

Anthropology and Counterinsurgency

The Strange Story of Their Curious Relationship

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Something mysterious is going on inside the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD). Over the past 2 years, senior leaders have been calling for something unusual and unexpected—cultural knowledge of the adversary. In July 2004, retired Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr., wrote an article for the Naval War College's *Proceedings* magazine that opposed the commonly held view within the U.S. military that success in war is best achieved by overwhelming technological advantage. Scales argues that the type of conflict we are now witnessing in Iraq requires "an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivation."¹ In October 2004, Arthur Cebrowski, Director of the Office of Force Transformation, concluded that "knowledge of one's enemy and his culture and society may be more important than knowledge of his order of battle."² In November 2004, the Office of Naval Research and the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) sponsored the Adversary Cultural Knowledge and National Security Conference, the first major DOD conference on the social sciences since 1962.

Why has cultural knowledge suddenly become such an imperative? Primarily because traditional methods of warfighting have proven inadequate in Iraq and Afghanistan. U.S. technology, training, and doctrine designed to counter the Soviet threat are not designed for low-intensity counterinsurgency operations where civilians mingle freely with combatants in complex urban terrain.

The major combat operations that toppled Saddam Hussein's regime were relatively simple because they required the U.S. military to do what it does best—conduct maneuver warfare in flat terrain using overwhelming firepower with air support. However, since the end of the "hot" phase of the war, coalition forces have been fighting a complex war against an enemy they do not understand. The insurgents' organizational structure is not military, but tribal. Their tactics are not conventional, but asymmetrical. Their weapons are not tanks and fighter planes, but improvised explosive devices (IEDs). They do not abide by the Geneva Conventions, nor do they appear to have any informal rules of engagement.

Countering the insurgency in Iraq requires cultural and social knowledge of the adversary. Yet, none of the elements of U.S. national power—diplomatic, military, intelligence, or economic—explicitly take adversary culture into account in the formation

or execution of policy. This cultural knowledge gap has a simple cause—the almost total absence of anthropology within the national-security establishment.

Once called "the handmaiden of colonialism," anthropology has had a long, fruitful relationship with various elements of national power, which ended suddenly following the Vietnam War. The strange story of anthropology's birth as a warfighting discipline, and its sudden plunge into the abyss of postmodernism, is intertwined with the U.S. failure in Vietnam. The curious and conspicuous lack of anthropology in the national-security arena since the Vietnam War has had grave consequences for countering the insurgency in Iraq, particularly because political policy and military operations based on partial and incomplete cultural knowledge are often worse than none at all.

A Lack of Cultural Awareness

In a conflict between symmetric adversaries, where both are evenly matched and using similar technology, understanding the adversary's culture is largely irrelevant. The Cold War, for all its complexity, pitted two powers of European heritage against each other. In a counterinsurgency operation against a non-Western adversary, however, culture matters. U.S. Department of the Army Field Manual (FM) (interim) 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, defines insurgency as an "organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict. It is a protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control. Political power is the central issue in an insurgency [emphasis added]." Political considerations must therefore circumscribe military action as a fundamental matter of strategy. As British Field Marshall Gerald Templar explained in 1953, "The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but rests in the hearts and minds of the . . . people." *Winning hearts and minds* requires understanding the local culture.³

Aside from Special Forces, most U.S. soldiers are not trained to understand or operate in foreign cultures and societies. One U.S. Army captain in Iraq said, "I was never given classes on how to sit down with a sheik. . . . He is giving me the traditional dishdasha and the entire outfit of a sheik because he claims that

I am a new sheik in town so I must be dressed as one. I don't know if he is trying to gain favor with me because he wants something [or if it is] something good or something bad." In fact, as soon as coalition forces toppled Saddam Hussein, they became *de facto* players in the Iraqi social system. The young captain had indeed become the new sheik in town and was being properly honored by his Iraqi host.⁴

As this example indicates, U.S. forces frequently do not know who their friends are, and just as often they do not know who their enemies are. A returning commander from the 3d Infantry Division observed: "I had perfect situational awareness. What I lacked was cultural awareness. I knew where every enemy tank was dug in on the outskirts of Tallil. Only problem was, my soldiers had to fight fanatics charging on foot or in pickups and firing AK-47s and RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. Great technical intelligence. Wrong enemy."⁵

While the consequences of a lack of cultural knowledge might be most apparent (or perhaps most deadly) in a counterinsurgency, a failure to understand foreign cultures has been a major contributing factor in multiple national-security and intelligence failures. In her 1962 study, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision*, Roberta Wohlstetter demonstrated that although the U.S. Government picked up Japanese signals (including conversations, decoded cables, and ship movements), it failed to distinguish signals from noise—to understand which signals were meaningful—because it was unimaginable that the Japanese might do something as "irrational" as attacking the headquarters of the U.S. Pacific fleet.⁶

