

# Irregular Warfare Oversight in DC

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SOCOM, Niger, Irregular Warfare, special operations forces, ASD(SO/LIC)

## SPEAKERS

Mark Mitchell, Pete Villano, Nick Lopez, Kyle Atwell

### **Kyle Atwell** 00:05

Our presence in Niger is not simply limited to our objectives within the borders of Niger, they're part of our broader regional strategy. But a reporter sees it says, why are Americans dying in Niger? And it casts the question in such a way that it's difficult to answer.

### **Pete Villano** 00:26

From the congressional perspective, I'll tell you just the same way it's a tough problem set to define irregular warfare in uniform and for civilians in the Pentagon. It's a very tough, you know, policy and program problems for the defense committees to understand, for policymakers to understand.

### **Mark Mitchell** 00:47

Having moved through the drafting and publication of the irregular warfare annex, which was a priority for Secretary Mattis, the idea of great power competition, frankly, became kind of an empty vessel for each of the services to pour their own meaning into.

### **Nick Lopez** 01:08

Welcome to episode four of the irregular warfare podcast. Your hosts today are myself Nick Lopez and my co-host Kyler Atwell. In today's episode, we begin to explore the behind-the-scenes mechanics and politics of how irregular warfare policy is made.

### **Kyle Atwell** 01:23

To do so we focused on two organizations which drive irregular warfare policy in Washington DC: Congress and the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for special operations and low intensity conflict or ASD(SO/LIC). Our guests today have an array of experiences, ranging from tactical combat deployments to influencing national strategy through various posts in DC.

### **Nick Lopez** 01:46

Mark Mitchell served as the acting ASD(SO/LIC), as the counterterrorism director on the National Security Council, and he is a retired Army Special Forces officer. He was one of the first Americans to arrive in Afghanistan following 9/11.

**Kyle Atwell** 01:59

Pete Villano spent a decade as a professional staff member on the House Armed Services Committee. He also served in the State Department and as a former Navy Explosive Ordnance Disposal officer.

**Nick Lopez** 02:09

You are listening to the Irregular Warfare Podcast: a joint production of the Princeton Empirical Studies of Conflict Project and the Modern War Institute at West Point. Dedicated to bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners to support the community of irregular warfare professionals. Here's our conversation with Mark Mitchell and Pete Villano. Gentlemen, really appreciate you both joining us today. It'd be great to dive right in and start with Mark. As I understand that the ASD(SO/LIC) has a broad portfolio of missions, and that the position itself is the Senior Civilian counterpart to the SOCOM commander, can you talk a little bit about your time in the office and some of the priorities that you had while serving?

**Mark Mitchell** 02:56

Well, it's interesting because from the time when I was a military officer, 2011 to 13, to the time that I came back as a senior civilian, 17 to 19, the office and responsibilities changed pretty dramatically. Back in 11, when I first got there, there was still a very heavy, day to day operational focus on counterterrorism. If you remember, back in the Obama administration, a lot of the high level, high value targets, those decisions got pulled up to the White House level. That generated a lot of work at our level, trying to get these targets approved. The Trump administration did away with that process, which had frankly proven unworkable. At that same time, Congress passed the 2017 NDAA, section 922, to reinvigorate is the SO/LIC's role as a Service Secretary.

**Kyle Atwell** 03:51

That's the National Defense Authorization Act?

**Mark Mitchell** 03:53

That is correct. It's the annual bill that the House and the Senate Armed Services committees develop that provides authorization and changes to Title 10, which is the part of the US Code that covers department defense. Back in that 11 to 13 time in addition to CT, we had the Benghazi attacks. So we were spending a tremendous amount of time again on CT embassy security. And then by the time we had shifted to the 2017-19 timeframe, I was spending a lot more time on efforts to reinvigorate our service secretary, their responsibilities.

**Kyle Atwell** 04:34

Is engagement with Congress, one of the key roles of ASD SO/LIC or just one of many tasks?

**Mark Mitchell** 04:39

I mean, from my personal perspective, I saw it as one of my primary roles. Is the SO/LIC is the senior Special Operations official in the Pentagon, our relationships with Congress, again, whether that's the authorizers, the appropriators, I testified for the Foreign Affairs committees, worked with the Intel committees. All of those are important relationships. I go back to our soft imperatives with soft, the soft

imperative, number one, know your operational environment, and when you're a senior executive in the Pentagon, a key portion of your operational environment is your relationship with Congress.

