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Cultural Unawareness in Vietnam and Iraq

MSG Jerry D. Patton

United States Army Sergeants Major Academy

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SGM Rodolfo G. Garza

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### Abstract

In the last 50 years, the US military has been engaged in two large scale counterinsurgency campaigns. One campaign took place over 40 years ago and one is presently ongoing. In both of these counterinsurgency campaigns, the US Military's cultural awareness or lack of it greatly affected the outcome of the past campaign, and if not recognized for its importance, could cause a negative outcome in the present conflict. The two campaigns that will be compared and contrasted with the focus of cultural awareness or lack of it are Vietnam, and the presently ongoing Operation Iraqi Freedom.

## Cultural Unawareness

Throughout the history of the US Military's efforts in counterinsurgency warfare in both Vietnam and Iraq, cultural misunderstanding complicated problems early on in during the start of operations. Cultural misunderstandings in Vietnam was one of the root causes that caused the unsuccessful conflict resolution in Vietnam and some of those same mistakes have been repeated which could ultimately affect the outcome in Iraq. It has been commonly stated that history repeats itself. Therefore, we should study history, and when in the business of the military and nation shaping, our past mistakes cannot be afforded to be repeated.

The first US Soldiers who began to enter into the counterinsurgency effort in Vietnam in the late 1950s were a small group of military advisors who were primarily comprised of US Army Special Forces. These small groups of advisors were skilled in the craft of counterinsurgency. They understood that while conducting training and operations with their partner nation counterparts, if they were to be welcomed, they needed to live within the Vietnamese culture. The advisors were greatly respectful and sensitive to the customs of the Vietnamese Soldiers, and early on were very successful in their efforts to win the trust and confidence of South Vietnamese populace. However, when the US upped its involvement by sending large numbers of troops who then became committed in battle and were forced upon the Vietnamese populace, there began a large scale failure of cultural awareness. Prior to 1965, the small numbers of Soldiers serving as advisors were trained in Vietnamese cultural awareness before deploying to the country. However when the large scale combat troop buildup began, they were deployed to Vietnam without that training. This lack of understanding led to prolonged engagements and failed attempts early on to gain the support of the host nation populace by those combat troops. Achieving cultural understanding early on during a conflict is paramount to gaining early support

from the populace. To have success against an insurgency requires that the population supports the counterinsurgency efforts, and not those of the insurgents.

One example of a failure due to cultural unawareness was the Strategic Hamlet Program. This program began in the early 1960s based on a British model that had been used successfully in Malaya. The program was designed with the idea that in the rural areas of South Vietnam, villages would be consolidated into larger and more secure hamlets where security could be provided for them while at the same time deny the enemy, the Viet Cong, the support that they needed from the population. The goal was to force the Viet Cong to separate from the populace. It was felt that this program would strengthen and benefit the local populace, but in reality, it not only upset the Vietnamese people affected by this program, it displaced them from their ancestral lands that had been in their family for centuries. By 1964, the program was abandoned because the Viet Cong had completely infiltrated the hamlets by taking advantage of the disenchanting population. They turned the US Military's cultural unawareness into anti-US propaganda that actually strengthened their own efforts. Had the US Military been culturally aware that the Vietnamese people live on the same grounds, generation after generation, they would never have started the program.

The Vietnam War was the US Military's first modern day conflict that dealt with the complexities of culture. The US Military was ill prepared to deal with such complexities due to lack of internal communication within its departments and overall lack of training of its military forces. For years, US Army Special Forces had been operating within Vietnam. From their experience, extensive research on the Vietnamese culture and its people had been conducted and recorded, and had been passed on throughout the US government. However, the information was not received with an open mind by our senior leaders. Those senior leaders thought that the

lack of modern technology and power by the communist insurgents in Vietnam would give the United States the upper hand and that the conflict would be short term. The United States military also did not consider or plan for the training, organization and establishment of host nation forces to take over the country upon US departure. The United States made two large mistakes early on in the conflict in relation to culture.

First mistake was the lack of understanding of the populace and the enemy they were up against. The North Vietnamese insurgency was led by a man named Ho Chi Minh, who understood both the US culture and obviously his own. He knew that the US would not think long term in their involvement in their counter insurgency efforts and that they would be shallow in understanding the Vietnamese culture. He knew that the US felt that they could quickly defeat the communist in large scale battles, so he engaged in small-unit guerrilla warfare, instead of conventional US-style warfare. This allowed the communist to control the pace of the fighting, engaging in battle only when they believed they had a decisive advantage. The guerrillas benefited from familiar terrain, a large degree of popular support, and from the fact the U.S. troops were unable to tell friend from foe. This inability to distinguish friend from foe caused the enemy to exploit these advantages. As a result, US Soldiers, without cultural respect and with extreme mistrust, would then enter villages and invade homes during broad search and destroy operations. They would destroy religious relics in the process and enter sacred areas in the search of the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong would then quickly exploit these actions to their advantage, and would win the support of the population as a result.