Such ethnocentrism (the inability to put aside one's own cultural attitudes and imagine the world from the perspective of a different group) is especially dangerous in a national-security context because it can distort strategic thinking and result in assumptions that the adversary will behave exactly as one might behave. India's nuclear tests on 11 and 13 May 1998 came as a complete surprise because of this type of "mirror-imaging" among CIA analysts. According to the internal investigation conducted by former Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff David Jeremiah, the real problem was an assumption by intelligence analysts and policymakers that the Indians would not test their nuclear weapons because Americans would not test nuclear weapons in similar circumstances. According to Jeremiah, "The intelligence and the policy communities had an underlying mind-set going into these tests that the B.J.P [Bharatiya Janata Party] would behave as we [would] behave."⁷

The United States suffers from a lack of cultural knowledge in its national-security establishment for two primary, interrelated reasons. First, anthropology is largely and conspicuously absent as a discipline within our national-security enterprise, especially within the intelligence community and DOD. Anthropology is a social science discipline whose primary object of study has traditionally been non-Western, tribal societies. The methodologies of anthropology include participant observation, fieldwork, and historical research. One of the central epistemological tenets of anthropology is cultural relativism—understanding other societies from within their own framework.

The primary task of anthropology has historically been translating knowledge gained in the "field" back to the West. While

it might seem self-evident that such a perspective would be beneficial to the national-security establishment, only one of the national defense universities (which provide master's degree-level education to military personnel) currently has an anthropologist on its faculty. At West Point, which traditionally places a heavy emphasis on engineering, anthropology is disparagingly referred to by cadets as "nuts and huts." And, although political science is well represented as a discipline in senior policymaking circles, there has never been an anthropologist on the National Security Council.

The second and related reason for the current lack of cultural knowledge is the failure of the U.S. military to achieve anything resembling victory in Vietnam. Following the Vietnam War, the Joint Chiefs of Staff collectively put their heads in the sand and determined they would never fight an unconventional war again. From a purely military perspective, it was easier for them to focus on the threat of Soviet tanks rolling through the Fulda Gap, prompting a major European land war—a war they could easily fight using existing doctrine and technology and that would have a clear, unequivocal winner.⁸

The preference for the use of overwhelming force and clear campaign objectives was formalized in what has become known as the Weinberger doctrine. In a 1984 speech, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger articulated six principles designed to ensure the Nation would never become involved in another Vietnam. By the mid-1980s, there was cause for concern: deployment of troops to El Salvador seemed likely and the involvement in Lebanon had proved disastrous following the bombing of the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. Responding to these events, Weinberger believed troops should be committed only if U.S. national interests were at stake; only in support of clearly defined political and military objectives; and only "with the clear intention of winning."⁹

In 1994, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell (formerly a military assistant to Weinberger) rearticulated the Weinberger doctrine's fundamental elements, placing a strong emphasis on the idea that force, when used, should be overwhelming and disproportionate to the force used by the enemy. The Powell-Weinberger doctrine institutionalized a preference for "major combat operations"—big wars—as a matter of national preference. Although the Powell-Weinberger doctrine was eroded during the Clinton years; during operations other than war in Haiti, Somali, and Bosnia; and during the second Bush Administration's pre-emptive strikes in Afghanistan and Iraq, no alternative doctrine has emerged to take its place.¹⁰

We have no doctrine for "nationbuilding," which the military eschews as a responsibility because it is not covered by Title 10 of the U.S. Code, which outlines the responsibilities of the military as an element of national power. Field Manual 3-07, *Stability Operations and Support Operations*, was not finalized until February 2003, despite the fact the U.S. military was already deeply engaged in such operations in Iraq. Field Manual 3-07.22—meant to be a temporary document—is still primarily geared toward fighting an enemy engaged in Maoist revolutionary warfare, a type of insurgency that has little application to the situation in Iraq where multiple organizations are competing for multiple, confusing objectives.¹¹

Since 1923, the core tenet of U.S. warfighting strategy has been that overwhelming force deployed against an equally powerful state will result in military victory. Yet in a counterinsurgency situation such as the one the United States currently faces in Iraq, “winning” through overwhelming force is often inapplicable as a concept, if not problematic as a goal. While negotiating in Hanoi a few days before Saigon fell, U.S. Army Colonel Harry Summers, Jr., said to a North Vietnamese colonel, “You know, you never defeated us on the battlefield.” The Vietnamese colonel replied, “That may be so, but it is also irrelevant.”¹² The same could be said of the conflict in Iraq.

Winning on the battlefield is irrelevant against an insurgent adversary because the struggle for power and legitimacy among competing factions has no purely military solution. Often, the application of overwhelming force has the negative, unintended effect of strengthening the insurgency by creating martyrs, increasing recruitment, and demonstrating the “brutality” of state forces.

