

Military Ethics and Cultural Knowledge

Written by George R. Lucas Jr.

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GEORGE R. LUCAS JR., MAR 20 2012

The mistaken burning of prisoners' copies of the Qur'an by American military personnel at Bagram AFB, Afghanistan, and the tragic, violent social upheavals that have followed in its wake, constitutes only the latest unfortunate example of the crucial importance of regional knowledge and cross-cultural competence in the conduct of counterinsurgency. It is beyond exasperating to perceive how a single, symbolic cultural blunder of this magnitude can undo months and years of careful diplomacy and capacity building, and threaten the meaningful legacy of the many who have lost their lives in this conflict. The American military's cultural deficit has hardly gone unnoticed, but it has proven difficult in the extreme to assure that such knowledge and competence is attained uniformly and adequately by military personnel (as this terrible incident likewise illustrates), as well as to determine how best to provide such education in essential regional knowledge, and to assure such cross-cultural competence is readily available in theaters of conflict, especially to commanders in the field.

That American military personnel and NATO allies in ISAF, and even more, American and coalition forces in Iraq lacked such knowledge in a manner that was undermining counterinsurgency efforts was first recognized by then-Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus of the U.S. Army as early as 2005. Petraeus learned this lesson first hand, while in command of coalition troops in the Sunni-dominated Anbar Province in Iraq in the early days of that conflict. His efforts to better understand, reach out to, and cooperate with local and regional tribal leaders in establishing peaceful control over the region, however, ran afoul of prevailing American policy early in the Iraq war, which was dead-set against any reconciliation or accommodation with those who enjoyed rank or privilege of any sort during the regime of Saddam Hussein. Petraeus was summarily returned to the U.S. upon completion of his tour of duty, and posted to Ft. Leavenworth, KS to serve as commander-in-chief of the U.S. Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). For a capable and ambitious military leader during a critical time of armed conflict, this re-assignment constituted a *de facto* exile.

Petraeus made good use of his time at Leavenworth, however, propounding his radical views on the preeminent importance of enhanced regional and cultural knowledge and weaving them into the revised doctrine of counterinsurgency warfare (COIN), subsequently issued under his editorship in a newly-revised U.S. Army and Marine Corps field manual guiding such operations in December, 2006. By this time, Petraeus's views had returned to favor, and he was posted to Iraq essentially to redeem, through these methods, the floundering U.S-coalition peace-keeping efforts there, which had all but collapsed into wholesale civil war.

The most public face of that recovery at the time was the so-called "surge" in the number of coalition troops deployed as ground forces, and the re-distribution of those forces from safe havens in military compounds and the so-called "Green Zone" in Baghdad, to highly-visible local village patrols in virtually every region of the country. But Petraeus also put a key second component of his counterinsurgency strategy into place at this time in Iraq as well, with somewhat less fanfare, deploying five new "Human Terrain Teams" to work alongside Brigade Combat Teams (BCTs) in key areas of the country in early 2007. Each team consisted of specially chosen military and civilian personnel, recruited for their specific regional and cultural expertise and experience, and trained (during a four-month intensive program at Ft. Leavenworth) to collaborate effectively with multiple BCTs at once, in order to enhance the effectiveness of military and security ground operations, largely by ameliorating and reconciling (rather than inadvertently causing) cultural conflicts of the kind that the recent mishandling of the sacred texts in Afghanistan so vividly illustrates. This program, known as the "Human Terrain System" (HTS), was thus the U.S. Army's ambitious

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attempt to increase dramatically the degree of regional knowledge, cultural awareness, and anthropological expertise required for successful military counterinsurgency operations, and to recognize, anticipate, and head off in advance the kinds of cultural blunders and misunderstandings (such as ritual mishandling of copies of the Qur'an) that might otherwise lead to disaster.

While quietly implemented during its first two years, the program gained considerable notoriety with those initial deployments of HTS teams to Iraq and Afghanistan in 2007. A good deal of the controversy came from perceived efforts by the U.S. military to recruit academically-trained anthropologists and other social scientists to anchor each team's cultural knowledge and expertise. Anthropologists, in particular, took umbrage at what they characterized as an attempt to leverage disciplinary knowledge and professional expertise for what they viewed as illicit purposes, especially in the conduct of an unpopular and purportedly illegal armed conflict in Iraq. Thus, discussions of the professional probity of anthropologists, in particular, cooperating in the conduct of hostilities quickly became hopelessly mired in the broader political disagreement over the legitimacy of the American war efforts themselves.

