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Iraq and Missouri, a Comparison in Cultural Misunderstanding

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Abstract

Failure to understand the cultural terrain can greatly affect the length and severity of a military operation. There are many similarities in the cultural missteps made during United States' military operations in the conquered and occupied state of Missouri in the 1860s and 70s and the operations in Iraq from 2003 to 2007. If the United States military incorporated lessons learned from previous conflicts, especially regarding the cultural landscape, it becomes evident that many of the mistakes made in Iraq were avoidable.

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The United States Army has participated in numerous campaigns where the concerns of the population are secondary to military requirements. In a high intensity, invasion type operation this may be necessary and even preferred in order to preserve the lives of Soldiers. After the initial invasion however, as the military transitions to stability operations those civilian concerns become increasingly important. At this point, it becomes paramount that, in order to avoid the rise of an insurgent movement, Soldiers win the battle for public perception. The most effective way to do this is by emphasizing cultural awareness among Soldiers. The lack of cultural awareness in both Iraq and in civil war era Missouri directly led to the emergence of an insurgent conflict and prolonged the reconstruction efforts in both campaigns.

In both campaigns, and more importantly in both reconstruction efforts the United States military and government failed to understand the culture of the people in the “occupied” areas. This institutional failure resulted, early on, in mistakes in combat operations themselves. In both cases, the Army underestimated the will of the people to resist what they regarded as an occupying army. In Missouri, this initially manifested itself in the formation of the Missouri State Home Guard, which would join the main Confederate Army on the battlefields of Wilson’s Creek, MO and Elk Horn Tavern, AR. In Iraq, the seemingly spontaneous attacks on American formations by the Fedayeen were predominantly nothing more than local Sunnis who had vowed to resist the invasion of their homes (Gordon & Trainor, 2006, p. 70). Additionally, in both cases the failure by the American military to exploit the divisions among the people; Sunni vs. Shia, Kurd vs. Arab, Southern sympathizer vs. Northern loyalist lengthened combat operations. Only after the rise of a protracted insurgent movement did the value of incorporating “local” sympathizers and militias become self-evident and incorporated into the strategy. In Missouri,

there was an abundance of groups culturally divided from the guerrillas. Anti-slavery militias from Kansas (Jayhawkers), Pro-Union militias, and local law enforcement groups became part of the Union effort, with various levels of oversight, but only after two years of war had passed (Gilmore, 2006, p. 135). The breakdown in identifying these divisions among the populace are a by-product of a very limited understanding of the cultural environment and were still in evidence 142 years later when insurgents factions fought for more than four years before becoming an enfranchised part of the American effort with the formation of “concerned citizen” groups of pro-American Sunni militias.

The obvious negative effect of misunderstanding a culture is the loss of credibility with the indigenous population. Galula (1964) states in his book “that counter-insurgency is a fight for the population” (p. 4) continual cultural missteps and blatant disregard for cultural sensitivities will lead to a loss of the targeted audience. Insurrectionary groups in Missouri often sprang up as loosely organized bands of friends and neighbors, which rapidly coalesced around charismatic leaders who had proven themselves under fire. Confederations of this nature, led by such individuals as William Quantrill, “Bloody Bill” Anderson, and, after the war, Jesse James would prove the standard for guerilla actions. These “outlaw” or “terrorist” groups would roam unchecked through Missouri for 15 years, causing a smaller civil war between diametrically opposed groups (Hartman & Ingenthron, 1994, p. 117). How similar is this to Iraq where local groups of neighbors and individuals who share a common belief have been operating for five years throughout the country rallying around the charismatic individuals who make it to the high value target lists? Muqtada al-Sadr and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, though on different sides of the religious spectrum, exemplify the same tendency to allow rebel leaders to continue to grow in local and even national notoriety until they build a base of support that allows them to retain

freedom of maneuver among the people. Once legitimized by the support of the public and partisans, insurgent factions are free to become as large as necessary to meet their objectives. During the civil war Quantrill's bushwhackers were unmolested long enough that he was able to amass sufficient combat power to attack and destroy the town of Lawrence, KS. Similarly, Jesse James' band of "terrorists" could expand to include up to ten or more combat proven veterans when conducting a raid and shrink down to individuals in order to blend in with their supporters. In Iraq, Muqtada al-Sadr controls a group known as the "Mahdi Army". This group of known terrorists goes unmolested by the United States Army since al Sadr declared a "truce" in 2006, despite having fought against the American forces for the three years prior and giving every indication that they are preparing to, at a minimum, fight for control of the country at the earliest opportunity.

