success in these enduring competitions in places you don't see on the news, but in which our adversaries are aggressively challenging us.

**FSR:** *On a related note, highly kinetic SOF operations tend to get more press than other operations – when prominent terrorists are killed, etc. Can you give examples that you believe to be successes and models for the future for SOF on the lower end of the conflict scale?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think it's natural that those types of operations gain a lot of press. Long term we've had good success in the Philippines. Working with the Filipino military has gained us a little bit of notoriety.

There are some good cases in Africa, including the efforts to counter Koney [Joseph Kony, leader of the Uganda-based Lord's Resistance Army rebel group] and the influence of the Lord's Resistance Army in the region. There are lots of successes coming from our ability to message to his fighters that there is an alternative. You don't get a lot of press on that, but those are all good successes from an influence ops standpoint. There are also a lot of places where we have had capability building success. In Colombia, for example, we have shown considerable progress in their development and we've done so, by and large, under the radar. It took a long-term, disciplined approach to the campaign.

**FSR:** *What would you characterize as the most important elements of a successful unconventional warfare campaign, or is that even something that can be done given the primacy of context?*

**LTG Cleveland:** Every one of these [campaigns] is highly individualistic. Every campaign is going to be different. As an example, we're now changing our vocabulary to talk about special warfare as opposed to just unconventional warfare or foreign internal defense. In reality, what you see is that there are places where we are doing ostensibly a FID [Foreign Internal Defense] mission but it has unconventional warfare activities included in it.

There are places where we are doing things that are necessarily part of working 100% with your partner – there are [also] things we do unilaterally, for example at the same time as training and capability building. There are other places – we have very publicly spoken about the Syria train and equip mission. That is a very unconventional warfare activity, but it has pretty significant FID overtones to it. We're going to "train and equip" – that's even the words that we use. The Northern Alliance and working with the Peshmerga at the beginning of both Afghanistan and Iraq were unconventional warfare efforts, but again, there was a chain of command and it was done somewhat from sanctuary [at least initially] and so it had FID-like qualities to it.

There are a couple of activities in places where it is purely unconventional warfare, working with surrogate groups. So each one of these cases is tailored by the circumstance, what's generating the problem, and by the capacity and capability of whoever is there. If there is one overriding thing, it's having the ability to understand the local and indigenous problems and using that and leveraging that in order to develop the appropriate solutions. You have to know up front what it is. You can't just take the formula from the last successful venture and think it's going to work in the next one. That is why there is a premium on language understanding and area knowledge.

**FSR:** *You were involved in Operation Just Cause, the US invasion of Panama in 1989.*

*This was a situation where, by many accounts, the state apparatus fell apart in the wake of the invasion: widespread looting, civil servants, and police deserting. And yet, the US was ultimately able to stabilize the situation and reconstruct a functional state. Do you think that's an accurate characterization? If so (or if not) what lessons can we learn from that mission?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think that's a pretty accurate characterization, though I'm not sure I would attribute the looting to inadequate planning. War is going to generate chaos, and within the chaos you will find the opportunists and the crooks. So I think we were somewhat unfairly taken to task in Baghdad for not securing a lot of stuff. We went into Mosul, as an example, without a lot of force on the ground with us. There was no way you could have secured a lot of that stuff. I don't want to say that's the cost of doing business, but it is the unpredictable nature of warfare and I don't know that you can plan your way out of that. But to counter that, or try to avoid that in the case of Panama, you could have doubled or tripled the size of the force that you had to put in there. There is a cost calculus there.

**FSR:** *What allowed it to be a success, and allowed us to pull that one out?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think that one of things was that we already had a deep relationship, and our cultures were pretty tied together with the Panamanians. If you go back far enough, the Panamanians owed their independence to the United States. Honestly, the Panamanian population was very pro-American.

On Christmas Day I was the S3 [the Operations Officer] of the battalion, so my job was to do the planning. We were going into David, Panama [San José de David] near the Costa Rican border and I had done an exercise up there. I had been in the TOC [Tactical Operations Center] for 5 days then and I wanted to get out of the TOC, so [Major] Kevin Higgins, who had A Company, Third of the 7th [7th SFG(A), Company A, 3rd Battalion] and was a good friend agreed to take me along on the mission and the battalion commander agreed to let me go. So we're up there and we are flying over the town on the approach to the city and the sun's coming up and out of all of these houses out there, these people were coming out cheering. They were exuberant, waving American flags. Now I assume that they didn't want to get bombed, not that we were going to bomb them, but there was a sense that people knew that they were repressed and they knew us well enough to understand our motives. Carter had done a great thing in their eyes by giving them the [Panama] Canal back and so there was a wellspring of pro-American feeling that had been suppressed artificially by the Noriega regime. That allowed a set of conditions that are not going to be present in a place like Iraq or Afghanistan, which makes the job much more difficult.

