
CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

The Cornerstone of Success in a COIN Environment

MAJOR MARK S. LESLIE

“Military operations, as combat actions carried out against opposing forces, are of limited importance and are never the total conflict.”

— Roger Trinquier
Author of *Modern Warfare*

Cultural awareness is a term that has grown and morphed in the course of the global war on terrorism, and the actual meaning and the “*how can I implement this in actual combat*” and “*why this is important to me*” has been somewhat lost in the “big picture” in my opinion. Some Soldiers perceive cultural awareness training as another block to check during required pre-deployment training. This assumption is partly correct — it is mandated training. But if this is where the unit, or the Army as a whole, draws the line then we are significantly shortchanging our troops in their preparation for combat in a counterinsurgency (COIN) environment. Cultural awareness training must be embraced by the unit early on in the train-up process and implemented in all echelons of training. Cultural

awareness is a combat multiplier in a COIN environment and its importance is relative to that of our combat skills training. Cultural awareness training should not be the training event that is sacrificed at the expense of time in the training schedule.

When most people think of cultural awareness training, they think of sitting in a classroom learning a litany of cultural do’s and do not’s. This may be a baseline and is the first step in the ladder of our real objective, which is cultural understanding. But, it is not cultural awareness training. Real cultural awareness training takes those do’s and do not’s, as well as history, geography, cultural nuances, and social norms and expands them into training at all echelons of training. For example, the task of conducting a cordon and search operation is given to a platoon. One way to integrate cultural awareness training would be to include role players (as civilians on the battlefield) who would react to the

A Soldier with the 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment talks with some young citizens during a search for weapon caches in Iraq February 10, 2007.

