The Enlightened Warrior: reason, critical thinking, and the Special Forces

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In an era marked by hybrid conflicts, threats in the "gray zone," and scenarios where politics and violence intertwine, the Special Forces soldier cannot merely be a combat operator. As **David Maxwell** argues in an essay published in *Small Wars Journal*, the modern operator must become an **Enlightened Warrior**: a professional who combines tactical skills, strategic depth, and moral rigor. Drawing on the legacy of the Enlightenment — from Locke to Kant to modern authors like Camus — Maxwell asserts that the values of reason, critical thinking, and human dignity are not abstract doctrines but practical and indispensable tools in irregular, unconventional, and political warfare operations (David Maxwell, *Small Wars Journal*).

The Enlightenment and the warrior's ethics

The Enlightenment, the "Age of Reason," exalted the individual's ability to think independently. Kant defined the Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity," inviting the use of one's reason without the guidance of others. For the Special Forces operator, this intellectual autonomy is crucial: often operating with incomplete information, in hostile environments, and with delicate political implications. Maxwell, with his field experience described in *Small Wars Journal*, emphasizes how judgment, moral clarity, and the willingness to question established assumptions become tactical qualities, not mere philosophical virtues.

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John Locke offers an evaluative framework for the commitment of Special Forces in support of resistance movements: the right to self-determination and the legitimacy of opposing governments that violate the social contract. In the comparative essay published by Maxwell in *Small Wars Journal*, this idea is directly linked to the motto *De Oppresso Liber*: supporting local forces fighting for freedom can find moral justification in classical political philosophy, provided the intervention respects the will and legitimacy of the communities involved.

Kant, with his categorical imperative — to treat every individual as an end and never as a means — imposes an ethical constraint on military actions. Maxwell insists (as highlighted in his piece in *Small Wars Journal*) that even in clandestine or kinetic operations, commanders and operators must carefully assess the human impact of their choices, avoiding instrumentalizing communities or individuals for purely tactical purposes. Kantian ethics reminds us that effectiveness cannot override dignity.

Critical thinking in the irregular space

Irregular warfare is essentially human: it plays on narratives, political legitimacy, and cultural perceptions. Here, critical thinking is a strategic weapon. As T.E. Lawrence observed, irregularity is more intellectual than physical. Maxwell, in his analysis in *Small Wars Journal*, invokes Thomas Kuhn to explain the importance of recognizing when an operational paradigm is outdated: Special Forces must be able to abandon obsolete models, adapt practices, and conceive tailored solutions for specific contexts, recognizing the incommensurability of seemingly equivalent options (state sovereignty vs. universal human rights).

The tradition of ***ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello* (Cicero, Augustine) integrates with Enlightenment principles to forge the "silent professional" of the Special Forces: prudent, just, courageous, and temperate.** Reason directs action towards clear and legitimate political ends: violence is justified only when it is the last resort and aims to restore peace and justice. Maxwell emphasizes, in his contribution to *Small Wars Journal*, that this orientation avoids instrumental drifts where operations become autonomous ends and preserves the fundamental distinction between combatants and civilians.

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Postmodern critique and Enlightenment resilience

Postmodern critiques, which problematize grand narratives and universal truths, do not render the Enlightenment obsolete; on the contrary, they force it to become more robust. Maxwell observes in *Small Wars Journal* that confronting relativist positions stimulates better reflection

and argumentation: everything that survives a rigorous critique gains greater legitimacy. Camus, while recognizing the absurd, identifies in rebellion the affirmation of human dignity — a principle that resonates with the commitment of ***De Oppresso Liber*: supporting the freedom of peoples without imposing foreign models.**

Future competitions will be as cognitive as they are kinetic. Information warfare, influence campaigns, and ideological competitions are fought with argued narratives and analytical capabilities. Therefore, the training of Special Forces must integrate philosophical studies, history, public ethics, and political theory with technical training. Maxwell proposes, in his reflections collected in *Small Wars Journal*, the idea of a modern *De Officiis* — a code of duties that unites Locke, Kant, Camus, and a prudent conservative conception — to provide a moral and intellectual compass to operators, allowing them to discern what **must** be done from what **can** be done.

Conclusion: reason, freedom, and the warrior's vocation

The Enlightened Warrior is not an oxymoron: it is the operational ideal for those facing complex and nuanced conflicts. As David Maxwell argues in *Small Wars Journal*, in a world where brute force rarely produces lasting stability, reason, critical thinking, **respect for human dignity, and solid ethical training are the levers that transform a military operator into a legitimate agent of peace**. Special Forces that invest in intellect and ethics do not limit their effectiveness; they multiply it. Thus, the soldier of the future can be not only the protector of the free world but also the living testimony of its highest values — a point repeated and reiterated by Maxwell himself in his contribution published in *Small Wars Journal*.

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