**FSR:** *I'm going to follow this up by asking an extremely Fletcher question, because what we have here [at the Fletcher School] is not just a mix of security folks, but also development and people who walk the line [between the two disciplines]. So in an era where the military and especially SOF is being relied on more and more for a wide variety of missions: fighting transnational crime, containing disease outbreaks, responding to humanitarian disasters and helping to rebuild failed or failing states, how do you personally define the line between what are and are not appropriate military tasks?*

**LTG Cleveland:** That is a very Fletcher question, indeed. I would tell you that that is part of the dialogue that we are we are introspecting on, that we are looking at today.

I think what we're discovering though is that the left and right limits are starting to blur quite a bit and that at some point you actually become a DoD team player on an effort that's being run by any number of different players. It could be the State Department under the Chief of Mission and it could be distributing rice in the FATA [Federally Administered

Tribal Areas in northwest Pakistan]. But because you have trucks or something and you can get the USAID [United States Agency for International Development] rice up to them, you become a part of that effort. You don't lead it necessarily, but you are part of the team.

So I think that what used to be comfortably where you could draw harder lines, the reality is in this very blurred security environment, this place where competition is happening in a way that is nonstandard to us, DoD is finding itself as a part of a broader team and has a place and role. [There could be a place] where we shouldn't be used at all because it could be prejudicial against the effort we are undertaking. There are places where we might have an "in" with the local military and we become the vehicle of choice for some project that another agency wants to execute.

**FSR:** *Given that people in the general public don't really understand SOF, how would you as the commander of USASOC describe the role of your command in assisting the other elements of national power to achieve a country's foreign policy? What do you need as a command from the other elements of national power to help you be successful in accomplishing the missions you have set out to achieve?*

**LTG Cleveland:** If you think about the US Army Special Operations Command, I'll use our doctrine to try to put it simply. We provide the nation two exquisite capabilities: Surgical Strike and Special Warfare.

The first, Surgical Strike, is a hyper-conventional capability, namely to conduct a precision raid. There could be many reasons to conduct that raid: kill/capture, rescue hostages, etc. In order to do that, you have to have the right kind of structure and apparatus in place. The other, Special Warfare, is an unequaled capability to work with and through indigenous peoples that allows you to garner a far deeper understanding of the environment and the problems that you are trying to solve in that complex environment. You have to carefully select, train, equip, and build the teams and organizations to be able to deliver these exquisite, but mutually supporting capabilities.

From a capabilities standpoint, the most distinguishing factor between the two is how we have to deal with uncertainty. In the case of the surgical strike capability, we build an apparatus that will take out as much uncertainty as possible, and then execute with exceptionally high probabilities of success on the objective; so that we don't kill the hostage, so that we get the target that we were after, and so forth. This strike capability requires highly trained operators and it takes an organization that is specifically designed to reduce uncertainty to the maximum extent possible and get the operator on the objective to do that job.

The other type of special operations capability, Special Warfare, is one that is defined by uncertainty, and for which we build units such as our Special Forces (or Green Berets) which are specifically designed for this type of operating environment. These teams, with their unique training, linguistic and cultural acuity, are designed to operate amongst indigenous peoples, gain a deep understanding of the environment, shape events, and report back.

Another distinguishing factor between our Surgical Strike and Special Warfare elements is scalability. If you think of the Rangers as the SOF raiding force for instance, you can scale this capability by taking a Ranger platoon, add three more platoons to get a company, and onwards up to a full Regimental size raiding element. We fight the Special Forces differently. They have built in redundancy to enable a 12-man detachment to split in to two 6-man detachments with the same capabilities (medical, intel, communications, etc). You don't scale Special Forces capability, as it works through the indigenous population. The Special Forces team is designed to survive in a denied area or in an area that's highly dangerous due to insurgent activity. The Special Forces elements deal with uncertainty by wading into

it, surviving, mitigating it, and ultimately controlling a space far larger than their numbers would indicate. They accomplish this through generating something we call 'Indigenous Mass': the development of solutions through networks of indigenous peoples and forces.

I think the nation needs both of these exquisite capabilities. One has been very prominent (this ability to surgically strike) and it's probably always going to be that way. The other is much more discreet in its use, and that's OK. I would offer, however, that the security environment that we see unfolding before us, whether a resurgent Russia, the rapid rise of ISIS, or the violent dissolution of former partner states such as Yemen, is defined by just the type of uncertainty that our Special Forces and other SOF units are purpose-built to deal with.

