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Military Cultural Awareness: From Anthropology to Application

by

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In the mid-1990s, Marine General Anthony Zinni began making the case for the necessity of military cultural awareness as a “force multiplier.” General Zinni was then reacting to the challenge of resolving tribal conflict in Somalia and considering the potential eruption of other such conflicts. Since that time U.S. forces have had to react to the subversive activity of Albanian clans (the European version of tribes) in Kosovo and Macedonia, the largely ethnic-based Taliban resistance in Afghanistan and the ethnic divisiveness of Iraq. In recent years, the attention to those challenges has generated a raft of opinion editorials, numerous staff college papers and a few scholarly articles on the importance of cultural awareness for the U.S. military. These essays collectively present general truths and broad recommendations that seem quite valid. Yes, cultural awareness could facilitate pacification efforts and “enlistment” of allies and prevent unnecessary clashes and misunderstandings and so forth; however, several practical aspects of cultural awareness training remain to be seriously addressed—in consideration of time, money and human-resource constraints. What is really relevant? How much is needed and for which specialties, functions and career levels? And who vets the required products and projects?

Culture encompasses all aspects of life, involving beliefs, thought, customs, behavior, production, art and institutions. To delve into all of this requires a major investment in both formal and informal education. Book learning, either in school or self-initiated, is a good start but in itself is not wholly adequate. To understand the real dynamic and deep meanings of a certain culture, one has to observe and experience it first-hand—the longer, the better. Thus, *immersion* in the target culture is an indispensable part of the education (or training) process. Most readers will probably agree on this point without further elaboration; however, the related issues of *where* the training occurs, *who* gets training and *how much* training they get present considerable challenges. The question of where must assess the security implications

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of cultural immersion training in overseas environments; simply put, it may not be safe for U.S. military personnel to be in certain societies under certain conditions of regional tension or conflict. As for the questions of who and how much, they apply to the domestic environment rather than to foreign ones.

The key consideration is that American society overall has become relatively deficient in foreign cultural awareness. True, “cultural diversity” sensitivity was recently a fad in management philosophy and training circles, but this concept involved building teams with individual Americans of varying backgrounds; it had virtually nothing to do with understanding foreigners within their own societies. That endeavor lay in another arena. Modern Language Association statistics for higher education indicate that enrollments in language courses, which dipped in the 1970s and ‘80s, rebounded in the 1990s.¹ However, the increase was largely due to expanding enrollments in Spanish, which accounted for 55 percent in 1998. Recently there has been a rise in Arabic language course enrollment, but the faculties of Middle East Studies departments have become intimidated by the scrutiny of watchdog organizations, who say their analysis of Mid-East conflicts is biased.² It would seem that society is alienating the very people who may have something to offer. The situation used to be a little more encouraging.

In the decades following World War II, America’s educational system paid attention to the country’s new status as “leader of the free world.” There were efforts, of varying effectiveness, to incorporate foreign language and geography instruction into primary, secondary and higher-level curricula. However, those efforts have diminished considerably as America has assumed new roles as leader of technologic advancement and globalization. Many would say that advanced technology exceeds the bounds of specific cultures, while globalization entails the spread of the English language and American popular culture. Thus, the mandatory subjects covering foreign cultures that my generation studied in school are not studied by my children. (Even before the shift, the subjects that we had to study, and that I even enjoyed, were distasteful to many of my classmates.)

The point is that relatively few Americans are keen on studying foreign cultures, particularly as the opportunities and incentives for doing so have diminished. The military establishment might seek to remedy that situation for its own purposes, such as having more translators or human intelligence (HUMINT) specialists, but how many enlistees and newly commissioned officers bring the right interests and inclinations into military service? Directed training or reassignment (to gain cultural awareness) can only be partly effective because some people can “get it” and some people cannot. Defense Language Aptitude Battery (DLAB) results demonstrate that innate learning capabilities differ, although other factors, such as desire to learn, might disprove a low test score. Many observers rightly contend that Soldiers with “street smarts” can function well in foreign environments. However, their commentary does not always distinguish between self-taught cultural awareness (taking into account cultural differences) and security instinct (more universal among cultures), which are not the same. The latter, for example, might be observing the absence of people where they are normally present or noticing the movement of wildlife toward, rather than away from, one’s patrol. The bottom line is that the issue of selecting which military personnel have the aptitude and ability to train as foreign cultural experts is very complicated, and so is the issue of deciding which aspects of culture require study.

Humanity is divided among a myriad of more or less distinct cultural groups. Where and how one draws the cultural boundaries are debatable. At the rather amorphous macro level, one deals with a small number of civilizational zones and a larger, yet manageable, number of culture areas, such as Latin America, the Caribbean Basin, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East/North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Eurasia and so forth. However, there are many subsets within each area, defined by language, the countries' strategic importance and other factors. One defense official recommends short lists of key powers, regional powers and strategic regions.³ Still, it is one thing to agree on such priorities; it is quite another to then decide the correct course of study for the respective target cultures. Apart from basic and advanced language study, the following subjects are all potentially relevant: physical and social geography, economy, customs, general and military history, philosophy, religion, law, government, literature, folklore and media. How much of this knowledge can be imparted and assimilated? How can we divide it into basic versus advanced levels of specialization? How much has general versus special applicability? More fundamentally, is this really the best approach to create a culturally aware military establishment?

