The 21st-Century Turn to Culture: American Exceptionalism

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The U.S. Military's turn to culture in the 21st century occurred largely because of its inability to achieve its stated objectives in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through conventional military force. Building on a long history of military strategies concerned with the cultural differences of others,[1] the U.S. military crafted a warfighting strategy in 2006 based on a counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine of using cultural knowledge to battle the enemy.[2] Charting how and why culture was embraced as a 21st-century "weapons system" shows us how technopolitical systems inside the military-industrial complex are envisioned, built, and then dismantled. Close tracking of these changing 21st-century strategies of war reveals, deep within the counterterrorism discourse, a fundamental belief in American exceptionalism. The principle that emerged from this ideological environment is that the enemies to be fought are not only terrorists or the ideologues of al-Qaʿida but also the countries and cultures that produced them. The implementation of this principle, despite its obvious failures, reveals the ideological underpinning that has justified the incredible destruction and securitized implementation of warfighting.

In the invasions of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), the U.S. government under President George W. Bush charged the military with the goal of removing from power the Taliban and its al-Qaʿida supporters in the former country and Saddam Husayn's regime in the latter. In other words, the wars were envisioned and carried out as limited-duration strategic strikes with the intent of regime change. This partially explains the shock-and-awe bombing campaigns, the lack of sufficient invasion forces, and, in the case of Iraq, the intentional destruction of the infrastructure in 2003. Numerous commentators and many participants noted the absence of postinvasion preparations by the U.S. government. Some analysts proposed that the invasions would have been successful had they been done properly, and in particular had the troops had a better understanding of the local populations in order to work with them to "nation-build."

Beginning in 2005, the U.S. military developed new programs designed to address issues of culture. Building on experiences of the well-respected Defense Language Institute, each branch of the military either established new bodies or enhanced the capacity of existing ones to produce cultural training materials, with specialized training for officers and more general training for enlisted personnel. A further addition to the battlefield was the Human Terrain System, which embeds social scientists within military units.[3]

This new focus expanded the targets of cultural training from well-trained elite forces to all troops, who were taught how to interact with Afghans and Iraqis, to understand culture as part of the war against "the bad guys," and to incorporate it into their tactical thinking, responses, and communication. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. service members were trained in culture so that they could be sent out on patrols to talk to locals, train the Iraqi and Afghan national armies and police forces, and work with "local leaders" to

build community infrastructure. Unlike the majority of those I spoke with who served *before* 2007 and who thought the cultural training was not useful, interviews with those who served post-2007—the new COIN cohort—found the cultural training relevant to what they were being asked to do, and thus better aligned with "the mission."

This period also saw technological innovations that eliminated the lecture of the "subject matter expert" with his pithy PowerPoints of "dos and don'ts," introducing computer-based or real-life simulations in mock Iraqi and Afghan villages that targeted kinetic and visual learning skills. The more positive responses to the recent cultural training efforts could be due to the improved content of the material, the more effective training interfaces, and the fact that cultural knowledge was being promoted as part of the troops' missions within the shift to COIN.

In this environment, the Army and Marines implemented new requirements for training troops and new opportunities for specializing in a region or language as part of a career trajectory. However, in a 2011 review of the programs, the Government Accountability Office concluded that there is no unified system to record the acquisition of such skills, and thus "units were unable to document the completion of the training."[4] In short, there was no follow-through or assessment of the training programs, and whether or not the skills were effectively utilized depended on the service member's job, character, and luck rather than on wider systems of decision making or deployment.

The Iraqis I interviewed between 2008 and 2011 had definite opinions on the U.S. military's culture turn. When asked whether they thought culture was relevant to the role of the military in Iraq, almost all the Iraqis replied that it was not. More important to them were issues of respect, not just of their culture but of their country and their capabilities. They asserted that the condition of their lives after the 2003 invasion contradicted the liberatory rhetoric of the U.S. government. They found it increasingly difficult to reconcile their feelings of freedom from despotic rule with the ongoing destruction of Iraq's infrastructure, the unexpected threats to their day-to-day personal safety by U.S. troops, and the overwhelming violence, corruption, and lawlessness that they confronted on a daily basis. They saw U.S. troops living in well-protected bases and patrolling the streets heavily armed. Iraqis questioned why the most powerful military in the world could not keep their neighborhoods and children safe or ensure regular electricity, water supply, and garbage pickup.

