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Running Head: Fighting the Culture War

Argumentative Essay

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Abstract

Special operations soldiers who waged the early fight in Afghanistan proved that their sensitivity to and understanding of the cultural differences of the indigenous population as well as the enemy combatants led to overwhelming success on the battlefield. Conventional forces, lacking in training and experience of cultural nuances, claimed victory on the conventional battlefield in Iraq but later spent several years unsuccessfully fighting an insurgency for which they were ill-prepared and little understood. Later emphasis on cultural understanding and empowerment of the local population led to significant gains in defeating the Iraqi insurgents. The U.S. military must train its soldiers to embrace cultural understanding and use it to guide the strategy of current conflicts and those of the future.
The U.S. military is now succeeding in Iraq after rediscovering the effectiveness of integrating and emphasizing cultural awareness in waging unconventional warfare - or full-spectrum operations. After 9/11, small Special Forces units specifically trained and experienced in weaving cultural understanding into every facet of operations successfully toppled the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan. The corporate military structure and national leadership either disregarded, ignored or forgot the basis for our early success in Afghanistan as well as the lessons learned from our painful intervention in Vietnam. Untold numbers of lives, careers and resources could have been saved if the U.S. military had from the outset based its operations in Iraq on understanding the cultural sensitivities of its allies and its enemies. Why did it take so long to implement this strategy and how can the military prevent this institutional amnesia from happening again in future conflicts?

In order to understand cultural awareness we must first define it. Webster’s Dictionary has many definitions for culture, but the one closest to our needs is this: “the customary beliefs, social forms and material traits of a racial, religious or social group.” Webster’s also calls it “The integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behavior that depends upon man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.” Cultural awareness, then, involves understanding the behavior, beliefs and social framework of a people and embracing their historical knowledge.

The U.S. Army was redefining itself and its mission after the collapse of the Soviet Union when in September 2001, a startlingly lethal new enemy struck home. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, President Bush demanded an immediate military response against the Al Qaeda terrorist group leadership. This shadowy group operated
out of remote Afghanistan under protection of the country’s draconian ruling party known as the Taliban. America decided that Al Qaeda, and the Taliban, must be dealt with forcefully and decisively. While the nation’s military services gathered its wits, the Army sent its Special Forces into Afghanistan to begin the battle.

In the beginning phases of the operation, Special Forces was clearly the force of choice to achieve dramatic results with only a handful of soldiers on the ground. (Stewart, n.d., analysis) The small Special Forces teams - Operational Detachments – Alpha (ODAs) - linked up with native Northern Alliance forces who opposed the Taliban. Little more than a month after the World Trade Centers attack, special operations soldiers rode on horseback alongside their Afghan allies and ignited a furious attack on Taliban forces.

Members of these ODAs – which included Air Force close air support specialists - embraced the culture of the Afghan alliance warriors. They grew beards, rode horses and even joined in cultural sporting competitions. This led to greater cooperation and the forging of a partnership between the U.S. soldiers and their Afghan counterparts. In an interview with CNN on Oct. 12, 2001 as the Afghan invasion began, Delta Force veteran Sgt. Maj. (Ret) Eric Haney explained that special operations forces have certain virtues that conventional forces do not - flexibility and the ability to innovate. “They’ll understand the culture, the geography, the demographics, and the militaries of those countries….They can move and operate freely and quietly with the local populace” (Haney, 2001, p.1).

Many of the Special Forces soldiers spoke Pashtu or Dari – the two primary languages used in Afghanistan. Even those who were not fluent made an effort to speak in the local tongue. They shared the locals’ food and living spaces, as well as their hatred
of the Taliban. “They went as native as they needed to, in order to be credible in the local landscape” (Kaplan, 2005, p. 201).

While the cultural awareness of the Special Forces soldiers endeared them to their allies, their effectiveness brought them respect. That effectiveness could be attributed to the empowerment of the soldier on the ground. As Robert Kaplan, author of *Imperial Grunts*, a book about today’s American military from the soldier’s perspective, explained in a 2005 interview: “You had master sergeants calling in B-52 air strikes. You had operations approved in seconds over satellite phones” (Dougherty, 2005, p. 3).

The Special Forces teams and their Afghan allies routed the Taliban through the use of U.S. air power and Afghan land attacks. In a few short months, the Taliban had fallen and Al Qaeda was on the run.

By early 2003, U.S. attention turned away from Afghanistan and toward Iraq, a country with a strong conventional military and suspected of producing weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. Army wanted to show off the prowess of its conventional forces now that the special operations forces had succeeded so spectacularly in Afghanistan. Army and Marine ground forces rolled over the Iraqi army and declared victory within a few weeks of sustained combat. With the battle won, the military tried to learn on the fly how to rebuild a country it had helped shatter.

The overwhelming military defeat of Iraqi forces at the start of the war created a false sense of success among American military and civilian leaders alike. Many officials, including top military leaders, underestimated the challenges of rebuilding the country due to lack of cultural understanding. Initially, there was no clear overall strategy for winning the peace. The military had no plan for security of local populace and
institutions, which resulted in looting and destruction of many cultural institutions.