Tech Sergeant Molly Dzitko, USAF



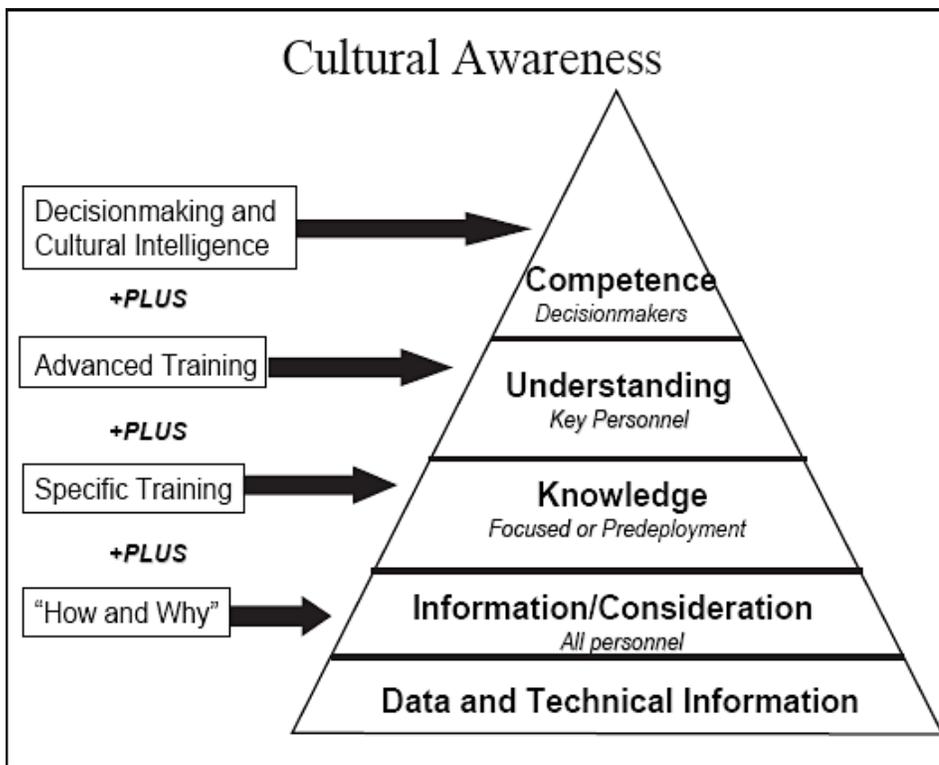


Figure 1 — The Cultural Awareness Pyramid

actions of the platoon based on social norms, etc. Then, the outcome and conduct of the exercise are based on the tactical decisions of the leader on the ground, who should incorporate cultural sensitivity and cultural awareness into the planning, preparation and execution of the mission. This cultivates and builds cultural understanding, which is our overall goal. If we place emphasis at all echelons on integrating cultural awareness into our thought process in a COIN environment, then we are successfully building cultural understanding and the impact it has on how we conduct warfare in a COIN environment. The ability to recognize the importance of cultural awareness in training, and therefore cultural understanding on the battlefield, can determine our actions on the battlefield and our success in a COIN fight. Our successes in sector are directly linked to how we conduct ourselves on a daily basis "outside the wire" in regards to the population. It is indisputable that the population is the center of gravity in a COIN fight, and therefore, our understanding of their culture and our attitude and demeanor in respect to that should be a significant factor that is taken into consideration in that fight.

An outstanding publication put out by the Combat Studies Institute, *Through the Lens of Cultural Awareness: A Primer for U.S. Armed Forces Deploying to Arab and Middle Eastern Countries* by William D. Wunderle, provides us with some baseline of reference in relation to all things culture related:

Culture: A set of traditions, belief systems, and behaviors. Culture is shaped by many factors including history, religion, ethnic identity, language, and nationality. Culture evolves in response to various pressures and influences and is learned through socialization; it is not inherent. In short, a culture provides a lens through which its members see and understand the world.

In a military context, think of culture as simply another element of terrain, parallel to geographic terrain. Just as a hill or saddle affect a Soldier's ability to maneuver, so can religion, perceptions, and language help military planners find centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities, and assist in campaign planning and the proper allocation of resources.

Cultural Awareness: The ability to recognize and understand the effects of culture on people's values and behaviors.

In the military context, cultural awareness can be defined as the "cognizance of cultural terrain in military operations and the connections between connections and war fighting." Cultural awareness implies an understanding of the need to consider cultural terrain in military operations, a knowledge of which cultural factors are important for a given situation and why, and a specified level of understanding for a target culture.

At an elementary level, cultural awareness is information, the meaning humans assign to what they know about a culture. A principal task involved in acquiring cultural awareness is to collect cultural information and transform it by adding progressively greater meaning as understanding deepens.

The Primer goes on to explain cultural consideration, cultural knowledge, cultural understanding, and cultural competence, with a corresponding illustration that captures our goal in reference to cultural awareness/understanding training and implementation.

Cultural Consideration: ("how and why") The incorporation of generic concepts in common military training – knowing how and why to study culture and where to find cultural factors and expertise.

Cultural Knowledge: (specific training) The exposure to the recent history of a target culture. It includes basic cultural issues such as significant groups, actors, leaders, and dynamic, as well as cultural niceties and survival language skills.

Cultural Understanding: (advanced training) This refers to a deeper awareness of the specific culture that allows general insight into thought processes, motivating factors, and other issues that directly support the military decision-making process.

Cultural Competence: (decision making and cultural intelligence) This is the fusion of cultural understanding with cultural intelligence that allows focused insight into military planning and decision making for current and future military operations. Cultural competence implies insight into the intentions of specific actors and groups.

Lieutenant Colonel Chris Hughes of the 2nd Battalion, 327th Infantry of the 101st Airborne Division provided an excellent

example of cultural understanding and competence. LTC Hughes' actions were detailed in the book *Banking on Baghdad* by Edwin Black. His highly publicized use of cultural competence in Iraq is just one of many situations in our current war where understanding the culture has worked into the military decision-making process and influenced tactical actions in order to resolve a situation. In the case of LTC Hughes, his actions thwarted those of the insurgents, frustrating them and their efforts, and in the end, coerced and influenced local leaders into cooperation.

