The high quality of today’s special operations forces (SOF) was born out of failure nearly three decades ago. As the United States faced off against the Soviet Union at the peak of the Cold War, an undetected void in our military arsenal was dramatically exposed in 1980 when our military failed to rescue 53 Americans held hostage in Iran. On a barren stretch of desert now infamously known as Desert One, Operation Eagle Claw ended in tragedy with the death of eight servicemembers, the destruction of several aircraft and the embarrassment of a nation: The cobbled-together task force of daring men and expensive machinery couldn’t deliver what the country needed.
This nation has a history of never being ready to go to war. We didn’t do it in World War II. We didn’t do it in Korea, and we didn’t do it here. I keep a photo of the carnage that night to remind me that we should never confuse enthusiasm with capability.

Eight of my comrades lost their lives. Those of us who survived knew grief and we knew failure, but we committed ourselves to a different future.

—GEN Peter Schoomaker, Veteran of Desert One, On Its 25th Anniversary, April 2005

Most experts will agree that the security environment we find ourselves in today will continue into the foreseeable future. The irregular threats that confront our nation in current battle zones in Iraq, Afghanistan and other hot spots around the globe require forces that can respond, fight and win at any point along the spectrum of conflict. Combatant commanders frequently depend on Army SOF such as Green Berets, Rangers, civil affairs and psychological operations teams. The tempo of Army SOF has never been higher, and the future promises no relief. By extension, demand for ArSOA support to its ground SOF brethren—including joint teammates such as the Navy SEALs, the Air Force Combat Controllers and pararescuemen, and the ranks of Marine Corps special operations—has never been greater. Consequently, a dangerous gap has begun to develop between legitimate ground SOF requirements and ArSOA’s capacity to support them. A quick review of the aftermath of Desert One is instructive.

The Holloway Commission offered a professional critique of the failed rescue operation and provided analysis and recommendations on 23 critical issues. Many of these issues involved inadequacies of the helicopter task force. The commission acknowledged that the aircrews were asked to “achieve a special-mission capability requiring flight regimes never achieved by any helicopter force in the world.” The commission prescribed the need for a dedicated helicopter organization, one that would be capable of deploying on short notice to crisis spots around the globe and successfully performing high-risk missions in support of national security objectives. According to the report, such a unit must have aircrews and aircraft that could operate at the very limits of human and equipment performance. The most obvious place in the Department of Defense to find the building blocks for such a force was the U.S. Army.

The Army’s leadership responded to the immediate challenge by pulling together personnel and equipment to form Task Force 160 at Fort Campbell, Ky. Its mission was simple: prepare to execute a second rescue operation. The aircrews began training in earnest, pushing the very limits of night-flying techniques and night-vision technology. The negotiated release of the hostages in January 1981, however, abruptly eliminated the need for a second rescue attempt. Nevertheless, the Army’s leadership, mindful of the Holloway Commission’s findings, acknowledged the need for a permanent, specialized rotary-wing organization. In 1982, Task Force 160 was officially designated the 160th Aviation Battalion and became a standing aviation unit on the Army’s books. Over the ensuing decades, the battalion would evolve into the world’s most sophisticated and capable helicopter organization—the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (160th SOAR), nicknamed the Nightstalkers.

Since its humble beginnings in the early 1980s, the 160th SOAR has played a prominent role in nearly every real-world military operation prosecuted by the U.S. government. The increasing demand for ArSOA by the regional combatant commanders drove incremental organizational growth in the 160th SOAR. In partnership with the U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), the Army eventually expanded the 160th SOAR to incorporate a second battalion at Fort Campbell, a third battalion at Hunter Army Airfield, Ga., and a fourth battalion at Fort Lewis, Wash. To generate and sustain this growth without jeopardizing its standards of quality, the unit had to do several fundamental things: institutionalize the capacity to recruit soldiers from the ranks of the Regular Army, form its own schoolhouse to train its aircrews and support personnel, and develop its own capability to find and integrate state-of-the-art technologies into its highly sophisticated helicopter fleets. It did this mostly by cutting manpower and equipment from its operational force, a sign that there was little appetite to expand any further.

BG Raymond P. Palumbo, the deputy commanding general of U.S. Army Special Operations Command, commanded at the company level in the 160th SOAR (A) and later commanded the 12th Aviation Brigade during Operation Iraqi Freedom.
Flash forward to 9/11. The terrorist attacks on that day and the largely irregular campaigns that followed generated an immediate and significant demand for SOF by the regional combatant commanders. In response, the Army and SOCOM grew its formations of Rangers, Green Berets, civil affairs and psychological operations. In addition, SOCOM grew its Navy SEAL, Marine Corps special operations and Air Force special operations capacities. This increase in joint SOF capability naturally called for a corresponding increase in ArSOA. Due to its high cost, however, ArSOA realized only moderate growth over the same period and has, therefore, not kept pace with requirements levied by the combatant commanders.

To compensate for the lack of ArSOA, theater commanders have habitually turned to conventional aviation to support ground SOF operations. Unfortunately, this comes at a time when conventional aviation itself is in short supply. Robert Martinage, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, briefed the House Committee on Armed Services in March 2009, stating that in Iraq and Afghanistan alone, “conventional Army aviation units have routinely provided lift support for about two-thirds of SOF ground units. In Afghanistan, nearly 50 percent of the lift requests to support Joint Special Operations Task Force-Afghanistan operations have been unmet in recent years.” Martinage’s comments and the conclusions of several studies conducted by the Department of Defense underscore the need for more rotary-wing capacity to support both SOF and conventional forces.

The challenge our Army and SOCOM leaders face today is broader than the one faced in the aftermath of Desert One. Back then, the weak link in our rotary-wing arsenal was singular—the absence of a special helicopter force. The issue was studied, a solution was identified and the problem was solved. Today’s challenge is not that simple. SOF requirements will continue to exceed the capacity of ArSOA, and the same argument can be made on the conventional side. The fact that helicopter operations are an expensive commodity makes any decision to grow our fleets difficult, particularly that of ArSOA. This is especially challenging in light of the world economic crisis, the administration’s focus on health-care reform, and the financial strain of two wars.

There is a difference, however, between what leaders faced after Desert One and what we face today: Then, we didn’t recognize the void until we failed; today we clearly see the void and have the opportunity to fix it before we fail. Tackling this problem now, before it becomes untenable, will avoid allowing disaster to become our destiny.