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Professors in the Trenches: Deployed Soldiers and Social Science Academics (Part 4 of 5)

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“How do I come to know what I didn’t know I needed to know?”

This is the *fourth installment* of a *five-part series*. Each article was co-authored by one Army soldier/civilian and one university professor/academic as part of a joint research project. This project and product responds to the Army’s objectives regarding the integration of cultural social sciences into its training and operations.

Introduction to the Series

The overarching goal of a “Military-Social Science Roundtable”, coupled with a related Delphi research process, is to boost, broaden, and render more viable the relationship between the military and academic fields of cultural studies in a way that benefits both communities. Specifically, the Roundtable and Delphi research process should foster a level of cooperation between these communities which assists tactical military units as well as military/political decision makers to ask the right questions in order to conduct full spectrum operations in unfamiliar cultural settings. The process and the venue of such cooperative roundtable conferences is intended to improve not only military long-term capabilities but also bring academic social science thinking into real world challenges.

The concept for the Military-Social Science roundtable and its associated Delphi process arose out of three common areas of interest. In the spring of 2007, the Command and General Staff College’s Center for Army Tactics (CGSC-CTAC) was seeking further perspectives and input from culturally-focused social science experts in order to enhance its training and research. CTAC was also engaged with many CGSC faculty members and students who had returned from Iraq, Afghanistan, or other combat zones, and who wanted a venue through which they could share unique observations regarding their deployment and interaction with foreign populations. Concurrently, the Training and Doctrine Command’s (TRADOC) Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) was interested in further opportunities to leverage resources from its network of academics and foreign security specialists against the warfighter’s need for intercultural capabilities. A third impetus to hold such cooperative roundtables stemmed from academe -- specifically within the social science community -- where there are a number of very knowledgeable and experienced individuals who believe in applying their disciplines to prevent unnecessary casualties. This is especially important in an era where conflicts are raging in a

number of different geographical as well as cultural environments, revealing a need to explore areas where cultural, social science studies may benefit today's decision makers from the tactical to strategic level.

The confluence of these three areas of interest prompted CTAC and FMSO to jointly develop and host a roundtable and Delphi process at Fort Leavenworth. CTAC found the military participants and FMSO found the academic participants. The nearby University of Kansas – particularly its military supporters with longstanding ties to FMSO and the Combined Arms Center (CAC) – became a local partner in the event.

The primary objective of the roundtable was to publish one or more papers – written together by the participants – that address two related topics:

Unique and/or common experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, or other areas of operations that may help define the military's need for culturally-related social science training, information, and/or methodologies.

The possible way ahead for “military anthropology”, military and cultural geography, and related culturally focused social science disciplines in terms of research, development, and cooperation that could benefit the military at multiple levels; i.e., from the Soldier level to senior planning staffs.

To meet this objective, four military personnel were each asked to write a paper on their – or their unit's – experience interfacing with a local population while deployed. The paper was to focus on: mission challenges stemming from cultural differences between the Soldiers and the indigenous population, how the Soldier or the unit adapted to those challenges, and whether these adaptations were successful.

This marked the beginning of the Delphi portion of the event. The Delphi method is an iterative process used to collect and distill the judgments of experts using a series of questions interspersed with feedback. The questions are designed to focus on problems, opportunities, solutions, or forecasts. Each subsequent set of questions is developed based on the results of the previous ones. In this case, each Soldier shared his paper with one academic with whom he was paired. Over a series of weeks or months, the academic asked the Soldier questions regarding the experience about which the Soldier had written, with the intention of investigating the story from a Social Science perspective. As these exchanges occurred, the academic gradually integrated his or her observations into the paper, eventually co-authoring the final text with the Soldier and forming the basis of this book.

On June 21st, 2007 – literally in the middle of the Delphi process -- all four teams (each consisting of one Soldier and one academic) participated in a one-day “Military-Social Science Roundtable during which they openly presented and discussed the Soldiers' experiences and the academics' observations. This roundtable was open to the public and facilitated questions and comments from additional attendees. The concept of social scientists and more specifically anthropologists working closely with military veterans -- rather unlikely partners in today's

environment -- drew a fair amount of attention from the academic and military communities, as well as the national and local press.

While there have been numerous conferences and much discourse about “military anthropology” and related concepts, this was one of the first, focused symposiums on this issue with the direct objective to publish one or more substance-filled papers intended to move this field forward. Most conferences or similar events on this topic have focused on sharing ideas, sharing information, and networking; not on publication. Moreover, the papers stemming from this roundtable have the unique credibility of having been written by social scientists -- several of whom are directly affiliated with universities or other DoD services -- in conjunction with experienced military personnel at the Army’s Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth.