Many will argue that it is not the job of the Army to be culturally sensitive or aware, that we are an Army that destroys the enemy and moves on with the next mission. This is a false, naïve, and outdated assumption. General David H. Petraeus, commander of Multi-National Force - Iraq (MNF-I), put it into perspective well in a memo dated May 10, 2007, to all Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines and Coastguardsmen serving MNF-I. He wrote, "We are, indeed, warriors. We train to kill our enemies. We are engaged in combat, we must pursue the enemy relentlessly, and we must be violent at times. What sets us apart from our enemies in this fight, however, is how we behave. In everything we do, we must observe the standards and values that dictate that we treat noncombatants and detainees with dignity and respect. While we are warriors, we are also human beings."

Fair treatment of detainees is a given, considering all the negative press the actions of a few at Abu Ghraib have brought to our Army as well as the mountain of IO material that was provided to the enemy. What is interesting in this statement is that the treatment of noncombatants is specifically addressed. Once again, think of yourself as a "quasi-policeman." If the customer, the center of gravity, in this case the noncombatant Iraqi citizen, does not

trust us and we have not taken steps to gain his trust and develop a rapport – where does this leave us? The only way to win trust and develop a rapport is through an understanding of the culture and maybe even to embrace it to a certain degree. We are after all in their country. I had a colleague point out to me that it is not necessary for the Iraqis as a whole to like us or even consider us friends; what is important is for them to trust us and understand that their interests, safety, and well-being are our objectives. Counterinsurgency has been and will continue to be with us for a long time, inevitably. No, I am not advocating that major combat operations are a thing of the past; what I am proposing is that I believe that as long as we have major combat operations (MCOs) we will have smaller scale conflicts (SSCs) in the post-MCOs that are dominated by COIN.

Understanding that COIN and cultural awareness are inextricably linked is one of the first steps. In COIN, there is a lot of gray area; there is a lot of room for low-level leaders to make cultural mistakes that could affect the strategic level. This is known as the strategic corporal theory and is very valid throughout Iraq today. Therefore, in order to avoid these subtle mistakes and alienate ourselves from the center of gravity — the populace — we must teach our leaders a new way to think. Think of cultural considerations as a combat multiplier, force multiplier and a valid inject in the military decision making process. When he was developing Marine Corps warfighting doctrine, the late Colonel John Boyd said "Do not write it as a formula. Write it as a way to teach officers to think, to think in new ways about war. War is ever changing and men are fallible. Rigid rules simply won't work. Teach men to think." COIN is a thinking man's game.

Integrating cultural sensitivity considerations into our tactical exercises at all levels and into our operations on the battlefield is doing just that — teaching our leaders and Soldiers to think about a war that is ever changing and varies area of responsibility (AOR) by AOR and tour by tour.

Our use of cultural sensitivity in our daily interactions with Iraqis will be largely unnoticed on a daily basis. There will be no big battles, no great revelations, and therefore, a limited feeling of success. But cultural competence is paramount in a COIN fight. Our character and perseverance is the key to success. Colonel T.E. Lawrence, one of the greatest and most legendary Arab advisors of all time, characterizes the power of influence and the embodiment of cultural understanding in his book *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He said, "I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger, unable to



Sergeant Jeffrey Alexander

A Soldier with the 3rd Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment talks with an Iraqi man through an interpreter during the opening of a gas station in Baghdad.