**Nick Lopez** 05:22

I'd like to come back to ASD(SO/LIC) role and the changes you mentioned in the 2017 NDAA in a couple of minutes to further dig into that relationship with Congress. Pete, is it a specific subcommittee that handles irregular warfare? And can you talk to us about the dialogue between ASD(SO/LIC) and Congress?

**Pete Villano** 05:42

Yeah, that's exactly it. It is a specific subcommittee for special operations forces for irregular warfare for related type issues. And they are essentially the same committee between the House Armed Services Committee and the Senate Armed Services Committee. On the House side, it's called the Intelligence, Emerging Threats and Capabilities. It handles all of Special Operations Forces, large portions of the intelligence portfolio as well as the name implies, as well as science and technology, emerging technologies, a good amount of combating weapons of mass destruction, which has a heavy SOCOM role, the Senate companion is the emerging threats and capabilities subcommittee, etc. And that portfolio over there for that subcommittee is essentially the same. So going back to the role of ASD(SO/LIC), and that principle, they're filling that position, it's incredibly important position to maintain a relationship with the chair and ranking of those subcommittees and to sort of have those policies service secretary-like conversations, difficult conversations that need to be had and frank conversations. A lot of times, not just external and overseas, but can be internal inside the building and the Pentagon, as well as some of the policy debates that are happening in DC. But in essence, what was prompting a lot of questions from policymakers on the defense committees was a lot of the gray area, a lot of the undefined space, separate and removed from the kinetic and the direct-action pieces that were really a lot harder to define from the way the Pentagon was looking at these things. But also, the questions that policymakers had. It was a lot easier, as difficult as it is in major war zones, it's a lot easier to understand the role of the military there. But outside of that, including, as Mark mentioned, Libya, and Benghazi and other challenges, even first in East Africa, but spreading across the continent into West Africa, as those challenges were coming about, that gray area, that was difficult to get an understanding of as far as operations and activities, you know, below the threshold.

**Kyle Atwell** 07:46

Was that difficult, because there just wasn't enough time in the day to get to it, or it's just difficult to access the information when you're on the hill.

**Pete Villano** 07:54

Yeah, it's a great question. And to be honest, I think it's a little bit of both from the hill perspective, you know, you are, you are spread very thin, as staff and members are, you know, in essence, serving in a chief executive role, they have many, many roles and responsibilities of which, you know, their time on the defense committee is limited, and we have to as staff be extremely conscious of using their time, very precisely. So to do and get more access to current operations and information, there was a, you know, a structure that was put in place to mandate and make law on a monthly basis, first on a quarterly basis, but then, on a monthly basis, counter-counterterrorism and related activities that briefs

would be given to the Congressional defense committees. And the Assistant Secretary of Defense for special operations in low intensity conflict played a major part in that literally as the principal briefer, the principal adviser, frankly, to members on current operations, on operational challenges, on resources, so that members could get a continuous, and have a continuous dialogue on understanding those risks that our servicemen and women were in and are in every day on a daily basis overseas.

**Kyle Atwell** 09:14

Does that mean that the ASD(SO/LIC) has the ability to kind of also choose the priorities that he or she wants to present to Congress? Or is it kind of mandated, we want information on this and this and that.

**Pete Villano** 09:25

So it is a broad mandate, but frankly, it's a dialogue. You know, these are these are closed briefings. They're closed for obviously, the classified reasons, but they're also closed, because it needs to be a frank discussion. And there generally is a loose outline, country by country outline, if you will. But you know, these are frank conversations and the members can ask hard questions and have frankly asked hard questions and, you know, related to authorities, related to interagency pieces related to risk, related t, as well, even different technologies that are helping or not helping, so that as they work on other areas across the defense policy space, they can help accelerate acquisition authorities, for example. It's a constant dialogue, members, and Congress. You know, Congress doesn't do current operations per se, but they absolutely have to stay fully and currently informed as the phrase is, on the ongoing risks and the challenges. And frankly, Mark played a large role in educating members on those challenges and the risks and previous SO/LICs you know, the frameworks that were put in place for those sensitive military activities, including irregular warfare now as well, moving forward.

**Kyle Atwell** 10:42

Maybe after the conversation, you could tell us some stories about times when Mark didn't do so well with the hard questions.