These writings – which now comprise the chapters of this book – represent only the beginning of what is hopefully an ever growing appreciation for the extent to which social science and specifically Anthropology can substantially improve a soldier’s ability to stabilize a situation in a hostile environment as well as assist a unit’s capability to deal more viably with a culturally unknown, possibly uncooperative population. Furthermore, such culture-based knowledge will certainly contribute a great deal to a senior decision-maker’s ability to better understand second or third order effects of any course of action/non-action. Cultural fields of study will not provide tactical, operational, strategic, or political planners all the answers they need to know about the environment in question. On the contrary, cultural fields of study will provide these planners the foundation-level context necessary to ask the right questions from the outset rather than erring in their assumptions.

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Part 4 of 5

An Advisor’s Experience: C CO, 2/19th SFG (A) December ’01 to September ’02

Michael Coker and Pauletta Otis

Interacting with indigenous civilians and indigenous militaries on a daily basis, and in a way that enhances mission success, force protection, and building democracy, is a role that is a new challenge for most soldiers. Training and preparing soldiers for this cultural interaction is as important as training for the kinetic piece.

Successful interaction between US military forces and the indigenous population is successful when it results in an indigenous citizenry that supports the country and its future. When it is not successful, there is an enhanced possibility that indigenous people will take the side of an insurgency with all of its destructive potential for the country, the region and even US interests in the AO.

The following essay provides valuable insight for the teaching and training of future soldiers who find themselves in advisory roles whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere. This knowledge and understanding is based on experience as well as formal on-the-job training provided by the US Army and other military teaching/ training experiences.

The first insight and suggestion is to work as a part of a team. As a team, observe meetings, discussions and dilemmas with local leaders. After the meetings, provide input to the team's decision maker as to what was observed, various interpretations of what "really happened," and note both the 'normal' and the 'abnormal.' This allows the decision maker to compile and analyze from a number of differing sources which complementary and/or conflicting reports. The local leaders knew that all of the members of the team were involved, understood the situation, and were important to the solutions. It is important to have a designated decision maker so that the team could speak with one voice – at least in public.

The second major suggestion is to understand the competing loyalties in the Area of Operations. Many who first went into Afghanistan after the removal of the USSR and the associated Mujahidden assumed that the Afghans would be loyal to a "cause." What they found out was that there was not over riding loyalty to a cause but that the Afghans were now loyal to local leaders, warlords, and their associated interests. For American soldiers, this came as something of a shock. Expecting a 'mirror image' in other warriors, the Americans had assumed loyalty to the 'big picture' – reflecting their own loyalty to concepts such as democracy, patriotism and the 'good of the nation. Neither removal of the Taliban nor fall of Al Queda provided a unifying cause for Afghani soldiers. Where this came something of a surprise, on further consideration it became apparent that a) some of the original reporting may have been overdrawn, and b) Afghanistan is a rural country with huge transportation and communication challenges partly as a result of the mountainous terrain and partly as a consequence of the climate. Kunar Valley could be another country insofar as the citizens of Kabul are concerned. Citizens from Kunar may have not seen an "official" from Kabul let alone have any loyalty based on interests, allegiances, nationalism or patriotism.

Loyalty, even to the Americans working on their behalf, was also pretty slim and transitory. The warlords that the US forces were working with were not necessarily loyal to the US cause of eradicating Al Qaeda and Taliban. They were often simply interested in receiving American money, aid, military support, and personal aggrandizement. In addition, simply by virtue of American soldiers working with a particular warlord, implied that America backed this warlord, which in turn gave the warlord an increased measure of prestige, honor, and power. Temporary loyalty is not always counterproductive: when used, manipulated, or at least understood, local alliances can be built based on name and support from local chiefs. In one case, the US forces

had credibility with the local population of Nangahar simply because a local warlord was identified with the United States' forces.

One of the other important lessons learned is that people in war zones may use US forces for their own personal gain or that of their people – which may have something or nothing to do with the US mandate. Any information given the US forces by the local population, indigenous soldier, or warlord has to be verified by separate sources. There have been numerous instances where US forces, trusting the 'source', took actions that only supported a local interest monger and had nothing to do with the mission. Personal and family vendettas are always a part of local tribal warfare and it is easy for US military forces to be innocently caught up. In Afghanistan, anyone could be called "Al Qaeda" or "Taliban" and US reaction would be to use force early and well until they recognized that they were to be used only as 'muscle.' Diligence is required: a good interpreter helps also. The "terps" are more than translators – they add context, motive, intent, and personal information critical to understanding the local players.

The key is to remain aware that the US forces will eventually leave and that the people on the ground will 'stay.' This is "their reality," and "they" will behave in both their own short term and long term interests.