By the end of the war in 1975, the US had withdrawn from the country and the communist quickly overwhelmed the South Vietnamese government. On a large scale, the US Military never truly understood the Vietnamese culture. If the US military had understood early on in the

late 1950s and early 1960s that winning the support of the population was the key factor in defeating the communist insurgency, they would have emphasized cultural awareness training.

The US Military was ignorant of the Vietnamese culture, their history, and their society during its involvement in the Vietnam War. This same ignorance would be carried over into the conflict in Iraq as well. The US Military failed to study and learn from their historical mistakes, and once again would not train themselves on the culture of the people prior to entering into a conflict where the support of a population is the most important factor in the recipe for success.

Currently in Iraq, the mission is focused on the rebuilding of the country and stabilizing the population. Because the enemy is once again a guerrilla who does not follow a written doctrine, it is imperative that U.S. Soldiers know their enemy. In a combat environment that is fought against a guerrilla, the ability to understand what is important in that culture, and at the same time not impose U.S. ideals on the local population, will increase the success of future combat operations. Soldiers must understand that the local populace may be living under their conditions due to fear, and if understood, supported, and secured, could possibly turn against the guerrilla insurgency and support the US efforts.

One of the most important principles taught to US Army Special Forces Soldiers from day one of training is to be culturally in tune to the people that they are working with. By this, the Special Forces Soldiers can skillfully include various factions in their operations, and at the same time, keep rivals apart from each other. This has been especially important in Iraq where US Soldiers have recently been successful in their relationships with the tribes of the Sunnis and Shiites. However, early on in 2003, when Operation Iraqi Freedom began, this was not always the case. Once again to the US Soldiers, everyone looked alike and there was no obvious difference between friend and foe. US Soldiers also failed to understand the tribal concept of the

Iraqi culture, and many times due to this ignorance, they had caused some tribes who had originally been supportive of US efforts, turn against them and join up with the insurgents. The US Military recognized this early on, remembering their mistakes from Vietnam. As a result, the US Military required units to conduct Iraqi cultural awareness and sensitivity training prior to deploying to the Iraqi theater of operations. Soldiers now are educated to be in tune with the Iraqi tribes and their differences within the Iraqi culture. This understanding has allowed them to interact in an equally balanced effort with the different tribes in the stabilization and rule of an independent government in Iraq. This balance has been instrumental in the gains made by the US Soldiers against the insurgents, which is now demonstrated by their success on the Iraqi battlefield. All across Iraq, the level of nearly every type of violence, including car bombings, assassinations, and suicide attacks, have dropped greatly. This downturn is a direct result in the cultural understanding of specifically the Sunni tribes, many of whom were former insurgents and have now turned against al Qaeda in Iraq and partnered with U.S. forces to patrol their neighborhoods and towns. Shiite tribal leaders now are seeking to improve their relationships with the US Soldiers because of the newly gained understanding and have ordered their militias to halt operations against the US. The improved security situation in Iraq was brought about by many factors, including cultural understanding by US Soldiers which instilled trust and encouraged commitment by Iraqi citizens to oppose extremist violence. This improvement is also allowing the redeployment of US troops and a possible positive beginning in the true transition of authority from the US led coalition in Iraq, to the Iraqi government, with the support of its people. Had the US Military realized the importance of cultural awareness early on, the situation in Iraq might be different today. However, like in Vietnam, the United States did not understand the populace and its culture. Once the Iraqi regime was overthrown, the insurgency

was able to grow in strength due to tribal conflict and the US inability to recognize the problem early on. This failure to recognize a population's impact on the country as a whole has led to greater turmoil which has further manifested itself by delaying the US troop's departure from Iraq, and the successful hand off of security operations in Iraq, to its own leadership.

### Conclusion

The United States Military's repeated failure to understand, train, and prepare culturally for an enemy prior to commencement of hostilities has proven to be a key ingredient in failed past campaigns. While this is in no means the sole reason for such failed campaigns, it is a large contributor to the overall lack of success. There is a growing need for culture awareness training to be integrated into every soldier's training, especially at the higher echelons of leadership who truly design the strategy of our military. Without a clear cultural understanding of a country's populace, terrain, and the true mind set of the people, the United States Military will continue to face adversities when dealing with guerilla and insurgency activities in the future.