**Mark Mitchell** 10:48

You might need a whole year's worth of podcast for that.

**Pete Villano** 10:54

Few and far between, few and far between. Mark's a modest man, as you know, and he, you know, in so many closed meetings, and I'm not kidding, advanced, and looked after SOF equities, but also, you know, did members right, in terms of giving them honest, and frank opinions and assessments, and he as well as his staff,

**Mark Mitchell** 11:15

Thank you, Pete. I would echo what Pete said about, yeah, it is a dialogue, because there's, there's really so much out there. And I don't think most Americans really appreciate how limited the time is for our elected representatives on the hill. You know, most members have multiple committee assignments. I hate to say this, but it's I think it's even worse on the senate side, because there's so few people and their staffs are working lots of things. And you've got a group of people that have diverse interests, and you're in this, you've only got maybe 90 minutes, two hours, which is a

tremendous amount of time for them to discuss all of these various issues, and try and get out, be remiss in not pointing out that we do this in conjunction with the joint staff. So when we would do these monthly updates, the SO/LIC rep would talk about the big policy picture, and kind of strategic objectives and maybe the authorities, and then the joint staff would give more detailed information. Again, you're not getting into current ops, you're just, there's just not that much time. And I have a saying that I got from one of my good friends, Kevin Leahy: current operations make you stupid. If all you're doing is looking at what happened in the last, you know, the last 24, next 24 hours, you're never going to be prepared for what's coming down the pipe. And so that's the balance, in trying to assuage and, of course, in a crisis, Pete and I lived through the, not only the Benghazi crisis, but also the Niger crisis.

**Kyle Atwell** 12:54

I was actually going to ask about the Niger crisis, it seems like when it happened, when four American soldiers were killed in an ambush, Congress in the media paid a lot of attention. And at the same time, some news reports made it seem like Congress had no idea US Special Operations personnel were in Niger before it happened. I'm curious how this played out from your perspectives, and why Niger became such a big issue for Congress when many other events do not .

**Pete Villano** 13:22

Yeah, I can start Mark and then feel free to add on. I mean, so that was a very challenging, I mean tragic incident, obviously, but very challenging as well. You know, I can speak from the House Committee on Armed Services, and our members had a good understanding of the baseline, authorities, and missions, and operations. From the vantage point of what I was saying about before, you know, these military activities are below purposely the headlines, but also below the threshold of war. So in some ways, they are also not on the forefront of policymakers' minds on a continual daily basis. So when you bring up a country in a remote area, and you know, it doesn't necessarily trigger memories right away, because again, members of Congress are very, very busy if spread very thin, and a briefing that they received a month and a half or two months ago may not literally be on the front of their mind, because of all the other issues. But that said, I mean are the frameworks of the monthlies and the quarterlies had, you know, defined enough, at least for our membership of a baseline understanding of those types of activities, not just for Niger, but in general across the continent, of what our Special Operations Forces and other forces were doing, the missions that they were actively engaged in. It held the attention for so long because it shifted to, in large part, a big policy discussion on what really are we doing there. Providing security and stability is obviously important, Special Operations forces can do that for all the advantages that they bring to the table, namely, a very small, limited footprint with big strategic impact and helping secure and keep a region stabilized, let alone deny safe haven to actors that can eventually disrupt the region, but then also potentially project into our allies through Europe, potentially disrupt CONUS issues here in the United States. The members that I worked with that focused on national security definitely understood the reason to stay and that was across the aisle. Did it trigger a debate? Absolutely. You know, these things always do and the loss of life does that. And that's what the tragic part of, you know, reminding everyone of how risky these operations are.

**Mark Mitchell** 15:48

Yeah, you know, I think there was also a couple other complicating factors. First of all, because this is not like widely advertised, even though our presence in Niger was at least noted in the President's War Powers Act notifications, going back to the Obama administration every six months, saying, hey, we have we have forces. And this is a public unclassified notification of Congress, we have forces in these countries that are equipped for combat operations. But the media doesn't pay much attention to it. As Pete said, the members are very busy. The staff, the professional staff, they know this. But the other factor is, it's not simply the defense committees, you also have the appropriations committees on defense, and also to a certain involvement are the intelligence committees. And they may not be as, as well aware. Members see stuff in the media, and it's not put in context. For example, the fact that our presence in Niger is not simply limited within the border to our objectives within the borders of Niger. It's part of a broader regional strategy. But a reporter sees it says, why are Americans dying in Niger? And it casts the question in such a way that it's difficult to answer. I think the other piece, too, is that what for most people would seem arcane, but inside the beltway is tremendously important. And that's the issue of authorities. What does the law say that we can do? And who is actually doing it? And sometimes in a country like Niger, you've got people there that are operating under different authorities, some are fiscal authorities, some are operational authorities, they come with different guidance, restrictions, and in the case of these tragic deaths in Niger, there was a lot of confusion over exactly what authorities and also how organizations operating under different authorities can interact.