The third lesson concerns human relationships. Men as friends or as soldiers can and do build relationships in war zones that are important, however short-lived. There is a quid-pro-quo aspect to providing aid for a warlords' people and his loyalty to the person that made this happen. Early on in the Afghanistan conflict, humanitarian aid and equipment drops by US forces that supported local populations were essential to laying the groundwork for future cooperation (There are pictures of some indigenous soldiers wearing US Army "poly pro" as an outer garment. Poly pro is designed to be worn beneath an outer garment as part of a cold weather uniform. These soldiers, however, wore the poly pro as an outer garment/uniform because they were proud of clothing from the US military. It was a mark of prestige and honor to be seen wearing it.).

Corruption is another subject that is fraught with difficulty. Americans are quick to judge corruption as being 'wrong,' 'evil,' and 'criminal.' Nevertheless, in a war zone, getting anything accomplished may include non-legal and a-legal behaviors. Without the power of a central state and/ or a security police force with arrest, detention and other legal processes, it is difficult to even define the concept. Nevertheless, US forces are under some pretty strict guidelines regarding how money is spent, contracting arrangements, and rates of pay for employees. Afghans understand that US soldiers have rules that they must follow.

Not that corruption is always an 'in your face' cultural behavior in Afghanistan. US forces were told by local civilians about vehicle check points where militia would collect a tax from occupants in vehicles, but did not observe this first hand. US military leaders made it a point to tell the local military leader in the area and demand that the extortion stop, but it still occurred. The fifth suggestion concerns human relationships. This seems to be the single most important key to building and maintaining rapport in an Area of Operations. It became apparent that soldiers who grew up on farms, small towns, or the south tended to do well in an advisor environment. This may be related to having a "trusting nature" – which goes along with friendliness and sociability. It was noted that when people were treated fairly, including

indigenous soldiers, that there was an immediate payback. Not only did the US personnel gain respect, but on a simply practical note, they gained more “mileage” out of people.

The American soldier needs to be as adaptable as a police officer – especially a police officer who works in a multicultural environment dealing with many different situations and ‘types’ of people on a daily basis. The police officer depends on people for information, tips, situation advisement and is required to build relationships with the community and community leaders. This is very much reflective of the ‘new’ military requirements for serving in places like Afghanistan.

A seventh suggestion concerns conflict management: Although trained in Middle East Studies, and familiar enough with the language that neither language nor culture stand in the way of ‘job success,’ the advisor has seldom been trained in “conflict assessment and conflict management.” It was very common to have two or more tribal leaders come at the same time, or sequentially, and ask for support against “the other” or to ask for the US team leader to solve a long-standing dispute between tribal elements. This ranged from marriage disputes to land management, control of mountain passes, access to US goods and services, and a range of other important or trivial arguments. If the American is going to be ‘used’ as judge and jury in indigenous disputes, he needs to be specifically trained to do so.

Suggestions for future teaching and training: It is important to train soldiers to work in specific cultural, religious, social environments. A “cookie cutter” approach to teaching will not work: every AO is different and each soldier’s task in the AO is different. The basic building blocks should focus on the soldier, leader, and job description as applied to the specific AO.

As an example, while in Jalalabad, a US advisor knew that the Governor of Nangahar Province (Haji Qadir) was a former Mujahideen soldier who fought against the Soviets. He also knew that the Governor had a brother named Abdul Haq who was also a Mujahideen soldier. Abdul Haq was killed in Jalalabad by the Taliban when attempted to establish control there (sometime in November or early December 2001). During a negotiating session, a US agency contractor, who did not know these facts, asked Haji Qadir about his brother. Most of the US military team was aware that Qadir’s brother was killed, so listened for what Qadir would say. Fortunately Qadir took the question in stride and explained that his brother was dead. The contractor did not know much about Qadir nor the history of the area; the consequences could have been disastrous if Qadir had been offended by the question.

Language training is important but not critical. A soldier’s core communication skills are more important. Without those, he cannot interact appropriately even if he knows the language. It takes months or years of training to achieve a level of language proficiency that allows even basic understanding of the language. Understanding the culture requires not a translator, but an interpreter.

Who should teach our soldiers the necessary cultural skills for today’s battlefield? How much training should a soldier receive? On today’s battlefield, many tactical decisions are made at platoon level and below, yet some of these soldiers receive no cultural training at all. Another way to fill the information gap is by using a cultural advisor at the platoon level. This could be a social scientist or soldier with specific cultural training and capabilities in the area of conflict management.

Whatever the Area of Operations, the future soldier must know and understand the culture of the people, the consequences of crisis and conflict, and how to interact so as to complete the mission successfully.

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