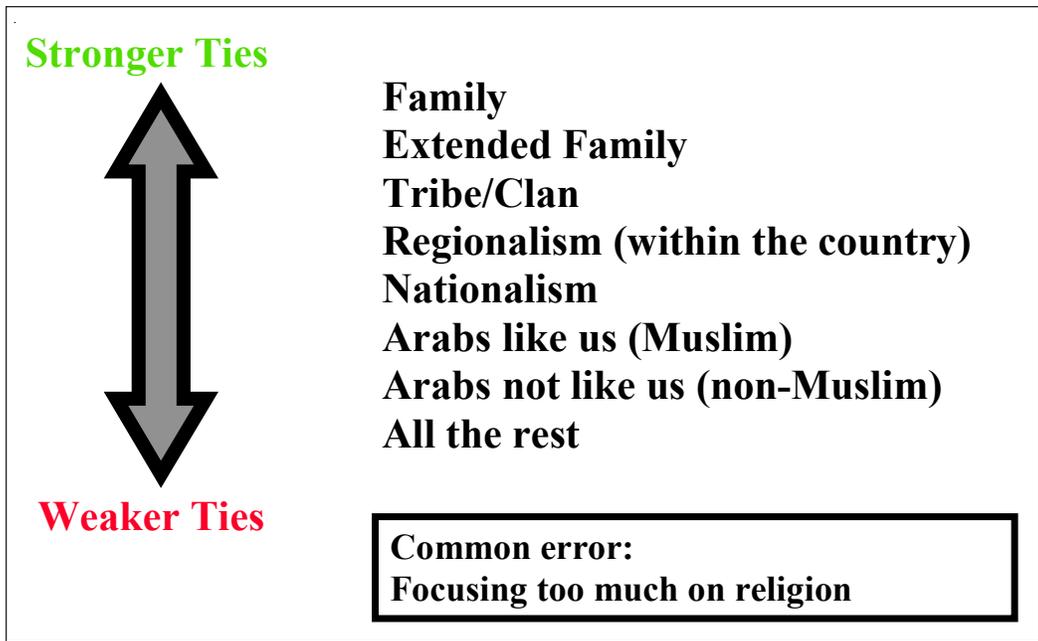


Figure 2 — Arab Loyalties Model

think their thoughts or subscribe their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward and to develop to the highest any movement of theirs profitable to England in her war. If I could not assume their character, I could at least conceal my own, and pass among them without evident friction, neither a discord nor a critic but an unnoticed influence.” Is that not the ultimate goal in a counterinsurgency — to pass among the populace without friction as an unnoticed influence? The center of the gravity is the populace, and the only way to pass among the population with little as little friction and as nonabrasively as possible is to be not only somewhat tolerant of their culture and social norms but actually embrace certain aspects of their culture to endear yourself to the populace itself.

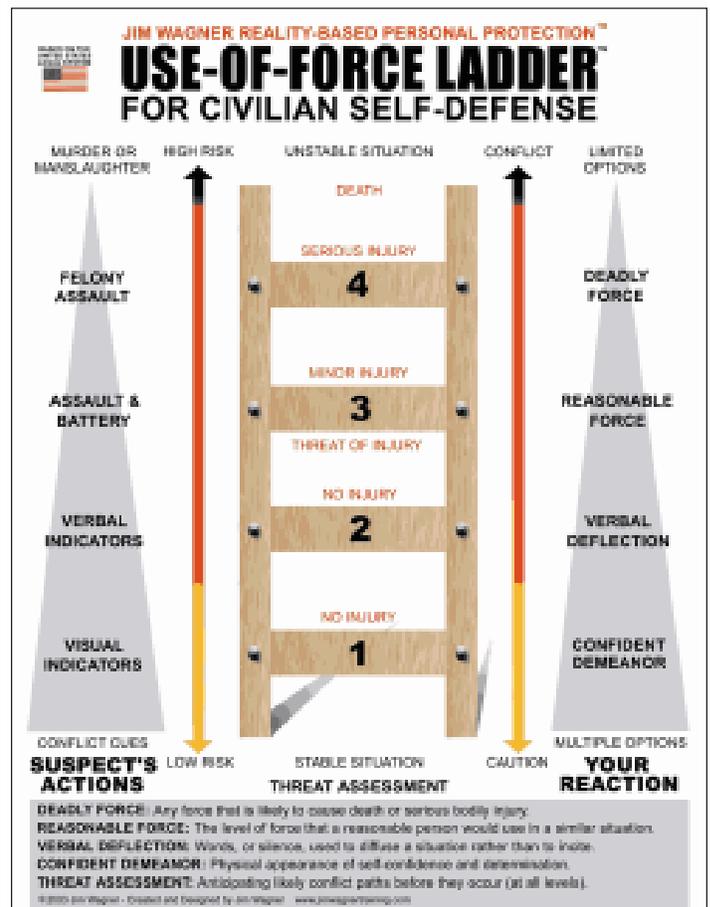
This is a tall order. As mostly non-Muslims and Arabs as a whole, we are very low on the Arab Loyalties Model (See Figure 2). Although not perfect, this model serves as a good lens into the mind of the population and our adversaries in Iraq.