**Kyle Atwell** 15:53

Is the ASD(SO/LIC) kind of one of the point people when lobbying for changes in authorities with Congress? Or is that coming through another organization? Yeah, for SOF or for authorities that affect SOF, absolutely ASD(SO/LIC) is involved, putting in legislative proposals, working with our counterparts on the Hill to, you know, to craft appropriate language that's gonna get through the NDA process and get written into law.

**Nick Lopez** 18:22

It'd be great to gain an understanding of how either authorities are expanded or even created. In terms of expansion, one of the things I've been thinking about is the expansion of Global Train and Equip authorities 1206 to build partner nation capacity authorities under Section 333. How does that-how does that all happen?

**Pete Villano** 18:41

I'm gonna start Mark, and then-

**Nick Lopez** 18:44

Sure, sure, yeah. Something like it completely was you for us at the tactical and operational level.

**Pete Villano** 18:51

Nikki brought up 333. And that unique authority that's been in place now for probably the better part of two or three years, at least, if not, if not a little bit longer. I mean, that really what that was all about was consolidating the proliferation of building partner capacity authorities that really happened, you know, frankly, post 2002 timeframe, all the way up through 2015-2016, when that was being considered, you

had a proliferation of, you know, upwards of a dozen or more different authorities that, not just special operations forces, but other you know, servicemen and women were using, in conjunction with the State Department as Mark said to build partner capacity in Iraq, Afghanistan, elsewhere, as programs expanded, as authorities morphed, there was a whole menu of different authorities of patchwork, of confusion that really was ripe for consolidation, but also simplification and you had 333 discussed in a multiyear effort really between DOD and Capitol Hill, not just the defense committees but also, you know, I should say not just the authorizing committees but also with the appropriators, and the Foreign Affairs Committees as well, because the State Department with their role and the so called dual key authorities, where you needed Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State approval to spend dollars for stability, reconstruction, stabilization, a whole slew of different things at that state at that local level. 333 was really about consolidating the US Code and the authorities so that it would simplify practitioners. Whether or not it's worked, it's debatable. There are still some slow, you know, impediments. Some, you know, obviously, you are still having to, you know, work through bureaucracies. I remember it from you know, wearing the uniform, but also even serving in the State Department as a civilian where I had budgets and people and was trying to execute overseas on the challenges associated with all of that.

**Nick Lopez** 20:53

I think the Excel spreadsheet has 50 tabs. Or 49.

**Mark Mitchell** 21:01

Pete touched on a really important piece of like these dual key authorities. And what I think it's important for, for a lot of your listeners to realize is that none of the departments or agencies are monoliths. And there can be just like in DOD, you can have a great deal of difference between the opinions at the tactical level, and those in the Pentagon and the E ring. Same thing at the State Department. One of the big fights that we had on several of these authorities was do we need to get the Secretary of State's approval? Or will the ambassador's approval do? And of course, main State wants, wants a secretary to say and the interplay at a couple points, I know there was discussion at the Foreign Affairs Committees of preventing the ambassadors from approving it, which would kind of force it down to Foggy Bottom.

**Kyle Atwell** 21:57

Yeah, so Nick and I talk about this all the time, where I think there's a perception at the tactical levels, that there's not a lot of flexibility when trying to design programs with partner forces or in specific countries. And we wonder, we have honest debates, is that a good thing or a bad thing we see kind of pros for it taking a long time. And we see also cons for it taking a long time, for the process. So I wonder if you have kind of insight on that.

