Commandant's Note

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Cultural Awareness — Useful Today, Vital Tomorrow

An understanding of foreign cultures and languages has long been part of the American Soldier's heritage. During both World Wars and even today, many members of our uniformed services were the sons and daughters of immigrants, and hence were imbued with the languages, customs, and cultures of their parents' countries of origin. German, French, Japanese, Polish, Russian, Italian, and other languages were familiar to them, and these language skills proved invaluable when their units found themselves fighting on foreign soil or confronted with refugees and populations uprooted by military operations.

The Army has made use of its own unique cultural heritage; Native American code talkers took advantage of the enemy's ignorance of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Navaho, and Comanche languages and confounded enemy radio intercept efforts by transmitting messages in their own dialects during both World Wars and the Korean War. For other Soldiers, however, cross-cultural awareness does not come easily and has had to be taught, both in those earlier conflicts and today in the global war on terrorism (GWOT). In this month's Commandant's Note I want to highlight the benefits of timely, informed cross-cultural interaction in today's irregular warfare and its potential for future applications.

Following the terrorists' attacks on September 11, 2001, we deployed forces into regions with languages and cultural traditions far different from our own. Special Operations forces sent to work among the Afghan tribes relied upon their own knowledge of Pashtu and Persian dialects and the services of translators to gain credibility and elicit the support of warlords opposed to the Taliban regime. Their experience clearly showed that the motivations and allegiances of combatants hung more on local and regional issues than on international ones. As the GWOT has unfolded, some U.S. Soldiers of Middle Eastern ancestry have shared their varying levels of cultural and linguistic knowledge as we brought the war first to the Taliban and then to Saddam Hussein.

We learned early on that cultural awareness would play a key role toward securing an ultimate, lasting peace. Recognizing the importance of training our Soldiers in this vital dimension of readiness, we have made every effort to imbed cultural awareness training into both individual and collective training. Fort Benning continues to lead the Army in educating Soldiers, from privates in Initial Entry Training through senior officers who attend the Infantry Pre-Command Course, about cultural awareness. The focus of this training is on the doctrinal aspects of cultural awareness: the eight variables of the contemporary operational environment, consideration of noncombatants as part of the intelligence preparation of the battlefield, and the Every Soldier is a Sensor initiative.

Any effort to develop cultural awareness must address regional history, religious and political factions, geography, infrastructure, customs, and the local economy, but it also has to go well beyond those to include somewhat more esoteric realities such as the hierarchy of loyalties to family, clan, and tribe. These loyalties are not laws unto themselves, however, and are subject to other variables such as family honor and situational religious considerations, and it is important that we understand these and how they affect our counterparts. Body language is another subtle yet essential element of understanding the culture, and we know it is possible to give unintended offense which can undermine weeks or months spent in building rapport. T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* illustrates the subtleties of his dealings with — and his acceptance by — the Arabs, and offers lessons we would do well to heed.

The pre-deployment lessons of cultural awareness are valuable, but they are only the introduction to the real learning that will take place in theater, where Soldiers and their leaders will better appreciate the nuances of the culture and the allies with whom they serve. As we learn more about our allies and our enemies, we form a better picture of their motives, their value systems, and their likely responses to a given situation. This will enable us to better gather and interpret the human intelligence that is the lifeblood of counterinsurgency.

As the global war on terrorism has evolved, so too has our Army, both in terms of the lessons we have learned and in the ways we deny the enemy access to our tactics, techniques, and procedures. The lessons we have learned in the derivation and dissemination of cultural awareness knowledge is not limited to the GWOT, and will find applicability and further refinements as we train to interact in new environments, with new allies, and against different enemies.

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