Is it possible for us to move up higher in this model, even though we do not meet many of the criteria on this model? Yes, it has been done numerous times by many of our leaders at all levels during the course of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. My fellow advisors and I felt that while we were never considered “Iraqis,” we were considered part of an extended family. How did this happen? Because the Iraqis saw that although we could be violent and were absolutely relentless in our pursuit of the enemy, we were passionate about the welfare of the citizens in our sector, the welfare of the families of our Iraqi soldiers, and were compassionate to the plight of the population. We took risks of not engaging known insurgents in order to prevent harm to the populace. We also took precautions to ensure those that provided us information were protected and cared for. When our Iraqi soldiers were killed, we ensured their benefits were paid to the families and at the advice of our interpreters, bought sheep and presented them to the families of the soldiers. Our area was largely

rural and this was considered an honorable thing to do in that area. I had never been formally instructed on the proper way to buy sheep, nor had the Iraqi local sheep “vendors” ever seen an American drive up and buy sheep and stuff them in a HMMWV for transport. But once the haggling was initiated, the price negotiated, and the word of our deeds spread through the community, our reputation as compassionate warriors who could be trusted grew — therefore our intelligence grew from local sources, and the detention of actual verified insurgents grew. This is just a small example of the how and why of cultural awareness is important and is a combat multiplier.

One of the Iraqi populace’s greatest causes of concern, and the American Soldier’s cause of concern, is the escalation of force. Rarely in a COIN environment will there be an easy call in regards to deadly force. There are

Figure 3



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Crowd Action	Nonlethal Response			
Unarmed Civilians	Command Presence/PSYOP - Ensure that the on-site commander of the TPT directs the broadcast of the dispersal proclamation and/or passes handbills. - Escalate the tone of the dispersal proclamation from information to a warning of force.	Show of Force - Display force along with escalating the dispersal proclamation. - Display force in a graduated manner, such as a helicopter hovering over a crowd or soldiers with charged weapons. - Exploit the psychological effect of a show of force.	Demonstration of Force - Do not demonstrate force toward unarmed civilians.	Riot Control Means (if approved) - Employ RCAs at the point of penetration. - Use PSYOP to exploit the psychological effect. - Move through the crowd using riot control formations and movement techniques.
Armed Civilians (knives, clubs)			- Display force along with escalating the dispersal proclamation. - Highlight the target pointer. - Demonstrate sniper precision strike capabilities.	
Armed Crowds/Military (firearms)				- Do not use RCAs—they may escalate the situation.
Hostile intent/hostile act occurs by armed threat.				
Crowd Action	Lethal Response			
Unarmed Civilians	Sniper Response - Ensure that target leaders or troublemakers are targeted. - Use the minimum response necessary. - Exploit the psychological effect of an attack.	Small Arms Direct Fire - Determine that sniper attack is insufficient. - Consider demonstrating capabilities. - Exploit the psychological effect of a lethal response. - Escalate gradually, starting with a small caliber, single round and work up to a large caliber, automatic.	Aerial Fires - Determine that small arms direct fire is ineffective. - Use the minimum response necessary. - Use a minimal precision strike initially; use subsequent fires based on the situation. - Exploit the psychological impact of each strike.	Indirect Fires - Determine that air assets are unavailable or ineffective. - Use the minimum response necessary. - Ensure that the response is directed by the on-site commander.
Armed Civilians (knives, clubs)			- CAS/indirect fires must be authorized by the MACOM commander. - Consider requesting permission for use when— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All lesser means have been ineffective. • There are physical eyes on target. • Proximity to civilians has been considered. • Risk to friendly forces/evacuees outweighs the risk of collateral damage. 	
Armed Civilians/Military (firearms)				