Different U.S. agencies failed to unite in a coherent strategy. The dismantling of the Iraqi army and ouster of all Baath Party officials caused cultural resentment and destroyed the only framework available for rebuilding.

Many in the military leadership, as well as soldiers on the ground, failed to understand the culture and mindset of the Iraqi people. They saw them primarily as the enemy, the vanquished. A sizeable number of Iraqis came to view the Americans as invaders instead of liberators. U.S. soldiers torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison and the resulting publicity helped fuel local support for an increasingly successful insurgency. U.S. military leaders began looking for a new strategy in the face of crumbling security and increasing casualties. One of the first success stories came at the hand of a bright young general who would later become a household name.

Maj. Gen. David Patraeus, commander of the 101st Airborne Division at the time, turned the Northern Iraq region into a showcase for reconstruction efforts.

“Some of our guys had studied politics 101; they reminded us that all politics is local,” Patraeus said in interview with The Weekly Standard (Kenner, 2004, p. 2). He encouraged soldiers to not only train but to integrate the local police and security forces into everything they did. They shared guard duty and ate together in the same mess halls. Patraeus provided funds for his soldiers to initiate civil works projects, recognizing that the person on the ground is in the best position to determine what needs to be done. As the projects became more ambitious, Patraeus insisted that Iraqis provide the expertise and manpower to carry them out. The security situation improved dramatically. The soldiers and the Iraqis began to see each other as partners.
“The one overriding lesson out of all of this is that our flexible, adaptable soldiers are key to everything our division and our Army did in Iraq,” explained Patraeus (Kenner, 2004, p. 1).

Other military leaders followed Patraeus’ lead and began to institutionalize the methods of his success.

“Cultural awareness and understanding how insurgents gain support from the center of gravity became the important campaign consideration,” wrote Maj. Gen. Pete Chiarelli of a new strategy for Task Force Baghdad in 2004-05 (Chiarelli, 2005, p. 7).

Patraeus drew on military history and personal “lessons learned” from nation-building efforts in Haiti, Bosnia and Iraq when he co-authored the 2006 U.S. Army Field Manual on Counterinsurgency (COIN), FM 3-24. It includes chapters on “Integration of Civilian and Military Activities” and “Developing Host Nation Security Forces.” The Army Handbook on COIN Patrolling also includes an appendix entitled “Every Soldier an Ambassador” that instructs soldiers on the local language and customs.

The new, more culturally attuned approach in Iraq provided dividends in the field of intelligence. Like politics, it seems all intelligence is local, too. As military policies helped to empower local Iraqis, the locals began provided better information on insurgent activity. This led to success in driving out the insurgents, and an improved security situation. “U.S. soldiers and Iraqi community leaders say a change in attitude by U.S. troops, and a focus on winning over local communities rather than fighting them, also played a role” (Christie, 2008, p. 2). Where once the only military activity was killing insurgents, it was now only part of the overall strategy. Rebuilding the country’s
infrastructure and social institutions became a priority because that is what the locals wanted. (Emphasis supplied by author).

There are still some hard-liners in today’s military and civilian establishments who believe cultural awareness is a weakness, not a virtue. They contend American fighting forces should depend more on their high-tech weaponry to gain victory and protect the force instead of wasting time dealing with the locals. It is impossible for Westerners to understand the Middle Eastern mind, so it is a waste of time to try. Islam is predicated on the destruction of Christianity and all other “non-believers”. American soldiers should focus on killing as many Muslims as possible – not on trying to understand them.

But our high-tech equipment cannot prevent all casualties and often is no match for low-tech weapons such as IEDs employed in ever changing ways. Cultural understanding is just another weapon in our arsenal. A warrior must be able to understand the motivations of the enemy, so we must always strive to achieve cultural understanding in whatever country or region we are employed. America is based on freedom for all religions, and extremists exist in all of them. Just because one religion seems to be dominated by violent extremists does not make it a candidate for extinction. There are many moderate Muslims in the U.S. and the world.

Cultural understanding of our enemies and local populations is essential to success as the U.S. military increasing engages in full-spectrum operations around the world. Using this cultural awareness to plan strategies and implement preventive measures can help avoid future conflicts. The U.S. military must remember the hard-won lessons of the Iraq conflict and use these lessons to train for the future. We should be
training for the next war, not the last war. We must ensure the historical mindset of our leaders and soldiers, not forgetting the principles that brought us success. Foremost among them is an emphasis on cultural awareness, and we should continue and expand training in this skill at all levels.

Just as importantly, we need to entrust NCOs with the authority and responsibility to ensure our soldiers learn and practice cultural understanding. Small units are the key in this endeavor.

As Kaplan points out, “The decisions of sergeants and of corporals are going to be increasingly vital. The more highly trained and linguistically adroit these lower-level non-commissioned officers are, the better we are going to do around the world. The action is no longer with generals and colonels. The real heart and soul and cultural center of the military is the non-commissioned officer corps” (Dougherty, 2005, p. 3).

Our recent success in Iraq, and the success of Special Forces soldiers in Afghanistan and elsewhere, has validated the usefulness of integrating cultural understanding in all operations.
References


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