An alternative approach would be to conduct a "front-end analysis" of cultural knowledge requirements as they pertain to different arenas of military activity. The starting point might be a listing of contrasts, e.g., table 1 presents a *partial* list of key contrasts between American and Arab cultures—which themselves are subsets of two distinct culture areas and civilizations. Contrastive analysis could be done at that macro level as well, but it would be less helpful. Another important consideration for cultural profiling is that not every member of a certain culture thinks and behaves according to the norm. Cultural trait profiles are generalizations; as such, they disregard deviations from the norm and perhaps conceal the reality of the internal challenges and slow reshaping within cultures. However, generalization, despite its inherent drawbacks, is indispensable for the process of knowing.

On the surface, the list in table 1 probably appears daunting. Its relevance may be easier to see in its application to military functions. At the basic level of general applicability, U.S. ground troops need cultural guidance to operate roadblocks and checkpoints, conduct searches, reconnoiter areas, ask questions of natives and interact with friendly native officials, soldiers and police. Such guidance should include basic verbal and nonverbal communication aids, behavioral "dos and don'ts," precautions to respect Islam and instruction on:

- the importance of greetings (in a word-oriented culture);
- the avoidance of non-mission-related probing questions (in a culture that values propriety);
- the necessity of respecting women's privacy (in a culture where women are shielded);
- the necessity of avoiding affront to honor (in a culture where honor is of utmost value);
- the expectation of exaggeration by informants (in a word-oriented culture);
- the expectation of false accusation (in a culture where clan rivalries are intense);
- the expectation of unusual reports (in a culture that uses allegory and metaphor for explanation);

American	Arab
Action-oriented	Word-oriented
Balanced in self-exertion	Bipolar in self-exertion
Causal interpretation of phenomena	Atomistic interpretation of phenomena
Rationalist in explanation	Allegoric in explanation (stories, parables, metaphor)
Materialist outlook (possessions matter)	Spiritualist outlook (all belongs to God)
Women are liberated	Women are shielded
Respect for achievement	Respect for status (as honor/shame trade-off)
Public-good mindset	Clan-interest mindset
Openly debate significant issues	Conceal issues (to "save face," propriety)
Distinction between war and negotiation	Interplay of war and negotiation
Shock effect is best combat method	Stand-off is best combat method

Table 1: Fundamental Cultural Differences

- the expectation that a clan will protect its members, despite “wrongdoing” (in a culture where kin-group loyalty is unquestionable); and
- the expectation of inconsistent attention to duty by native allies or, conversely, inconsistent enemy action (in a culture where exertion tends to be bipolar).

Taking the requirement for cultural awareness a step higher to the advanced level of general applicability, commanders and leaders need all of the aforementioned instruction and, since they have to assess local dynamics, engage local or regional native power brokers and handle feedback, they need additional instruction on:

- the way to “exploit” the pecking order of the local tribes and the dynamics of local or regional clan rivalries (in a culture where status is so important and clan rivalries are intense);
- the various nuances of bestowing and receiving honor (in a culture where honor is of the utmost value);
- the drawback of displaying bravado or being boisterous (as diminishing the honor of an occasion);

- the importance of not being seen as an ally of a rival (in a culture where clan rivalries are intense);
- the need for patience in developing ties (in a culture where respectability is more important than achievement)
- the need to differentiate the wants of the power broker from the needs of his kin-group (in a culture where status begets special treatment);
- the risk of passing judgment on a superior's harsh treatment of inferiors (in a culture where the prerogative of status is not overtly questioned);
- the possibility of an interpreter-translator having his own agenda (due to rivalries or pursuit of status);
- the unlikelihood of smooth (word-to-word) translations of certain concepts (because of the metaphoric, non-technical character of Arabic and other linguistic factors); and
- the potential for source disinformation (because of the word-oriented, allegoric, clan interest, propriety and other aspects of Arab culture).

Apart from such general applications of cultural awareness, American military personnel may undertake tasks that require special applications. Civil Affairs teams, for example, require all of the previously stated competences, basic and advanced, as well as access to extensive data on social geography and land use. Moving from the function of restoring the infrastructure to that of undermining the adversary, the planners of stability operations, information operations (IO) campaigns and high-value targeting endeavors require even more knowledge. They need what it takes to assess impacts and secondary effects of U.S. actions more than the ability to optimize interaction with natives. They must be cognizant of the macro-level power structure of society, the dominant tribes, key religious movements and relative wealth of regions as well as proscribed targets. IO planners in particular must be cognizant of the relevant historiographical and theological themes that infuse extremist and counter-extremist propaganda. Moreover, they must know enough to realize that such debate can be carried out effectively only by native Muslims, not by Western infidels who are inevitably suspect and discredited.

