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SUBCOMMITTEE**

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE TO THE US MILITARY
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman and Ranking Members of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, thank you for this opportunity to testify on the importance of socio-cultural knowledge to US military personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. I am appearing today in my personal capacity as a cultural anthropologist vice my official capacity as the senior social science adviser to the US Army's Human Terrain System (HTS). As such, my comments should be construed only as my own conclusions and not official Department of Defense or US Army policy.

I have spent the majority of my professional career trying to understand the relevance of cultural knowledge to the military, and seeking ways to deliver that information. Socio-cultural knowledge is a critical enabler for Stability Operations and irregular warfare. Stability and reconstruction operations pose a tremendous challenge to US Government personnel because they require different skills, knowledge, training, and coordination than those tasks commonly required by major combat operations. At a minimum, the short-term tasks include providing security to a local population, restoring essential services, and addressing immediate humanitarian needs. The long-term tasks include encouraging a viable economy, developing the rule of law, promoting democratic institutions, and assisting in the creation of a robust civil society.

Unlike major combat operations, stability and reconstruction operations must be conducted among, and with the support of, the indigenous civilian population. Working effectively with local civilians in order to rebuild a country requires knowledge of how the

society is organized, who has power, what their values and beliefs are, and how they interpret their own history, among other things.

Experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan over the past few years have demonstrated the benefits of having this knowledge, and the drawbacks of not having it in terms of lives, money and mission success. I want to provide you with a short, simple example from one of our Human Terrain Teams (HTT) in Iraq that shows what a difference a little cultural knowledge makes:

In October 2007, two members of an HTT provided support to a maneuver company conducting an operation in a small rural village, known to be an area in which al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) operates. During the operation, an elderly Muslim man was wrongly detained. The HTT facilitated his release and coached the company commander on how to remedy the insult by offering a public apology in front of witnesses from his village. On the day following the release of the elderly man, a sheikh from a local tribe came to the patrol base and said that the "respectful" nature of the current operation (and the release of the elderly man who turned out to be his uncle) had prompted him to seek Coalition assistance in securing his village from AQI. He offered to provide over 100 local fighters to oppose AQI, and requested air to ground recognition to prevent fratricide. At the conclusion of the meeting as a gesture of good will, the sheikh told the company commander and the HTT the specific location of a deeply buried IED in front of the mosque and the location of five other IEDs. In the words of the company commander: "The combination of cultural sensitivity and the

assistance of HTT on the mission to ... was the reason for our success. If I had the opportunity I'd definitely use them again."

A critical question is how US forces should acquire or access this knowledge. There are multiple possible means, to include: education, training, advisors, and databases. An additional question concerns the optimal amount of socio-cultural knowledge that US military personnel should have, and the trade-offs in terms of time, money, and manpower that acquiring this knowledge entails. After all, making every soldier and marine into a social scientist is neither feasible nor desirable.

Professional military education (PME) is a long-term solution to ensuring that the US military has the requisite level of knowledge about foreign cultures and societies. Lessons learned, insight gained, and skills acquired in a classroom influence how problems are conceived, solutions are developed, and decisions made in subsequent professional positions. Most professional military education institutions in the US face a number of challenges in meeting this need, to include: lack of qualitative social sciences within curricula; inadequate attention to developing inter-cultural and cognitive skills; limited opportunity for civilian graduate education; few social scientists on staff and limited research opportunities for students.

Recognizing that socio-cultural knowledge has improved the effectiveness of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, all branches of the US military have begun cultural pre-deployment training programs. In addition, the Combat Training Centers have developed scenario-based role-player training simulating operational conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Creating training programs were initially a "bottom-up" movement in response to lessons learned, rather than a "top down" push resulting from official DoD

requirements. As a result of this process, cultural training varies widely in content, structure, and time allotted. However, the Army and other military services are now developing comprehensive cultural and language strategies

Collecting socio-cultural information in a computerized database is another means to provide US forces with information about the local population in their area of operations. This is not a new idea: such a cross-cultural database was designed and built in the 1940s by the US military to prepare for war in the Pacific. However, when the Operation Iraqi Freedom began, there was no such ready-made repository for the collective knowledge about a given local area: each brigade stored information differently in its own local files, and transferred that information haphazardly to successor units. Because brigades had no system to store, sort, organize, or effectively transfer this information, much of it was lost during transfer of authority between units.

Recognizing this issue, the DoD made an effort to develop such a database in 2004, known as the Cultural Preparation of the Environment. Subsequently, in field-testing this database, we discovered that data needed to be geospatially referenced; and commanders and their staffs had little time available to use such a tool and little inclination to do so. What commanders actually wanted was an advisory staff element that would be attached 24/7 to the brigade, who could develop, use, and maintain such a database. Thus, the Army's HTS includes both a database, called the Mapping Human Terrain Tool Kit (MAP HT), and teams of advisers.

Operating forces can also acquire the requisite knowledge about the local population through the use of cultural advisers. At the present time, the US Army's HTS is probably the best-known example of an adviser program. The HTS mission is to

provide commanders in the field with relevant socio-cultural understanding in order to assist them in developing courses of action that are better harmonized with the interests of the local population, and which entail less kinetic force. This mission is achieved through 5-8 person teams of mixed military reservist and civilian personnel who are attached on orders to the military unit they support. The team does not rotate out with the brigade at the end of their tour, but remains in place. For example, the HTT in Taji will remain in Taji as long as US forces do. Individual team members are rotated out on a staggered basis, ensuring the continuity of socio-cultural knowledge and enabling each brigade to start their tour at a higher place on the learning curve. In addition, HTS supports the teams through a Reach-back Research Center and a network of subject matter experts, who are able to conduct complex research and analysis in support of a commander's requirements.

Currently, there are eight HTTs attached to brigade combat teams in Iraq and three in Afghanistan. By the end of September 2008, there will be a total of 24 teams deployed. In FY09, two additional teams will also be deployed.

Solutions to the military's immediate socio-cultural knowledge requirement have been ad hoc, bottom up, and developed by the respective military services in response to their own perceived needs.

For any of these solutions to be sustainable beyond the immediate conflicts, they should be rationalized, coordinated, and institutionalized. Otherwise, the capabilities will be lost and will have to be rebuilt yet again. After WWII, for example, much of the foreign governance and administration capacity within the US military was dismantled.

Similarly, after the Vietnam War, the institutional capacity of the US government to conduct stability operations was lost, leaving the US with little institutional memory about how to meet cultural knowledge requirements at the present time.