The work was also inherently dangerous, entailing risks not unlike those faced by journalists, health care workers, and humanitarian relief and development personnel. Charges of improper and incompetent administration of the program leveled by its critics increased substantially in the wake of the death of three anthropologists, one former Army enlisted personnel working in Iraq, and two developmental anthropologists working with HTS teams in Afghanistan in 2008. The resulting, widely-publicized furor over what came to be called "military anthropology," was the topic of my book, *Anthropologists in Arms*, published in 2009.

The wider controversy, and the book devoted to its analysis and examination, treated many topics beyond HTS itself: questions of professional ethics and the nature of professional malfeasance, for example, as well as the tensions inherent in the role of scientist and citizen, especially during time of war. Membership in, and governance of voluntary professional communities themselves, particularly as regards professional jurisdiction and responsibility for individual malfeasance, was another important topic raised in this controversy, as were the conceptual differences (and often morally disturbing similarities) between routine field work in the social sciences generally, and outright espionage. Informed consent, and protection of human research subjects also loomed large, especially in the context of an environment where some of those "subjects" might be found to constitute legitimate enemies or adversaries, whom it would become the task of military, intelligence, and security forces themselves to capture or kill.

Ironically, my analysis also revealed that the actual administration of the HTS program (including recruiting, training, deploying, and compensating the academic social scientists involved) had been outsourced almost from the beginning as a private contract to British Aerospace ("BAE Systems, Inc"). Thus, anthropologists and others participating in this program were, in fact, classified as private military contractors (in the employ of BAE Systems, rather than the U.S. military). This quickly embroiled HTS itself in the ostensibly distinct public and political debate over the propriety and efficacy of private military contracting, a novel dimension of what I termed at the time "post-modern warfare." Indeed, the crescendo of cries of outrage over HTS was unfortunately timed to coincide with public anguish following the debacle of armed Blackwater security contractors seeming to fire indiscriminately, and killing and injuring some seventeen Iraqi civilians at Nisoor Square, Baghdad in September, 2007).[1]

An important sub-text of the book, woven throughout this wider public debate, however, consisted of a question that was never adequately forefronted or thoroughly examined: namely, how should military forces, and programs of professional military education and leadership development, go about the task of preparing their personnel to operate effectively (including both "justly" and "respectfully") in dramatically unfamiliar cultural environments? If we accept, on all the various grounds adduced above, that it is properly the responsibility of military, intelligence, and security forces to exhibit adequate knowledge of the "human terrain" within which they are obliged to operate, and to manifest consistently "good cultural practices" while operating in those environments, how are those vital capacities best engendered, imbued, inculcated, and maintained? It is, transparently and preeminently, *this* question that the unfortunate Qur'an incident at Bagram AFB so urgently underscores. And this is not a question that is readily or easily answered.

It is, however, a question properly raised, inasmuch as provision of this cross-cultural competence might properly be

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regarded as a “moral responsibility” of professional military education generally, while the content of that expertise also has an ethical component. Absent sufficient cultural awareness and regional competence, military professionals are both unable to do their job of providing peace and security properly, and are at grave risk of exacerbating (rather than ameliorating) conflict and of harming (rather than safe-guarding) those whom they are sent to protect. Thus, against the valuable background of previous contributions made in their previous publications by members of the Military Ethics Education Network (MEEN) to our understanding of effective moral education and character development of military personnel, it behooves us to consider whether there are better or worse methods of going about the important task of developing regional knowledge and effective cultural expertise for military forces.

In that sense, while it attempted a rapid response to an urgent need, HTS also represented one of the military’s persistent failings in seeking a “quick fix” to a complex problem. HTS was designed as an “off-the-shelf” program: lacking relevant expertise, the organization simply tries to go out and purchase the relevant experts in the open market, rather than having invested the time and care to cultivate that expertise within its own ranks. There are, of course, drawbacks to this approach of a cultural sort as well: the newcomers are seen as strange aliens, not a part of the “warrior culture,” in this case, and threatened with misunderstanding and marginalization. Those feelings can be mutual, and lead to the kind of disaffection that apparently led some HTS members to quit prematurely and criticize the program. The newcomers also present a practical obstacle to effective battlefield integration, much as NGOs trying to operate amidst armed conflict sometimes present a risk to themselves and others. This is hardly desirable in a battlespace already overpopulated with increasing varieties of non-military personnel, often acting without license or coordination. Thus, the “quick-fix” of HTS quickly presented its own variety of cultural conflict, involving the difficulty of regular military personnel collaborating effectively with academics (who are generally unfamiliar with standard operating procedures during combat).