**Mark Mitchell** 22:22

I think there's, there should be some room for some, what I would like call entrepreneurship at the lower levels. But it has to translate into some sort of institutionalization, one of our former SOC Commanders, SOCCENT Commander Charlie Cleveland used to refer to some of our BPC efforts as random acts of touching. There were kind of there was, there was no real coherent approach to it. And, and we want to be good stewards of the taxpayers' money. So you want to ensure that whatever you're building is

gonna last. So it's a double edged sword, you want some flexibility, but you also don't want people wasting taxpayers' money, or in some cases, enabling parts of a host nation security or defense apparatus that may have ulterior motives. And that's why, you know, the vote, and the input from the hill, and from the State Department, and from, you know, the intelligence community can be really important.

**Pete Villano** 23:29

So a large part of it from that congressional piece, like Mark said, you know, as these things would come to Capitol Hill for approval, literally, I mean, a lot of the questions from the defense committees would be, how is this aligned with the country team's objectives? You know, how is this sustainable? What does this look like three to five years from now? Ff we're developing this host nations capability, how is that advancing our national interests, including even potentially us having to provide less US forces, less resources, because now we've helped them solve their problem and those SEA program dollars, those other capabilities that we've given them have empowered them to handle their issues and their problems on their own? And that's aligned with our interests, even if it includes making them potentially a more lethal force? And if that's the case, then how are we ensuring they're going to use that in a judgment, you know, use that with judgment and use it in accordance with our rules and our you know, agreed law of armed conflict and everything else associated with that as you get closer.

**Kyle Atwell** 24:34

Yeah, I wonder if based on what you're describing the fundamental tension between some of our tactical level people who are engaging with partner forces and Congress and other levels of oversight is at the tactical level, you're just focused on how you can get access to the partner and build rapport. But based on what you described, Pete at the congressional level, you're looking three to five years down the road, and being a steward of both taxpayer dollars and then an actual sustainable partnership

**Mark Mitchell** 24:59

At least three to five years.

**Kyle Atwell** 25:02

That doesn't make it any less frustrating for the guys at the tactical level.

**Pete Villano** 25:07

But I'll tell you, though, understanding, to be very honest, Kyler, understanding those challenges at that tactical level is a large part of what professional staff does, and travels out and about to see and to hear about those headaches. Best programs are those implemented by people closest to the problem, you know, and you want to make sure as that goes through, and it's crafted, and as you know, the no-sayers along the way, are still sort of blocked off, you still want to make sure that that is a proper-

**Nick Lopez** 25:41

Sponsored tourism.



**Mark Mitchell** 25:42

I gotta hand it to our, to our congressional staffers, because for some of your military listeners who may have been through one of the training center rotations, the observer controllers, they always seem to be able to find the one guy that doesn't know what the mission was. And yeah, the congressional staffers when they go out, always find that one guy, who tells of something that nobody else wanted to know. What it is, it's good, because there's sometimes there's the only way to understand is by being their person. And you guys, we all know that from a military perspective, the longer you're on the ground, the greater your appreciation is for all the nuances of what you're doing.

**Nick Lopez** 26:37

Just to take a step back and highlight section 922 of the 2017 NDAA, as I understand it, that was to empower the ASD(SO/LIC) and sort of, I guess, restructure the interactions between Special Operations Command and ASD(SO/LIC). Is that right? Am I sort of characterizing that properly?

**Pete Villano** 27:00

Yeah, I mean, Nick, that that's a great summary. I mean, that's a large part of it, it really was to take the codified that is the law of how the ASD was described, and to make it administratively stronger to strengthen the administrative chain of command, if you will, and provide that ASD with service secretary like authorities, not just for inside the building, but also to strengthen and enhance frankly, their relationship with the SOCOM commander as well. And so much of that was really geared towards providing a more robust civilian oversight framework to match and to complement the larger force that was there, you had essentially pre 9/11 SOCOM budgets that were hovering about a billion dollars, expanding upwards between 17 and 2018 timeframes upwards of \$13 billion, and the explosion of the size of the force plus the continued employment of the force. And 922 was really all about updating, modernizing, and restructuring the statutory authorities for that SO/LIC position to as I said, really empower that position service secretary-like authorities and complement as well other aspects of what that position is all about as well.