The narratives of Iraqis' interactions with and views of U.S. troops challenge the foundations underlying the emphasis on cultural knowledge within the U.S. military. While the troops were taught to avoid shaking hands with their left hand or talking about sex and politics, and to make small talk about health and weather before asking the questions they wanted answered, the behavior of individuals was constrained within discursive and material policies of the U.S. government, military, and popular culture, which see U.S. exceptionalism as a policy guide and the American way of life as the model for those in the region to adopt. These attitudes and policies were not lost on Iraqis, who were sidelined from the "nation" that the U.S. troops thought they were building.

The shift to cultural training in 21st-century war reflected two intertwined convergences: the overseas deployment of the largest number of U.S. troops since the Vietnam War and the utter failure of the wars to achieve U.S. goals. Following initial U.S. public support for the invasions, by 2005 many in the military and their families, along with the

general public, noted the wars' failures. Perhaps cultural training was seen as a fix that put "people-skills" into the hands of the troops to make them feel more successful on the individual level. But the COIN strategy was never fully adopted, either by the entire leadership or by the troops. The complaints of troops suggested that it was ineffective, that it was a touchy-feely fix and not something they joined the military to learn, or that more force was needed. These responses point to the fundamental contradiction of the shift to culture in war: that it is not possible to bomb and build simultaneously. Cultural training for the invading troops is not a lubricant to make an occupation more effective. Although creating troops that "know culture" may be a way to obtain better intelligence, it does not win hearts and minds, which still see and feel the violent imperial policies that envision invasions and occupations as justified, sustainable, and ethical.

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and Afghanistan marks the end of the culture phase of military strategy and the end of COIN. Operationally, this is because President Obama has overseen the removal of large numbers of U.S. troops in a few places in favor of small numbers of troops in many places. Laleh Khalili describes the shift (back) to a counterterrorism strategy, where cultural knowledge has returned to the domain of military intelligence and elite units, ready and able to deploy wherever the threats are determined to lie, often at the invitation of a particular government.[5] This counterterrorism strategy focuses on the physical elimination of terrorists, in contrast to COIN's efforts to address causes, change minds, and win hearts. Moreover, both the military and the CIA are using drones in areas where the United States is not officially at war: Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia. The marriage of 21st-century drone technologies with counterterrorism strategies of targeted assassinations needs American exceptionalism as an ideological justification. Policies that allow for the transgression of sovereignty and legality in the name of security alter 20th-century conceptions of geography and sovereignty in the name of keeping Americans safe.

NOTES

[1] See, among others, Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism: Eastern War through Western Eyes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013); and Paul A. Jureidini, *Casebook on Insurgency and Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1962).

[2] Frontline proponents of this strategy were Gen. David Petraeus, David Kilkullen, and Montgomery McFate. Army Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency* (2006), was revised in 2014 and is now FM3–24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* MCWP 3-33.5, http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf (accessed 28 June 2014).

[3] F. Rochelle Davis, "Culture as a Weapon System," in *Middle East Report* 255 (summer 2010); Roberto González, *American Counterinsurgency: Human Science and the Human Terrain* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2009).

[4] "Language and Culture Training: Opportunities Exist to Improve Visibility and Sustainment of Knowledge and Skills in Army and Marine Corps General Purpose Forces," Government Accountability Office 12–50, 31 October 2011, p. 0.

[5] Laleh Khalili, "Coin vs. CT," *Middle East Report and Information Project*, 9 January 2012, http://www.merip.org/coin-vs-ct. See also a *New York Times Magazine* article on AFRICOM's personnel and activities, 15 June 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/magazine/can-general-linders-special-operations-forces-stop-the-next-terrorist-threat.html?nl=todaysheadlines&_r=0.