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Understanding Enemy Culture

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Class 58

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18 March 2007

### Abstract

Although there has always been an emphasis on understanding a military enemy in terms of strengths, weaknesses, numbers, and equipment, often times the most critical aspect of the enemy is not researched-their culture. Lack of cultural understanding prolongs wars and hinders reconstruction. This paper will show some examples of how a lack of cultural understanding impeded the progress of mission accomplishment.

## Understanding Enemy Culture

### Introduction

Although one of the first principles of warfare is to “know your enemy”, often times this concept is overlooked, at least in the sense of the enemy’s culture. Not understanding the enemy, specifically their culture, can and will negatively affect the outcome of a conflict or war. Sun Tzu, a Chinese general and philosopher, who wrote the well known book on military strategy called, *The Art of War*, said, “if you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. The face of warfare has changed as has the need for an understanding of the culture of the enemy we face at every level of war.

### Vietnam

It wasn’t until Vietnam, when the asymmetrical fight replaced the conventional era of the two world wars. During Vietnam, in regard to understanding the culture of the enemy, there were critical errors made at the strategic and operational levels that filtered down to the tactical level. The government and the Army believed that Viet Cong (VC) were untrained, unsophisticated, and undisciplined. The Army knew that it had superior firepower and therefore should have no issue with defeating them. This was found to be untrue.

In fact the VC were very patient and diligent. They understood the tactics involved in guerilla type warfare due to their experience fighting the French. Additionally, they understood that the American people would only wait so long before losing faith in the cause. The Army, as well as the governmental policy makers, needed to know more about the people, their beliefs, and what “made them tick” rather than just their firepower and formations. In fact it was “several years before the Army began to emphasize population security and succeeded in eradicating VC influence in many parts of South Vietnam (Downes, 2006 pg. 9)”.

### War on Terror

The War on Terror in Afghanistan and subsequently Iraq is going on its seventh year. Early in the war policy makers and military planners made a number of mistakes that could have been avoided had they understood the variety and vastness of cultures that would be faced in that region of the world.

At the beginning of the Iraq war, policy makers assumed that once Sadaam was found and removed from power the country would continue to move forward. This was found not to be true, because without a central power in place, culture dictated that power would revert back to the leaders of the tribes or clans within the country (McFate, 2007). This has caused numerous problems from fueling an insurgency to hampering reconstruction efforts.

At the small unit level, innocent civilian lives were lost due to cultural misunderstandings regarding hand and arm signals at checkpoints. Early on, Soldiers and Marines were not allowed to interact with the people of the country, due to perceived security concerns, in order to establish relationships, which the Iraqi culture is based in. This led to a further division of support with the Iraqi populace.

Many of these lessons were learned the hard way, by trial and error, and luckily many of these lessons have been passed on and heeded by subsequent units and Soldiers. Once again, however, they were learned from the bottom and filtered up.

### Counterpoint

The value of cultural understanding was first recognized more than 200 years ago during the Indian Wars which resulted in the establishment of the Bureau of American Ethnology (McFate, 2007). Unfortunately, the purpose behind the establishment of this bureau has been

lost through the years. Even in WWII, anthropologists were used for intelligence operations in support of Special Operations and then in support of higher strategic level strategy.

During Vietnam, some aspects of the military, specifically Special Operations, began to see the need for a broader understanding of our enemy. Anthropologists helped at “bridging the gap between the military and tribes (McFate, 2007 pg. 47).” They were hired to assist with intelligence aspects of operations.

### Conclusion

The Special Operations community has long understood the importance of truly “knowing the enemy”. Many of the things they do could not be done without that knowledge. Unfortunately, even in the Special Operations community, much of the cultural training must be done at the individual Soldier level due to a lack of emphasis, and ultimately money to fund the existing people, and organizations put in place specifically for this training.

As more “lessons learned” are documented, and as policy makers and planners look back at this current war to reflect, hopefully the importance of real cultural training will be understood and emphasized throughout the military and the policy makers within our government.

References

Downes, A. B. (2006). *Military Culture and Civilian Victimization: The Case of American Strategic Bombing in World War II*. Philadelphia: American Political Science Association.

McFate, M. (2007). The Military Utility of Understanding Adversary Culture. *JFQ*, issue 38 , 48.