A second approach to providing “human terrain” resources to military personnel was actually tried first, with some success. “Crash courses” in cultural education were added to pre-deployment training in so-called “reach back” centers at Marine Corps University (Quantico) and Army Command and General Staff College (Ft. Leavenworth). Prospects for deployment were regaled with “smart cards” and interactive CD-Roms, distilling presumably essential cultural knowledge into a handy pamphlet or fact sheet that could be carried on one’s person as a quick reference guide. Reach-back centers also served as headquarters for regional and cultural experts who taught these courses and compiled and distilled the essential knowledge, while providing an accessible database of cultural information that could be accessed remotely by commanders in the field via secure internet and satellite connection. Live consultation of brigade teams with cultural experts back home via satellite and video teleconferencing was also an option.

This initial approach to the cultural knowledge deficit, predictably, appealed more strongly to academic experts than an intensive program of rigorous basic training followed by actual deployment in combat. And to be fair, such a solution also addressed the uncomfortable logistical problem described above, by avoiding the overpopulation of the battlespace with a variety of largely untrained and unprepared non-combat personnel. It is not a bad solution, but it is likewise not a very good one. Assembling all this expertise for remote consultation was probably too little and too late to adequately address the kinds of problems that General Petraeus had witnessed during his initial tour in Iraq. Academic and professional authorities would argue that complex, nuanced cultural knowledge is not easily, or even appropriately distilled or “boiled down” on a wallet card for use by a relatively untrained new recruit. And brigade commanders themselves often expressed a desire for immediate, on-site advice – an “angel on the shoulder,” as they put it – in lieu of a “guide on the side,” remotely accessible only by advance appointment. The kinds of practical problems being encountered required a more rapid response time than this leisurely (and safer) academic model could provide.

The obvious solution for the long term, of course, is to strengthen the preparation of officers and enlisted personnel routinely in cultural and regional knowledge, alongside foreign language skills. This is very likely the optimal solution in terms of cultivating the required expertise within the ranks of the organization itself, but it is also the most time-consuming and expensive. And it is not sensitive to rapid change: by the time we educate military officers with competence in Urdu or Pashtun, the focus of both conflict and urgent need has moved on to, say, Yemen, or Somalia, or Libya. Critics of this “long-term investment” approach to cultural expertise would likely point to the

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legions of Russian language and culture experts in military and intelligence, as well as in academic circles, left high, dry, and bereft of useful employment following the end of the Cold War. (And, lest the irony be lost, no sooner do we abandon them and berate the “outmoded” model, than their area of expertise once again flares to the surface as political tensions with the Russian Federation arise.) Our response time, on this model, is perpetually lagging behind the present needs, and utterly out of phase with the pace and direction of cultural transformation.

The US Air Force, cognizant of these myriad problems, has developed a different approach to regional and cultural education through a program dubbed “C-cubed” (C³) – “Cross Cultural Competence.” For the reasons adduced above (proponents of this approach argue), it is not efficient or feasible to provide rigorous and thorough cultural knowledge of a specific sort, certainly not throughout the organization, and to each and every individual member of it. Instead, the Air Force philosophy is to educate military personnel to adapt effectively, and interact intelligently across a range of unfamiliar cultural situations, to develop a kind of “multi-cultural sensitivity” – and leave the specific languages and knowledge of regional customs to locals and to a few experts within the organization.

Each approach has its own inherent limitations. The HTS program represented an ambitious and radical approach to addressing the cultural deficit. Long-term assessment of the program’s effectiveness has yet to be accomplished. The other approaches are both more tried and true, and perhaps pedagogically satisfying, but, as noted, slow, inefficient, and unresponsive to emerging needs. The Air Force C³ model offers perhaps the most promise of effectively sensitizing and equipping military personnel, quickly and with reasonable efficiency and effectiveness, to operate in unfamiliar cultural terrain. It remains an open question, however, whether such an approach, adopted through allied and coalition militaries, would be sufficient to minimize risks of a Bagram-like cultural incident of a sort that otherwise, and without warning, can bring a well-intentioned relief, development, and nation-building effort to the brink of despair.

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[1] This is no longer the case. Following the Nisoor Square incident, the controversial practice of granting legal immunity of foreign civilian contractors under local domestic law was repealed in Iraq. For their protection, HTS employees were henceforth converted to regular civilian civil service positions in the U.S. Department of Defense upon completion of the training in Ft. Leavenworth