**FSR:** *What do you see as we've entered this new security paradigm with non-state actors who might be motivated by religion, ideology, and perhaps ethnicity. Do you see that the second type of working within populations will gain a level of primacy that perhaps you haven't seen in the community's existence?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I would hope so. I hope that both forms of special operations are recognized for what they contribute, and as I mentioned before, those two exquisite capabilities are mutually supporting, and should be employed holistically. I do think the larger discussion is about what is our strategy and our policy in dealing with some of these problems? There is discussion today that we are never (again) going to deploy a large army to go after some of these security problems, like stabilization, nation building, or counter-insurgent operations. I'm not so sure that is entirely up to us, as our adversaries are exercising their options around the world. There is value, however, in considering an indigenous alternative so that they own the problem.

Indigenous solutions can, however, carry their own unique risks. We can go too far in 'helping' and take on too much of the problem, and often our host nation is happy to let us. The key is to bring our indigenous force to the brink of success and no further. Let them do their fighting. We were talking about this earlier. The way I think of it is it's almost a biological approach to the problem rather than a mechanical approach. What you want to do is aggregate the right kind of things around the infection, or around the wound and then when the wound starts to heal, disaggregate and be able to peel away and allow the indigenous forces to realize success on their own. We don't do that very well, especially in large footprint operations. So, this discussion about the employment of Special Forces, Psychological Operations, and Civil Affairs capabilities is germane. Their job is to help us identify and aggregate around that 'indigenous mass', or indigenous solution, so we know what we can contribute to make them successful. Mindful that we can take on more than is necessary, we can't want it more than they do.

**FSR:** *Just to further complicate this picture, there's obviously [been] a large push during the wars, particularly from [former Secretary of Defense Robert ] Gates, to work more through multilateral alliances, to work more through regional organizations, which presents many challenges. What sorts of trends have you seen in that area? How does this affect SOF in particular?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think that the trend is that there is an increasing understanding that we have impediments that don't allow us to do it well, everything from foreign disclosure challenges and bringing our partners into our intelligence fold. There is a lot of friction in our systems and processes that make inter-coalition warfare challenging.

From a wider DoD perspective, we've taken some good steps. We have BICES as an example, which allows us to communicate in a secure way with a wider group of allies. All of the

IMET and all the things we are doing to improve relationships with foreign militaries. Even in budget challenged times, leaders understand that we will go to war with partners and allies; therefore anything that is in this area continues to be supported.

From a SOF perspective, I would offer that the same skills and attributes that make our Special Warfare professionals so effective partnering with indigenous populations stand them in good stead operating in coalition environments. Aside from language and cultural skills, their maturity, sound judgment, and expertise make them highly effective operating by, with, and through allied partners and NGOs (Non-governmental Organizations). In the aggregate, I think the trends are good.

**FSR:** *Do you think it's realistic to think that we'll be able to work with our partners on small-scale missions?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think we're doing that now. You see that we have expeditionary partners that are going with us to places like Central America, like the Colombians for example, who are helping us take on some of those issues. I think it's important to consider the sheer value of US presence and engagement in some of these places around the world that are in either conflict or pre-conflict stages. Partner nations may not commit until we do, and the whole point of a US SOF solution, is that the commitment need not be large. Consider Iraq of today, where other nations joined in bolstering the Iraqi army once the US committed to the effort. So yes, I think that's where most success will take place, where others take on some of these things in their regions, and facilitating them when they help address own issues. Everyone understands who needs help in their own neighborhood.

**FSR:** *A question about you... in your 30 plus years of experience, how would you describe the evolution in the integration of SOF and conventional forces and what do you think needs to be done to maintain the lessons you've learned and the progress you've made in that regard for your community.*

**LTG Cleveland:** Both theaters of war, Iraq and Afghanistan, were excellent forcing functions in terms of bringing SOF and conventional forces together in, frankly, a pretty wide array of circumstances. If you think about the beginning of the war you have just to use my own example, so I'm commanding the 10th Special Forces Group, and the CFLCC Commander, then LTG McKiernan, gives Tactical Control (TACON) of the 173rd ABN Brigade to the 10th SFG(A). So now a Colonel of infantry from the 173rd is now working for a Colonel of Special Forces. At that same time, the 26th MEU came in and they gave the 10th Special Forces Group TACON of the MEU. Additionally, I had attached to me an infantry battalion, the Golden Dragons. So here you are at a very kinetic phase and you have a very mixed organization. Add onto that the 65,000 Kurds that are partnered with you. That was a paradigm-breaking moment. Here you are giving one of the Army's premier infantry brigades to a Special Forces unit. We proved that we could do this.