**Mark Mitchell** 28:27

A lot changed since 1987, when SOCOM and SO/LIC were created over the intervening now 33 years. But really since 9/11, SOCOM has grown tremendously, not only in terms of budget and personnel, but in terms of its importance and its role in our nation's security. It may be hard for a lot of people to see but you know, all these additional authorities that we've been, that the Special Operations community has been granted. And the reality is, is that ASD(SO/LIC) was kind of frozen in time. And actually, maybe even going backwards. As I mentioned earlier, you know, the during parts of the Obama administration, there was such a focus on actual daily CT high value target operations, that the part of SO/LIC dedicated to working on the SOCOM budget had gone from, like 26 people in 2001 down to two people in like 2016. The reality is, DOD is a different place, the bureaucracy is different ASDs don't have access to the secretary, typically, whereas the Four-star combatant commanders do. So we have an imbalance between the civilian and military leadership. And the truth of the matter is, is that the SOCOM commander, rarely, if ever, is actually fulfilling a combatant commander role in terms of operations, and about 90 plus percent of the stuff they do on a daily basis is train-equip-organize.

**Kyle Atwell** 28:40

So if I understand correctly, then, your concern is that there's not enough civilian oversight over SOCOM right now. And that's having negative implications for the force.

**Mark Mitchell** 30:12

I think that's true. And we go to a lot of detail about other areas. But the simplest one is the budget. For almost, you know, for the last 19 years, the SOCOM budget's been going up. SOCOM has gotten unprecedented for structure growth. And authorities, they've been the belle of the ball for last 20 years. But that's not always going to be the case. And SOCOM's looking at budget decreases, and I think it's only going to get worse next year post COVID-19. Irrespective of who wins the presidential election or any anything else. I think all of our elected representatives are gonna have to grapple with the aftermath of that. And SOCOM is going to have to make, there's gonna have to be tough decisions made for the soft enterprise. And to paraphrase somebody, those, those decisions are too important to be left to the generals.

**Pete Villano** 31:06

From their congressional perspective, you know, a large part of this was also ensuring a voice for the national strategy and a civilian voice. When you think about what we talked a little bit about earlier about what the next 10 to 15 to 20 years look like, the way I have always looked at this, you know, as we strengthen the ASD(SO/LIC) and 922, none of this was ever, you know, designed to be zero sum with the SOCOM commander or anything else. These are strong partnerships when you have four stars and strong civilian leadership, being and you know, driving conversations of strategic national importance out decades ahead.

**Kyle Atwell** 31:51

Given your experiences in Congress and the Department of Defense, I'd love to hear your thoughts on how irregular warfare is viewed today in the context of other potentially competing national security priorities.

**Pete Villano** 32:03

Yeah, I mean, from the Congressional perspective, I'll tell you, it is not necessarily an afterthought, but it is not on the front, it is not on everyone's minds front and center, it is a misunderstood challenge to a certain extent, number one, I think part of that is the department hasn't necessarily defined what they want irregular warfare to be for the next 5 to 10 years, you can make slim connections to the national defense strategies. And you can talk about 1202 unconventional, irregular warfare authorities that allow special operations to partner with the regulars and surrogates, you know, to counter Russia threats to counter other nation state specific threats. But just the same way it's a tough problem set to define in uniform and for civilians in the Pentagon. It's a very tough, you know, policy and program problem set for the defense committees to understand, for policymakers to understand, even the intelligence committees, they play a big role in this because again, below the threshold of war, there are other things happening that need to be understood and coordinated. And they get a say in that.

**Mark Mitchell** 33:11

Yeah. You know, having lived through the drafting and publication of the irregular warfare annex, which was a priority for Secretary Mattis, the idea of great power competition, frankly, became kind of an empty vessel for each of the services to pour their own meaning into, you know, for the Air Force, it meant more F-35 squadrons, for the Navy, it meant more ships and carriers, for the Army more BCTs and long-range missiles. So I would even take it a step larger, Pete said that the definition of irregular warfare, I will even go a step further to saying we really haven't fully understood what the role of the Department of Defense is, within great power competition. In some ways. We are prisoners of our Cold War experience and the 1947 National Security Act that created our current structure. For better or worse, I think for better, the United States government doesn't have the same authorities as the Communist Chinese party. And we're a democracy and we live by different standards. But there's a threat that's posed by that and we need to figure out, are we organized properly? Are authorities divvied up? Who's the best? You know, which is the best organization or are there hybrids or new visions? Because China is a serious threat. Yeah, there's there can be disagreement about the timeline, and whether they can achieve it or not, but I don't think there can be any real disagreement about their intentions. And that's what we need to focus on. I will tell you what we first drafted the irregular warfare annex the response of a senior official who won't be named, and it wasn't Secretary Mattis because he told us to do it, was why do we need this? You know, we're not doing irregular warfare anymore. That's, that's Iraq and Afghanistan, we're focusing on China now. And I was like, not that this person was General, you're not mentally equipped to fight this war? You know, they don't understand.