The alternative approach to fighting insurgency, such as the British eventually adopted through trial and error in Northern Ireland, involves the following: A comprehensive plan to alleviate the political conditions behind the insurgency; civil-military cooperation; the application of minimum force; deep intelligence; and an acceptance of the protracted nature of the conflict. Deep cultural knowledge of the adversary is inherent to the British approach.¹³

Although cultural knowledge of the adversary matters in counterinsurgency, it has little importance in major combat operations. Because the Powell-Weinberger doctrine meant conventional, large-scale war was the only acceptable type of conflict, no discernable present or future need existed to develop doctrine and expertise in unconventional war, including counterinsurgency. Thus, there was no need to incorporate cultural knowledge into doctrine, training, or warfighting. Until now, that is.

On 21 October 2003, the House Armed Services Committee held a hearing to examine lessons learned from Operation Iraqi Freedom. Scales’ testimony at the hearing prompted U.S. Representative “Ike” Skelton to write a letter to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld in which he said: “In simple terms, if we had better understood the Iraqi culture and mindset, our war plans would have been even better than they were, the plan for the postwar period and all of its challenges would have been far better, and we [would have been] better prepared for the ‘long slog’ . . . to win the peace in Iraq.”¹⁴

Even such DOD luminaries as Andrew Marshall, the mysterious director of the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment, are now calling for “anthropology-level knowledge of a wide range of cultures” because such knowledge will prove essential to conducting future operations. Although senior U.S. Government officials such as Skelton are calling for “personnel in our civilian ranks who have cultural knowledge and understanding to inform the policy process,” there are few anthropologists either available or willing to play in the same sandbox with the military.¹⁵

... The Perils of Incomplete Knowledge

DOD yearns for cultural knowledge, but anthropologists en masse, bound by their own ethical code and sunk in a mire of post-modernism, are unlikely to contribute much of value to reshaping national-security policy or practice. Yet, if anthropologists remain disengaged, who will provide the relevant subject matter expertise? As Anna Simons, an anthropologist who teaches at the Naval Postgraduate School, points out: “If anthropologists want to put their heads in the sand and not assist, then who will the military, the CIA, and other agencies turn to for information? They’ll turn to people who will give them the kind of information that should make anthropologists want to rip their hair out because the information won’t be nearly as directly connected to what’s going on the local landscape.”¹⁶

Regardless of whether anthropologists decide to enter the national-security arena, cultural information will inevitably be used as the basis of military operations and public policy. And, if anthropologists refuse to contribute, how reliable will that information be? The result of using incomplete “bad” anthropology is, invariably, failed operations and failed policy. In a May 2004 New Yorker article, “The Gray Zone: How a Secret Pentagon Program Came to Abu Ghraib,” Seymour Hersh notes that Raphael Patai’s 1973 study of Arab culture and psychology, *The Arab Mind*, was the basis of the military’s understanding of the psychological vulnerabilities of Arabs, particularly to sexual shame and humiliation.¹⁷

Patai says: “The segregation of the sexes, the veiling of the women . . . , and all the other minute rules that govern and restrict contact between men and women, have the effect of making sex a prime mental preoccupation in the Arab world.” Apparently, the goal of photographing the sexual humiliation was to blackmail Iraqi victims into becoming informants against the insurgency. To prevent the dissemination of photos to family and friends, it was believed Iraqi men would do almost anything.¹⁸

As Bernard Brodie said of the French Army in 1914, “This was neither the first nor the last time that bad anthropology contributed to bad strategy.” Using sexual humiliation to blackmail Iraqi men into becoming informants could never have worked as a strategy since it only destroys honor, and for Iraqis, lost honor requires its restoration through the appeasement of blood. This concept is well developed in Iraqi culture, and there is even a specific Arabic word for it: *al-sharaf*, upholding one’s manly honor. The alleged use of Patai’s book as the basis of the psychological torment at Abu Ghraib, devoid of any understanding of the broader context of Iraqi culture, demonstrates the folly of using decontextualized culture as the basis of policy.¹⁹

Successful counterinsurgency depends on attaining a holistic, total understanding of local culture. This cultural understanding must be thorough and deep if it is to have any practical benefit at all. This fact is not lost on the Army. In the language of interim FM 3-07.22: “The center of gravity in counterinsurgency operations is the population. Therefore, understanding the local society and gaining its support is critical to success. For U.S. forces to operate effectively among a local population and gain and maintain their support, it is important to develop a thorough understanding

of the society and its culture, including its history, tribal/family/ social structure, values, religions, customs, and needs.”²⁰

To defeat the insurgency in Iraq, U.S. and coalition forces must recognize and exploit the underlying tribal structure of the country; the power wielded by traditional authority figures; the use of Islam as a political ideology; the competing interests of the Shia, the Sunni, and the Kurds; the psychological effects of totalitarianism; and the divide between urban and rural, among other things.