Military intelligence is another arena wherein specialization is required. Intelligence analysts are likely to be called on to support most or all the previously mentioned tasks. They therefore need to know, or be able to retrieve, all or most of the required general and special information. In addition, their own jobs require that they truly understand how adversaries build, exert, conserve and lose force. The culturally relevant points are that force generation depends on alliance building because of the primacy of clan loyalty and force disintegration conversely derives from alliance breaking. Moreover, historic Arab (and Levantine) ways of war generally favor stand-off and close-combat avoidance, unless there is resort to suicide attacks.⁴ Apart from knowing how the adversary fights, analysts must also have skill in assessing useful, correct information that emerges from a culture where speech is metaphoric and informants resort to exaggeration and even falsification (to gain status or discredit rivals). This last point raises consideration of the special requirements of the HUMINT collectors, which are perhaps the most intricate. These include a new, culturally unique set of information objectives as well as guidance on behavioral, psychological and linguistic nuances.⁵

The conclusion of the above survey is that a massive instructional effort is required to create sufficient military experts in just one subset of one cultural area. Yes, the desired culturally educated “product,” as portrayed in old movies, is quite appealing. Take, for example, the character of Sergeant Thomas Ballantine in the classic 1939 movie “Gunga Din,” a quite militarily competent noncommissioned officer who also understands the native language and ways. Ballantine represents the finest of Britain’s colonial soldiery, but such soldiers cannot be replicated now. In the age of colonialism, Western soldiers gained cultural competence by spending most of their careers in the same foreign land. The age of colonialism has passed, and contemporary military assignment patterns do not accommodate “homesteading” in a foreign country.

There is growing interest in creating a new, separate “force,” with skill-sets modeled on those of U.S. special operations forces (SOF).⁶ Many officers are looking to the SOF as a model for upgrading the capabilities of intelligence personnel.⁷ Indeed, SOF excels in operating in foreign environments. However, SOF has the distinct advantage of selectively enrolling mature soldiers and repeatedly deploying into the same cultural areas—the immersion factor. This advantage even seems to compensate for gaps in language proficiency. SOF teams gain access because they perform missions that benefit host countries’ military forces in various ways; intelligence personnel, by their very specialty, are less likely to be welcome. So, the attendant questions are: is the creation of another SOF-like force really practical or necessary, and, if so, which military occupation specialties should be included in the new force? After all, this recourse does not address the need for expeditious production of cultural-awareness guides for the entire deployed force or expertise in IO campaign planning for the theater command or in-scenario validation for the training base.

America’s defense establishment may have enough culturally-experienced personnel to form a conflict-unique cadre, with temporary tenure, to provide the necessary guidelines to troops, commanders and staff officers. The level of effort for such a task force would be the special “products” list in table 2, which correlates with the previously stated front-end analysis, plus the added requirements for tailored support to operations, exercises and curriculum and for review of “external” products and scenarios. The workload for one target culture could probably be done by 25–30 principles, about half military/half civilian, assisted by a smaller support staff. The approach seems very efficient and economic, yet there are some real bureaucratic challenges, such as that the military members could be reassigned after two or three years of service. However, the civil service system does not have much flexibility, and the contracting route often brings the lowest quality for the lowest bid. To attract *competent* civil servants, the Office of Personnel Management

Handbook for Soldiers
Handbook for commanders
Handbook for staff planners/campaign planners
Doctrine (Field Manual appendix) and instruction for intelligence analysts
Doctrine, Tactics, Techniques and Procedures and instruction for interrogators, counter- intelligence agents and collection managers

Table 2: Cultural Awareness Product Requirements

(OPM) would have to create something similar to the existing Intelligence Community Assignment Program (ICAP), giving adequate incentives to both the “transferee” and the losing command. To attract external talent, OPM would have to authorize Title 10 appointments as it does for professors at the various service schools. Finally, there remains the question of competent selection authority.

Despite the challenges, creating an expert cadre may be more feasible than creating a new special force. Neither recourse can be implemented quickly, yet both have long-term potential benefit. The demographic and economic data from the Islamic world suggest the continuation of conditions rife for militant agitation, making a culturally aware force more and more necessary.

Endnotes

- ¹ Richard Brod and Elizabeth B. Welles, “Foreign Language Enrollments in United States Institutions of Higher Education, Fall 1998,” available online at www.adfl.org/resources/enroll.htm; accessed 4 August 2005.
- ² Much of the controversy centers on the website www.campus-watch.org and spin-off media articles.
- ³ Maxie McFarland, “Military Cultural Education,” *Military Review*, March–April 2005, p. 67; or reprint in *Special Warfare*, July 2005, p. 14.
- ⁴ This “thesis” is argued in John W. Jandora, “War and Culture: A Neglected Relation,” *Armed Forces and Society* 25, No. 4 (1999), pp. 541–556.
- ⁵ Details are withheld due to sensitivity.
- ⁶ See Bryan Bender, “Pentagon Seeing New Keys to Victory,” *Boston Globe*, 15 November 2003.
- ⁷ This concept is formally proposed by Eric R. Morrow, “Aiming the Spear: Developing Intelligence Officers for Irregular Warfare” (thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, Calif., June 2005). A less-structured approach is already underway in the form of “exchanges” between the Army special operations forces and military intelligence communities.

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