

Cultural battlegrounds: Why Culture matters in the Global War on Terror
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(Editor's Note: The following editorial is not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, the U.S. Government, Department of Defense or Department of the Air Force.)

In every culture, there exists the possibility of a mob of people that could be easily compelled to action by those who know how. Understanding culture, for the military professional, should be thought of as the art and science of understanding cause and effect in social contexts.

In operational contexts, culture is human terrain; just as real as the ground on which we fight, the airspace we own and the seas we dominate. Culture subsumes, among so much else, a people's morals, values and ethics -- what is beautiful, right and wrong; what people will or will not fight and die for. These are all aspects of culture that military professionals need to understand to be successful in 21st Century warfare.

Why worry about what is beautiful? Military information support to operations cannot produce effective media and/or conduct psychological operations without a working knowledge of what certain people regard as pleasing to the eye, ear or heart.

Understanding what people consider right or wrong is as important to the private on his first foot patrol through an Afghan village as it is to the four-star general who makes a speech to another nation on international television.

The knowledge of what people are willing to fight and die for should be obvious. Sadly, it is not. Evidence is clear that the spate of Green-on-Blue shootings in Afghanistan is overwhelmingly caused by cultural transgressions. From refusing to urinate in private to condemnations of the Qur'an, we as a military seem not to understand that we sometimes cause our own problems.

Military professionals must, of necessity, not succumb to flimsy explanations, such as those bandied about on television, radio and internet news sources, that "those" people are just "crazies." Sure, fanatics exist in the form of extremists all around the globe. Many of them are lobbing Molotov cocktails, rocks and RPGs at our embassies and consulates across the north of Africa as I write this. But one must ask him or herself: "Which is more likely?" An entire culture of people is crazy enough to be incited to violence by a poorly produced video clip downloaded from the Internet. Or, there are a few -- maybe only one -- individuals or organizations behind the violence.

Experience has shown that the latter is usually the case. One example is a band of bad actors that understand a culture so well that all they need do is search the Internet for the most effective stimulus to create a predetermined effect on the anniversary of the 9/11 attacks.

Leaders of extremist, Islamist and illicit organizations understand well that culture is a fire burning in the heart of every human. All one needs to do to make that fire erupt into action is fan the flames just a little. And then sit back from a safe distance and watch. Watch as their small efforts spread across a region or even a continent. Watch as we Americans continue to try and explain what is happening while wearing what can only be described as blinders of ethnocentrism. Watch as we lose more American lives and treasure fighting an enemy that is overwhelmingly outmatched on every single plane of warfare save one: the human terrain.

So the challenge seems clear: military leaders of all ranks must strive to cleave the extraneous information away from the actual causes of deadly effects. To understand that it is impossible to fight an idea or ideology, but very possible to target our awesome military might on the specific bad actors perverting ideas and ideologies. To bring the fight to the few who are manipulating the many.

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