Figure 4 — Sample GRM Card

many factors that determine the use of force in Iraq, and not just deadly force since any force can cause a rift in the populace. While this article is not about rules of engagement (ROE) or the escalation of force, I think it is paramount and would be negligent not to discuss it in relation to cultural awareness.

In his book, *Afghanistan & The Troubled Future of Unconventional Warfare*, author Hy S. Rothstein states: “The pursuit of attrition efficiencies against an irregular enemy can only be damaging to one’s own cause ... by producing collateral damage, antagonizing the population, increasing the ranks of the enemy, and eventually

demoralizing one’s own forces as a result of increasingly well-coordinated attacks generated by an increasingly hostile population.”

This passage highlights the importance of precision and controlled fires, and meeting escalation of force is an issue that is ingrained at all levels of leadership in our training. As an Army, we often place great value on firepower and a show of strength. And arguably so, this is an appropriate response to force. But graduated response is a better way and simply having it available to us does not make it the appropriate tool. A visual representation of meeting force with the

appropriate force is sometimes useful in conveying a message to the troops. Meeting force with the appropriate measure of force is critical in a COIN fight in order to not alienate the population even further. Figures 3 and 4 are two examples of escalation of force modules. Figure 3 is a civilian model designed by Jim Wagner, a world renowned law enforcement and military instructor. It is a good model and has applications that, although not designed for military use and are not cookie cutter solutions for Iraq, they could be a base line for Soldiers at the individual level. Figure 4 is a graduated response matrix (GRM) card from FM 3-19.15, *Civil Disturbance Operations*. This GRM is a sample and could be modified at the battalion or brigade levels to fit specific needs. A GRM should be war-gamed, molded and developed to fit each unit’s individual conditions in respect to the nature of enemy attacks, rapport with the local populace, as well as the cultural and social considerations unique to their area. A reevaluation of this matrix based on events and proper measure of effectiveness (MOE) would be recommended at the battalion level. It is important to remember the IO campaign plan when developing this matrix in order to capitalize on our efforts to minimize civilian casualties and collateral damage. Proper use of force creates a tremendous amount of stress on Soldiers and leaders alike. The proper development of a graduation of force ladder assists in the mitigation of this stress. This makes the populace safer, and in the end – Soldiers safer by gaining the trust and respect of the Iraqi people.

The enemy in Iraq succeeds daily in their goal of engaging us in attrition-based warfare while they slowly strengthen their lines of communication with the center of gravity in a COIN fight — the Iraqi populace. We must do all we can to discard the idea that this war is about simply killing the enemy. Without a doubt, that is a micro part of our objective, but the real mission is gaining the confidence of the Iraqi people in their government and strengthening the lines of communication between them, their government, and us. This cannot be done without some degree of cultural awareness and cultural understanding. Some ways we can achieve this are by integrating cultural sensitivity into

our training and our combat operations.

* **Cultural awareness training:** Soldiers must know, understand, and be able to effectively integrate what is the social norm in theater.

* **Language training:** This is an invaluable skill that serves a unit well throughout the tour. Every unit has its language training challenges. Be innovative. Some Stryker brigade combat teams (SBCTs) at Fort Lewis, Washington, have realized the importance of this skill and have accepted risk in some areas to capitalize on this combat multiplier. Knowing some of the language and body language helps break down social and cultural barriers.

* **Leader training:** Develop scenario-based vignettes and exercises involving escalation of force. Develop and implement negotiation training and arbitration at all levels of training. Our leaders in Iraq and Afghanistan are going to have to do this on a daily basis in some form or another. Why not give them the proper tools to do so? A surprising number of civilian courses have a plethora of information that can be applicable and have utility in Iraq if looked at through the lens of cultural awareness.