Ever since that point, as that campaign shifted into a stability operation, there were SOF teams on the ground, increasingly in a supported/supporting role to the conventional force. There were cases, as the campaign changed in its complexion, in which the conventional force started peeling off capability to give to the SOF force. As time went on, we got pretty good at shifting the supported/supporting relationships as the nature of the problem changed. One of the things that the Chief of Staff of the Army wanted me to do upon taking command of USASOC was to make sure we didn't lose that. We had just come out of Iraq when I took over command of USASOC and we saw on the horizon that Afghanistan would be drawing down. So the Chief's guidance to me was, "make sure we don't lose that relationship".

The good thing is that we were given the opportunity for the first time in our 60-year history



to write our own doctrine. Up to that point we had field manuals. Field Manuals tell us how to do our business. If someone from the outside wanted to learn about Special Forces or PSYOPS, they would pick up our manual and 'learn us'. That is not the same as doctrine. In August of 2012 we published for the first time, our own doctrine. Once that happened, it allowed us then to use approved doctrine as a platform to put teams in the TRADOC Centers of Excellence to teach that doctrine. Now we are teaching the young Lieutenants and young Sergeants that Special Warfare and Surgical Strike, Army Special Operations is part of their Army. Educating them that USASOC, one of their Army Service Component Commands, is 51% of the nation's SOF capability.

The current Army Operating Concept outlines the concept of SOF-centric campaigns, hybrid campaigns, and conventional-centric campaigns. It's written as though Army SOF was part of the Army, and I think that is indicative of the maturing of the Army's thinking and the understanding that we are all part of one great Army. I'm optimistic about that, and I think everything from the JRTC/NTC type rotations, which is where everyone kind of says SOF integration with conventional forces happens, it now actually happens on a more fundamental level in the education system and in the doctrine and in the concepts. Since we've won that part of it, the rest of it will fall in place.

**FSR:** *You at one time oversaw the management of the Army Special Forces Officer Career Field. Do you think that the current SOF officers are being sufficiently trained? Does the need for increasingly specialized cultural and language training in order to operate in certain environments limit your flexibility?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think SOF operators have never been better, frankly. The assessment and selection process absolutely brings in the best soldiers we've ever had. Across all of our regiments, the quality has never been better. The training program that they get at the foundational level has never been better. I think after their entry into their various branches, we've been pretty innovative on ways to get them advanced degrees for example, and get them to places like NPS or NDU (NDU has a master's program located at Fort Bragg). We even get them up here to the Fletcher School. That allows them time to reflect, think, and write about their profession and their part of the defense portfolio. So, I'm pretty optimistic, even amid sequestration challenges.

One of the things we did at USASOC was as we entered into sequestration, the first round of the problem, we dedicated ourselves to making ourselves better, not bigger. If we had to get a little smaller to get better, we'd take that. We shrunk the size of our force, reduced the number of SF ODAs [Operational Detachment Alpha, or 12 person SF teams] out there, we reduced the number of Rangers, we reduced the number of Civil Affairs teams and then we were able to plow some of those savings into making our units better. So I'm very optimistic. The training level is higher, the language skills are getting better, the organizations that are getting redesigned have an impetus for the soldiers in the business to learn some of the higher end skills necessary for this 21st Century environment that we are in. I think everything is coming together.

**FSR:** *So through this sort of refocusing, you feel like you have been able to hold on to the operational experience coming out of the last 15 years?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think so. The problem is that we are part of the Army and the Army is drawing down. As the Army looks at its sizing mechanisms, our officers and NCOs [non-commissioned officers] are going to be involved in that sizing exercise. Like the rest of the officers in the army, they are subject to being removed if their performance hasn't been at a level that is commensurate with their peers. But again, I think we have enough of an inventory that we are okay with that.

**FSR:** *To turn it back a little bit, what do you think about the current priorities and procedures across all the agencies when it comes to providing assistance to foreign states? Many have expressed concern that what is easy to measure and requested by our partners – that is, train and equip [their forces] - will inevitably be prioritized over efforts to train them for success in the hearts-and-minds aspect of counterinsurgency, such as in human rights and such. Do you think that is a valid criticism, and if so what options do we have to keep things moving in the right direction?*

**LTG Cleveland:** That’s really a good point . . . When I was a captain in the special forces we went on a mission to Bolivia to train the UMAPAR, which are the Bolivian rural police. And we were the first team in there, so it was an ideal SF mission. You had coca paste being sold and processed all over the place. The force that we had fallen in on was corrupt, they were ill-trained, they were living in these dilapidated Brazilian-donated tents that weren’t really providing any overhead cover except from the sun.