Guerilla leaders, during both conflicts have understood the need to influence society by demonstrating the ineptness of the government. A limited understanding of Iraqi society and culture caused Soldiers to bypass the tribal culture of sheiks and elders and appeal to U.S. appointed government officials for control. Insurgents capitalized on this mistake by incorporating the tribal culture that they understood, into their concept of operations. Using this clannish political base they were able to demonstrate the inability of the U.S. led government to provide for or protect the people by attacking those very institutions. Police officers, Mayors, former government officials and government buildings were and are repeatedly the target of attack. During Missouri's outlaw era, local sheriffs and known Union or former Union Soldiers lived in fear, knowing that they were targets of raiders anxious to settle grudges or prove how far outside the reach of the rule of law these they were. Additionally, banks and railroads became popular targets. The James gang gained both fame and notoriety by attacking these symbols of a

“carpetbagger” class, commonly viewed as instruments of government oppression (Stiles, 2002, p. 214). Likewise, in Iraq, services provided by Americans or American “sympathizers” are attacked; power plants, pipelines, and water purification facilities are just some of the services that have come under fire. Many of these situations, in both cases, were preventable or avoidable with a better understanding of the cultural terrain, a small amount of cultural training as part of a unit’s train-up can go a long way to rectifying these situations.

Several key issues during the reconstruction of war-torn Missouri directly led to the continued resistance by former guerillas. Similar circumstance has led to various Iraqi insurgent groups remaining active long after the end of major combat operations. A concern for many Missourians and Iraqis alike was what to do with refugees. The American Civil War displaced thousands of people; these refugees had few options, forced out of their destroyed or confiscated homes they drifted across Missouri, upsetting the already fragile balance of communities based on agriculture. In Iraq, this same experience is more complex because of the existence of a tribal culture. When an American unit takes control of a house, for example, the displaced family then has to rely on the familial support structure of the tribe. Other members of the tribe will take the refugee in but then the men will consider it their duty to avenge this slight to their honor, especially if a death resulted from the operation. Again introducing American leaders at the lowest levels to the “honor” system embedded in a tribal culture can prevent these “blood debts”

Of equal concern was the policy of DeBathification, initially this resulted in the educated members of Iraqi society losing their jobs bringing many crucial industries and services grinding to a halt. The long-term result was that thousands of men were out of work, had no way to support their families, and now had a debt of honor to avenge against the Americans. Likewise, in Missouri after the civil war, known confederates or confederate sympathizers were prevented

from holding jobs in industry or government (Stiles, 2002, p. 132). This gave many men a cause to rally too and drove them to join insurgent gangs or to, at the least, support them.

Fueling the fire in both conflicts was and is the treatment of prisoners and alleged atrocities. In the 1860's a bushwhacker expected no quarter from Union Soldiers; knowing that he faced hanging if captured and the display of his body as a grisly reminder of what it means to be on the wrong side, most rebels went down fighting. In 2008, the constant reminder to Muslims of women and children accidentally killed by Americans, prisoner abuse at Abu Ghirab and Guantanamo Bay, and the influence of media outlets such as al-Jazeera ensure that many Iraqis would rather fight then surrender themselves to those same humiliations.

Lastly, time is the biggest factor in both the destruction of insurgent cells and the reconstruction effort as a whole. It took 17 years from when Jesse James first gained public attention to infiltrate and break up his gang, ultimately resulting in the death or lifetime imprisonment of all but one of the members of the outfit that started out robbing banks in 1865 (Stiles, 2002, p. 420). This lengthy campaign is largely the result a lack of knowledge concerning the cultural practices of the native Missourians, causing government and private agents to stand out, as well as ensuring that many people would not talk or cooperate due to family or regional ties to the gang. As the United States military enters its fifth year of combat in Iraq it faces many of the same challenges on a much larger scale for which the only solution is to allow the Army and Marine Corps the time necessary to complete the job.

There are many similarities between the conduct of the war in Iraq and the war and its aftermath in Missouri. There are many instances where it is necessary to disregard the sensitivities of the local population in order to preserve the lives of Soldiers, however, once high intensity combat has ceased it is imperative that the focus turns to winning the battle for the

people. The marked lack of cultural understanding during campaigns in both civil war Missouri and modern Iraq directly led to the rise of an insurgent conflict and prolonged the efforts at reconstruction in both conflicts.

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