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# Cultural Awareness In Stability and Support Operations

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In today's volatile world of ethnic conflict, humanitarian relief operations, and disaster assistance, the United States Army finds itself deployed on missions to provide a stabilizing presence in various locations. When it comes to preparing soldiers for these types of missions, however, there is a missing piece, and that is cultural awareness.

At the upper levels of command and control, specialists are assigned to ensure that the commanders are politically astute, historically aware, and culturally sensitized. Unfortunately, this information has no real conduit down to company and platoon levels, and, perhaps most important, to the individual soldier. In most organizations of the conventional infantry force, there is no Foreign Area Officer or Civil Affairs Officer—personnel who specialize in these matters—to fill this gap. Al-

though it is vital for senior leaders to be well informed in these facets of operations, it is often the company commander, platoon leader, or squad leader who finds himself on an isolated checkpoint or observation post dealing with the civilian populace day by day.

How can we prepare our junior leaders and soldiers for these scenarios? What assets do we have available to inform and sensitize them to these very foreign environments? The answer to these questions may be easier than you think.

The question most often asked by soldiers and junior leaders is, "Why are we here?" They have to wonder why they are deployed to a certain country to help sort out what is, all too often, an internal problem of the host nation. The United States has survived the Cold War as the sole remaining global superpower. But the yardstick for measuring

*superpower* is no longer simply the ability to mass more forces than the other guy. It has evolved into the ability to export one's own values. In the case of the United States, those include peace, stability, and democracy. That is the guiding factor in most of our deployments today. The United States has the credibility and, more important, the ability to support the entire spectrum of peace operations. So we find ourselves deployed to such places as Haiti, Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo. Do our soldiers and junior leaders *really* understand this crucial aspect of national security policy?

With the decentralized nature of peace operations and the growing international intolerance for violent solutions to internal conflict, it is in our best interests to inform our soldiers of the subtleties of the environment in which they will find themselves.

With all the new things going on, soldiers will want to know what their focus should be. There are many models upon which to draw when studying internal conflicts in a foreign state. But we must be careful to pare this down to its core elements and confine the discussion to pertinent information. With all of the things to do before a deployment, the N-Hour sequence is probably not the time to force this information down the chain of command. Rather, preparations must begin early and must be sustained on a constant basis.

The areas that I propose focusing on are basic, and the information is relatively easy to obtain.

**Geographical Aspects.** Where is this place on the map, and how does its internal strife affect the countries around it?

**Historical Aspects.** No need to go back centuries here. The focus should be on contemporary history, say the past few decades.

**Political Aspects.** Who are the major political players, and what do they want?

**Cultural Aspects.** Who are the people? What is their religious and ethnic makeup? What are their customs, and what effect will our presence have on them?

This model seems relatively basic, but it is by no means the last word on what information to gather. The target audience is the key. Enlisted soldiers, noncommissioned and commissioned officers with varying levels of education and backgrounds, competing priorities, different duty positions and MOSs all make for a broad-based audience. The information should be concise, clear, and pertinent to the upcoming mission. If you are keeping track of your unit's geographic area of responsibility, you can focus even further and, more important, earlier.

In this age of technological advance and the telecommunications boom, there are few excuses for not staying informed. There is a multitude of free information on the Internet. When using the Internet, however, stick to reputable news sites, such as *CNN Interactive*, *The New York Times*, and *The BBC Online*. Not only are these sites

constantly updated, but you can also customize them to focus on a specific region of the world.

Other sources of current information are foreign affairs-based journals and magazines and news publications. Of particular note is *The Economist*, which is not simply a business magazine, but a world-renowned source of international news. In addition, numerous domestic papers provide excellent international coverage of events unfolding worldwide.

Last, but not least, television can add a critical "third dimension" to your mission preparations. With the "CNN effect" influencing world opinion daily, we professional officers can use timely video footage to capture and tie together the other information and put a "face" on it. Some of the video coverage on television will contain a great deal more intelligence than you might think.

At company and platoon level, the commanders and platoon leaders can develop sustainable programs using as little as 15 minutes as week. With a map of the unit's area of responsibility posted in the dayroom or command posts, along with some 3x5 index cards containing pertinent data posted weekly, a system for tracking events can be established. Reviewing taped news footage can add to the understanding of volatile situations as they evolve on the world stage. A payday activities brief after physical training can further tie it all together.

### A Case Study:

In December of 1994, with the Dayton Conference quickly wrapping up, the 3-325th Airborne Battalion Combat Team (ABCT), based in Italy, was notified to begin preparations for deployment as the first NATO ground combat force to move into Tuzla, in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Having just returned from an assignment to the Joint Military Contact Program, an offshoot of the Partnership for Peace Program, I was assigned to the battalion staff as the S-5. It helped that I had a knowledge of Serbo-Croatian, was married to a Croatian national, and had traveled extensively in the region, but what about the rest of my battalion? I broached the

subject with my battalion commander and voiced my desire to begin a program of cultural and historical awareness briefings to coincide with our tactical and logistical preparations. We decided it would be best to present these briefings down at the platoon and section level and to keep them brief and to the point. With this guidance I set off to spread the information throughout the battalion combat team.

First, I made up a few simple handouts, which contained a series of maps starting at the regional level and working down to Tuzla itself. Second, I typed up a brief historical summary of events that led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia. I then posted on an easily portable board some pictures I had taken while on leave in Croatia and Slovenia. Finally, I coordinated with the harried company leaders and key staff sections for briefing times and places.

The briefings went well, with the soldiers, from commanders down to the lowest ranking enlisted soldier, listening intently and asking good questions. I brought my wife along on several briefings to add the "native" element to the sessions. We briefed in dayrooms, offices, motor pools, and maintenance sheds. The briefings obviously had their intended effect. The soldiers appeared calmer, more confident, and better able to understand the situation they were about to enter. We used video footage for certain elements of the battalion, particularly the scout platoon. The video footage from *CNN International* was these soldiers' first real look at the various factions and their equipment. As their former platoon leader, I knew how much this information would affect their train-up for the operation.

As we moved to the departure airfield at Aviano, Italy, I continued talking to the soldiers and answering questions. They were hungry for information to help alleviate the anxiety of the wait. All in all, I believe the program we developed had something to do with the extremely professional conduct of the battalion and its soldiers. More important, it gave them the feeling that we, the leaders, cared about them and

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wanted them to understand why they were deploying and how that related to the commander's intent.

To summarize, I think it is fair to say that there are numerous requirements competing for our attention as commanders and leaders. But as we accelerate into the 21st Century, the armed forces, particularly the Army, will be placed in harm's way in missions mandated by NATO and the United Nations.

Weapon proficiency, equipment maintenance, individual readiness, and collective training are the cornerstones of success. But now that we find ourselves deployed into stability and support operations, maybe we should add cultural awareness to our kit bag of combat multipliers. It is the right thing to do for our soldiers as we lead them into strange lands to carry out their missions.

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