Interim FM 3-07.22 continues: “Understanding and working within the social fabric of a local area is initially the most influential factor in the conduct of counterinsurgency operations. Unfortunately, this is often the factor most neglected by U.S. forces.”²¹

And, unfortunately, anthropologists, whose assistance is urgently needed in time of war, entirely neglect U.S. forces. Despite the fact that military applications of cultural knowledge might be distasteful to ethically inclined anthropologists, their assistance is necessary.

Notes

1. MG Robert H. Scales, Jr., “Culture-Centric Warfare,” *Proceedings* (October 2004).
2. Megan Scully, “‘Social Intel’ New Tool For U.S. Military,” *Defense News*, 26 April 2004, 21.
3. U.S. Department of the Army Field Manual (FM) (Interim) 3-07.22, *Counterinsurgency Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 1 October 2004), sec. 1-1; David Charters, “From Palestine to Northern Ireland: British Adaptation to Low-Intensity Operations,” in *Armies in Low-Intensity Conflict: A Comparative Analysis*, eds., D. Charters and M. Tugwell (London: Brassey’s Defence Publishers, 1989), 195.
4. Leonard Wong, “Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom,” *Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania*, July 2004, 14.
5. Scales, “Army Transformation: Implications for the Future,” testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., 15 July 2004.
6. Roberta Wohlstetter, *Pearl Harbor: Warning and Decision* (California: Stanford University Press, 1962).
7. Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Unknown: The C.I.A. and the Pentagon take another look at Al Qaeda and Iraq,” *The New Yorker*, 10 February 2003.
8. See Max Boot, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).
9. Casper W. Weinberger, “The Uses of Military Power,” speech at the National Press Club, Washington, D.C., 28 November 1984.
10. Jeffrey Record, “Weinberger-Powell Doctrine Doesn’t Cut It,” *Proceedings* (October 2000) The Powell doctrine also “translates into a powerful reluctance to engage in decisive combat, or to even risk combat, and an inordinate emphasis at every level of command on force protection.” Stan Goff, “Full-Spectrum Entropy: Special Operations in a Special Period,” *Freedom Road Magazine*, on-line at www.freedom.read.org/fr/03/english/07_entropy.html, accessed 18 February 2005.
11. U.S. Code, Title 10, “Armed Forces,” on-line at [www.access.gpo.gov/uscode/ title10/title10.html](http://www.access.gpo.gov/uscode/title10/title10.html), accessed 18 February 2005; FM 3-07, *Stability Operations and Support Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, February, 2003); FM 3-07.22, Interim.
12. The 1923 Field Service Regulations postulate that the ultimate objective of all military operations is the destruction of the enemy’s armed forces and that decisive results are obtained only by the offensive. The Regulations state that the Army must prepare to fight against an “opponent organized for war on modern principles and equipped with all the means of modern warfare. . . .” The preference for use of offensive force is found continuously in U.S. military thought, most recently in FM 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2001), which says: “The doctrine holds warfighting as the Army’s primary focus and recognizes that the ability of Army forces to dominate land warfare also provide the ability to dominate any situation in military operations other than war”; Richard Darilek and David Johnson, “Occupation of Hostile Territory: History, Theory, Doctrine; Past and Future Practice,” conference presentation, Future Warfare Seminar V. Carlisle, Pennsylvania, 18 January 2005; Peter Grier, “Should US Fight War in Bosnia? Question Opens an Old Debate,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 September 1992, 9.
13. For a full discussion of British principles of counterinsurgency, see Thomas Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–1960* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990); Ian Beckett and John Pimlott, eds., *Armed Forces and modern Counter-Insurgency* (London: Croom Helm, 1985).
14. Office of Congressman Ike Skelton, “Skelton Urges Rumsfeld To Improve Cultural Awareness Training,” press release, 23 October 2003, on-line at www.house.gov/skelton/pr031023.html, accessed 18 February 2005.
15. Jeremy Feller, “Marshall US Needs To Sustain Long-Distance Power Projection,” *Inside The Pentagon*, 4 March 2004, 15.
16. Renee Montagne, “Interview: Anna Simons and Catherine Lutz on the involvement of anthropologists in war,” *National Public Radio’s Morning Edition*, 14 August 2002.
17. Raphael Patai in Seymour M. Hersh, “The Gray Zone: How a secret Pentagon program came to Abu Ghraib,” *The New Yorker*, 24 May 2004; Patai, *The Arab Mind* (New York: Scribner’s 1973).
18. Patai.
19. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1959), 52.
20. Amatzia Baram, “Victory in Iraq, One Tribe at a Time,” *New York Times*, 28 October 2003; FM (Interim) 3-07.22, sec 4–11.
21. FM (Interim) 3-07.22, sec. 4–13.

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