

War experts focus on narco-terrorism

by Leo F. Scanlon

While there is no agreement among military specialists about what exactly constitutes a "Low Intensity Conflict," the leaders of the U.S. Special Operations Forces (SOF) agree that narco-terrorism presents the closest thing to a definition of the term in the world today. The American political establishment has little real appreciation of the dimension of this threat, and has even less commitment to the strategy of nation-building that underlies any viable campaign to defeat this insurgency.

This assessment, and the problems it poses, dominated the discussion throughout a two-day symposium in Washington, D.C., sponsored by the Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict Division of the American Defense Preparedness Association. The first annual symposium was the occasion to gather together top-ranking retired and active duty leaders of the Special Operations Forces (SOF) and the representatives of the industries which provide high-tech and low-tech support to this specialized branch of military activity.

The challenge which narco-terrorism poses to the military was summed up by the keynote speaker, Gen. Fredrick Woerner, the recently retired head of the U.S. Southern Command: "We have no trade policy, and no commerce policy" coordinated with our anti-drug efforts, "and short of a total crisis, I'm afraid that we are incapable of developing a coherent policy on any issue," he said.

General Woerner highlighted the contradiction between the increasing political sophistication and self-government of the republics in the Southern Hemisphere, and the economic degradation these countries are being subjected to. "Mexican real wages are down 40% since 1983. . . . Throughout Latin America inflation is 213% on average. . . . In the area of health care, the major cause of infant and child mortality in the Western Hemisphere is common diarrhea." The military has a decisive role to play in dealing with these problems, he said, but our forces are not prepared to meet the challenge. "When I looked in my quiver for the arrows of quality security assistance, engineering, and medical assistance, I found sawdust."

An important indicator of the relative commitments of the two superpowers to the future of the region is illustrated

by the fact that "there are 10,000 Latin American students studying at Patrice Lumumba University [in Moscow]. . . . We finance 1,000 students to study in the U.S."

The problems of U.S. policy in Panama are exemplified by Woerner's observation that "as we approach the year 2000, and prepare to turn over the canal to Panama, there are 20 Panamanian youth studying waterway management in the U.S.S.R.—and there are zero in the U.S." While he emphasized that he is no friend of Gen. Manuel Noriega, Woerner stated that he is retired today because he considers U.S. policy toward Panama to be an unmitigated fiasco. In his view, the Panama Canal is being operated flawlessly, Panama is a relatively stable country with developing republican institutions, and U.S. policy should have concentrated on assisting in those areas, and "just ignored Noriega." Once the Justice Department indicted Noriega, Woerner pointed out, the trap was sprung, and the United States was diverted from its actual interests in the country.

The task facing the U.S. in the region, he said, is to "further the professional competence of the Latin American militaries, see that they are adequately resourced," and "legitimized" within their societies.

Economic development vs. People's War

The issue of economic development has been central to the concept of special forces since the idea was first proposed by the late Maj. Gen. Ed Lansdale almost 40 years ago. What the SOF military planners have never been comfortable with, is the fact that the policy of the State Department, and the U.S. government in general, has been to prevent the type of nation-building which Special Operations Forces were created to facilitate. Unfortunately, they are still unable to do anything about it.

George Talbot, who has taught generations of officers at both Ft. Leavenworth and Ft. Bragg, readily agreed that there is an absurdity in the fact that present-day political dogma—"free trade," "free enterprise," and "democracy"—has nothing to do with the policies which actually built the United States, "That's not how it happened here; we had our Army Corps of Engineers go out and lay the railroads and canals."

The resolution of this problem will determine whether any of the administrative steps, tables of organization, and chains of command of the newly reorganized Low Intensity Conflict command will amount to anything useful. Lt. Col. H.T. Hayden pointed out that *glasnost* is a "change in method, not goals," and presented the thesis that "People's War" is being waged as ruthlessly today as it was in Vietnam. "The people who didn't see it then, don't see it today," he said. He demonstrated how the Tet-style offensive underway in El Salvador is complemented by an in-depth political and social organization mobilized by the insurgents. U.S. intelligence never adequately understood this process in Vietnam, according to Hayden, and we are about to miss the boat again in El Salvador and the Philippines.