It was a perfect SF mission, it really was. You were right in the middle of the problem, and they had asked us to come in and fix this force. You have to remember, there are a lot of drug lines in Colombia that were using the Chapare as a source region for their coca paste, they ran their lines into the Chapare, and of course they were bringing in a lot of money to buy off those who needed to be bought off so the business could continue. We learned pretty quickly that the problem was the motivation, not as they would say “por falta de medios,” you know, “If only I had new uniforms, we would be so much better, or a new mochilla (backpack).” Really, at the end of the day, when I would get frustrated with my counterparts, which was quite a bit, I’d say, “I could take 12 Indians with blow guns and they would do a better job interdicting these guys”. So it’s all about motivation.

What I am afraid of is that often progress is measured by spending a lot of money on equipment and training. You can’t spend enough, really, for training on these problems if the government doesn’t have the credibility. It doesn’t matter what you put on their back, it doesn’t matter how much training you give them, you are going to have serious problems when you encounter a serious enemy who is motivated. And so, I guess my concern is that we have to be very careful that we are judging the motivation and addressing the motivation issue and in some cases that means a different kind of policy. How good is that government on governing, and how respected are they by their people? You can only do so much, and you can’t fight your way out of bad policy.

**FSR:** *To follow up on that quickly, we’re in the situation now, no longer being in Iraq and Afghanistan, where we are working with host governments on priorities are important to us. We know what we want to see, including better governance and better civil-military relations because we feel like that has a connection to containing insurgency. But our interests are not perfectly lined with theirs, [and at the same time] we are not occupiers. How do we achieve the things we need to achieve in that kind of environment, where we have that mismatch in incentives?*

**LTG Cleveland:** Part of it is understanding that whenever you are going down the path of supporting an indigenous group or country, you’re not in the driver’s seat. One of the sages here at our headquarters compares it to taking a taxicab. The cab is going to go where the driver wants to take the taxi. You are paying him hopefully to take it where you want it to go. But the path it takes and the ultimate destination is going to be up to the guy driving. We, the US, often have a hard time with that.

Sometimes these paths will do things that are just not aligned with US interests. You have the nuns being killed in El Salvador, for example. But those kinds of things are going to unfortunately happen when you are not in the driver’s seat. You have to understand that in

this business of supporting indigenous forces or host nation forces, that it takes a long time. In the case of El Salvador, we had real success when Salvadoran officers we had trained in basic training and at the basic infantry course were coming back to us and attending our War College, and then going back down to take over their Army. That's a generational approach to what is often a generational problem. So we have to have patience.

We have to have a sense of operational time, and we have to understand that there will be deviations on the path because inherently it's their problem, and it exists in their space. The choices often are, "don't do anything", which certainly is going to let this problem go in a direction that may be totally against our interests; "take it over and do it ourselves", which is normally very expensive and sometimes problematic; or take the approach that is going to take a while, do everything you can do to avoid taking over their problem for them, but be there to help influence, even if incrementally and slowly, the path that the taxi cab is taking.

**FSR:** *To follow up on that, do you think that the will exists in our institutions to stick it out when it comes to stabilization and conflict prevention missions?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I think so. I do think that it is interesting to watch the President as he has laid out a longer-term strategy in Iraq and Syria, and yet he has taken heat, politically, as others look for more direct intervention or quicker solutions. You are always going to have that debate. I think it is a healthy debate. But when the case is made appropriately, I think the patience is there. I think we have some good examples. For example, Colombia, which was almost a failed state, in a way. It was almost a narco-state, depending on what intel report you are reading. But I think that is a great example of a success story.

**FSR:** *One final question about you and what you perceive to be your legacy at USASOC. You're about to pass your unit colors this spring. What do you consider the Command's most important accomplish during your tenure as Commander for USASOC's future fights?*

**LTG Cleveland:** I hope that we were able to take what could have been a tumultuous and chaotic situation surrounding sequestration and coming out of Iraq and drawing down Afghanistan, and turn those challenges into opportunities for change. We had a vision, we knew where we wanted to take the command, we were honest with ourselves about our problems and we forthrightly addressed them. Most importantly, we did not do this in a manner that would be lost to the changing of the guard. We published all of this in a three-part document called ARSOF 2022 which spelled out in writing everything we intended to do, and we held ourselves accountable. Such large scale change is challenging, and momentum has to be achieved. We achieved that critical momentum, and did so without the command imploding. Ultimately, we are collectively stronger for it. Time will tell.

*\*Interview has been lightly edited for clarity. Brackets indicate editorial additions.*