**Nick Lopez** 35:28

Definitely appreciate you sharing that perspective. I think we have time for one more question. And in light of mentally equipping for the next fight, since both of you have experience in the military, as a practitioner, and also this extensive policymaking experience, what type of advice would you give yourself, if you could go back as you were a practitioner?

**Mark Mitchell** 35:51

It goes back, it goes back to my statement earlier about "current operations make you stupid". And if you don't find time, to step back from your daily grind, and this is hard. I know, it's hard, particularly in the special operations community where people are you know, you're going on deployment, you come back, you recover, and you go again, to the degree that you can learn about, educate yourself, develop relationships, with mentors who served in that environment, you got to understand the operational environment within the beltway. There's, you know, we have a real significant cultural bias, in the special operations community against service inside the beltway, you know, there's a perception that you're just kind of screwing off, and you're leading the easy life. But the reality is, is its tough environment, and you're engaged every day. So I would encourage your listeners, whether civilians, military personnel, seek an opportunity to serve in DC, whether it's in the Pentagon, or especially on the hill, as like a military legislative assistant, or in a legislative affairs shop, or in the interagency, so you begin to understand the complexity of the environment that we operate in up here, because it will, will help you not only understand the tactical level better, but explain it to your soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and identify potential obstacles and solution.

**Pete Villano 37:38**

Yeah I mean, it's a great answer, Mark. Looking back on those days, I thought I understood things in terms of the larger picture, but I, but I really didn't. And it made me understand how important it was now looking back to really understand how decisions are made laterally in terms of what you're doing, and who is contributing to the larger mission, because you will impact them as those waves circle outward, but then also understand and learn about how decisions are made further upstream from you up to literally that SecDef or beyond level, because that will help you understand the pressures that they're under. And then how you can contribute to accomplishing the mission or equally as important, avoiding failure in so many different ways. And that's hard. It's hard to you know, especially if you are working in ambiguous environments with limited guidance. In some ways, those are good challenges. But it's also, as you try to learn and understand second, third order effects of what you're doing in an ambiguous environment. It's, it's difficult. And then, of course, the most important thing that one of my earlier commanders and mentors always said, was always have fun. Don't forget to have fun as you're doing it, because that'll keep you smart. Keep you smart and sharp. As you're going through.

**Nick Lopez 38:59**

Appreciate it gentlemen, this has been a fantastic discussion.

**Mark Mitchell 39:02**

It's my pleasure. These are great discussions. And I thank you guys for a wonderful podcast early.

**Pete Villano 39:08**

Thank you for the invitation. Thanks for letting us participate. Great dialogue, great conversation, I think podcasts and the Initiative and what you're doing specifically for practitioners as well, I think it's an important platform. So congratulations to the both of you for doing this.

**Nick Lopez 39:23**

Thanks again for listening to episode four of the Irregular Warfare Podcast. On the Modern War Institute's Irregular Warfare website, you can find a link to an article Mark co-authored with Zach Griffiths and Cole Livieratos. At war on the Rocks, where they argue for increased civilian oversight of SOCOM.

**Kyle Atwell 39:40**

We release a new episode every two weeks. Up next, Nick and I discuss how armed rebel groups manage human resources in Syria with Dr. Daniel Milton from West Point's Combating Terrorism Center and Dr. Vera Miranova, who interviewed over 600 Syrian fighters and civilians on the frontline in the Syrian Civil War. After that, Shawna and I have a conversation with retired Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks and Dr. Eli Berman, about whether the US and its allies can influence proxies in North and West Africa.

**Nick Lopez 40:09**

Please be sure to subscribe to the irregular warfare podcast so you don't miss an episode. You can also connect with us on Twitter, Facebook, or LinkedIn to start a conversation about past or future episodes that we have lined up.

**Kyle Atwell** 40:23

And one last note, what you heard in this episode are the views of the participants and don't represent those of West Point, the Army, or any other agency of the US government.

**Nick Lopez** 40:32

Thanks again and we'll see you next time.