* **Rules of engagement and escalation of force training:** ROE and EOF vignettes are culturally sensitive. Soldiers may have to make a life or death decision within moments. Understanding ROE and EOF enhances the Soldier's ability to make the right decision. Rehearse these prior to every mission.

* **Diversify training events:** Integrate ROE, EOF, role-playing, and civilians on the battlefield into all tactical exercises. Ensure there are consequences for cultural blunders and blatantly disregarding cultural social considerations in the planning and execution phase.

* **Draw the line:** Emphasize that cultural sensitivity in no way jeopardizes the lives of Soldiers. Ensure that Soldiers understand that sometimes tactical decisions that are not culturally sensitive must be made, but that is the exception rather than the norm. Care towards civilians and treating them with dignity and respect is "the culture of our organization."

* **Information Operations (IO) training:** IO training at all levels ensures that this powerful tool in a COIN environment is adequately utilized throughout our organization. Know that IO is the name of the game and integrate it into our daily operations. "Knowing your neighborhood" is essential in the IO plan. As an example at the micro level, while I was an advisor, in our AOR there were no local newspapers, etc., and the local populace was hungry for printed material. One of my NCOs was a big NASCAR fan. While looking at some photos one day, we came up with the idea of enlarging sector-specific IO products and pasting them all over our vehicles and our Iraqi vehicles. While the appearance was rather "unmilitary looking" in a traditional sense (they resembled a NASCAR car with the sponsor logos), the response was overwhelming from the locals. They actually read our vehicles while at halts, on security, etc., and subsequently provided us valuable intelligence based off this.

* **Every Soldier is a sensor:** This is almost a cliché now, but a

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true one. Intelligence information in a COIN fight is more often than not garnered through personal relationships. Verbal engagements are more common than kinetic engagements. Debriefings are critical to reaping the rewards.

* **Civil Affairs training:** Pre-deployment training on public works, animal husbandry, waste disposal process, etc., are essential. While no one expects us as infantry Soldiers to be masters of these tasks, general knowledge can and will give

you a point of reference to base ideas, thoughts, and most importantly – solutions – off of. Although Columbus, Georgia, and Clarksville, Tennessee, are not Baghdad, the local cities in the area can provide you with a working model to base "nation builder" duties off of. Attending a local city meeting may seem a far cry from what you will be doing in Iraq, but the same principal as above applies – working model.

* **Embrace the culture:** This is difficult for most but not impossible. Understanding the Iraqi people, the center of gravity in our fight, is a combat multiplier. Knowing the history, cultural norms, and social norms enhances understanding and reinforces the belief that they are not the enemy — the insurgents are the enemy. Assimilate local customs and sensibilities as closely as possible.

In our Army today, there is no excuse to deploy culturally ignorant. There are multitudes of tools, models, and assets at our disposal as leaders. Tools such as Rosetta Stone, Army Continuing education classes on Arabic, and Internet resources such as the 11th Infantry Regiment's Web site dedicated to cultural awareness (<https://www.benning.army.mil/11th/culture/culture.asp>) are just a few examples. Our imagination is all that limits us in our ability to train our Soldiers effectively in preparation for the rigors of combat. Traditional warfighting skills are important as ever and are not meant to be marginalized by cultural awareness. The next step in progression in the level of difficulty is obviously the integration of the cultural factors that so often determine defeat or failure in a COIN fight. To disregard the implications of cultural ignorance or the inability to be culturally savvy is to place not only the mission of victory in Iraq in jeopardy but also our most precious asset – the lives of those in our charge, our Soldiers.

Let there be no misconception that I understand we are engaged in deadly combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet we must temper that necessary violence in a COIN fight with cultural awareness, cultural understanding, and ultimately cultural competence. For as Clausewitz said: "*The people are everything in war.*"

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