

## **Chapter 6 – WHY CULTURAL AWARENESS IS VITAL TO COUNTER-INSURGENCY (COIN) CAMPAIGNS**

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Today's conflicts are very complex and constantly changing. Thus, there are challenges in planning, executing, supporting, training/education. This is truer today than in the Cold War era. Things were more predictable then.

Culture is an awareness of cultural heritage, including professional culture. We need to get rid of hard-wired "truths". Culture isn't tangible. Everyone has it. There is a saying, "Culture sticks to the walls", but this isn't true and thus organizational change isn't seamless. Culture is a shared understanding, solving problems from different angles. Culture is in our hearts and minds. We know it, but we forget it. We know it's not just a national thing. For example, Norway is big; it's quite different from North to South. Nations are not homogeneous. Social memories, like national days, are the way we call ourselves a Nation. "The War" is World War II in Norway. We as a culture define certain events. Bodily practices and individual stories are all part of culture.

Culture is how we think, act and communicate. Culture is not static; it is constantly changing and reinventing itself. For example, Chechnya today is not the same as 50 years ago – we continuously reinvent culture on a local and national level. Benedict Anderson talked of "imagined communities" (that Nations are socially constructed and "imagined" by the people that perceive themselves to be part of that group); that we don't know everyone, but we feel like part of a single entity. The armed forces have a culture, but not everyone knows one another.

Culture is expressed in symbols and in rituals. Nations are not homogenous, nor are professions, but professions have a big impact on how we think and act. Education and professional experience give people cognitive maps (different ways of viewing things), toolboxes and certain ways to communicate. This makes cross-cultural teamwork very demanding. What kind of mythology do we use? Do we use statistics or case studies? Do we count things? You couldn't run a group of social anthropologists like a (military) battalion, it wouldn't work, and vice versa.

Culture gives us a foundation. We see the world from an elevated platform. For example – the view of the world as The "West" and the "Rest", where the West is US, Europe, Australia (not a geographic continuum), and we see things through culturally tinted "rose coloured glasses", the west as democratic, civilized, etc. We interpret and see things through our cultural context and we need to be aware of that context and not jump to conclusions based solely upon it.

Let's talk about some principles of insurgencies. The goal of insurgents is to gain power and to make the costs larger than the benefits for the regime or occupiers. Not all insurgents are terrorists, but they may employ terrorist tactics from time to time to achieve their goals. When we look at the Middle East, it's interesting that they often know our concepts, doctrine, political goals and rational/values whereas we often fail to analyze and understand their culture, language and practices. Those that do understand these things are often muted or not paid any attention. Ethnic or religious insurgent groups may not use religious texts to find a way – they may use ideological texts from different revolutions, such as those by Mao, Lenin, Che Guevara, Lawrence of Arabia, and Gertrude Bell. In Iraq, as described in Michael Collins' book, they used the IRA model (Editor's note – there was significant disagreement among the group on this last point).

I've talked to Professor Ahmed S. Hashim at the US Naval War College about Counter-Insurgency (COIN) operations in Iraq. He told people that there was an insurgency in Iraq and implored them to do something

and was ignored. Calling a movement an insurgency is an admission that the local groups do not consider the political leadership legitimate. This sort of denial is why starting a counter insurgency takes time. The old analysis of the insurgency in Iraq described it in terms of Shia versus Sunni (“good guys”), but insurgencies are rarely religious. They are about politics and identity. The Sunnis held the (political) power for many years. The Shias were closely connected to Iran. When you take power away, people naturally revolt. Most Shias used what, for them, are their “normal” strategies (given the imbalance of power) – they’ve been repressed for years. They were used to being “low man”. The Sunnis revolted. Groups with power react differently than oppressed groups.

During armed conflicts, jails are great gathering places for the “bad boys”. People, including charismatic leaders and criminals, often get together in jail and get their stories straight and then they are coordinated, well organized. In Iraq, they organized in jails and read works by Lenin and Mao, as well as the IRA book, which they followed precisely (Editor’s note – there was significant disagreement among the group on this point). Time plays a key role – war is very expensive and the insurgents aren’t going anywhere so a protracted war is a good thing (gives a group time to build up structure) in that it makes it expensive to keep fighting. Sir Robert Smith talks about “war among the people” – this is war for the people. The insurgency in Iraq moved the war from attacking military battalions to war among the people (and for the people). They need sanctuary and Support – so they can’t use terror tactics too much because the population would turn against them. They need mass population mobilization to inform and indoctrinate; thus, some of the stories we hear aren’t made for us – they are intended for their own population (target audience). There are blurred boundaries between the civil and military spheres when dealing with insurgencies. The insurgent operational art includes “hit and run” tactics, guerrilla tactics, terrorism, targeting those who collaborate with “the enemy” to teach them a lesson (e.g., Iraqi police) and infrastructure takedown.

Why are things going badly? Dealing with insurgencies presents some problems in planning. Sun Tzu, philosopher, military strategist and author of the “Art of War”, said that if you don’t know yourself and your enemy, you will lose 100 wars and if you know yourself you will win 50, but to win all wars you need to know both yourself and your enemy actual, not idealized strengths and weaknesses. An insurgency has some common patterns, but the cultural context is always local and cannot be easily transferred. Therefore, some hard-programmed truths and rules need to be reprogrammed – it (the insurgency) may look the same but it is not. The same action might result in a very different effect; thus, it is important to rehearse different scenarios in order to be able to recognize patterns and not jump to conclusions. All potential courses of action need to be contextualized in time and space. What worked five years ago or even a year ago or in the Balkans or another theatre might not work now! In terms of planning, military officers are trained in conventional warfare, but COIN campaigns are unconventional. Moreover, they are deeply complex, and must be compatible with the local cultural context in order to achieve their strategic objectives. As such, success in COIN depends upon commanders’ deep understanding of a spectrum of topics not included in the conventional military syllabus, politics, religions or cultural complexity. COINs are thought to be 80% politics, so understanding the politics, etc., is essential. Usually leaders have a short course when they are in their 40’s, but that’s too little, too late.

COIN campaigns must be planned, conducted and executed by teams with complementary, cross-cultural competences and members. However, working in cross-cultural teams can be very difficult. Everyone has to deal with the same problems, but they do it from different angles and have different ways of interpreting what they see. You are seeking diversity, but many people aren’t really open to that. “How do you respond to answers you never asked?” In a military campaign, when we act or communicate we send signals and we need to have cultural awareness to understand the local context to anticipate how these signals will be perceived. “To be entombed with all your prejudices and biases is not a part of any humanitarian convention.” It is very important to at least be aware of our own biases and try to get rid of them! Otherwise, if you only have a hammer, all your problems will be nails. To stick with the tool analogy, you need a huge toolbox to counter insurgencies effectively.

## 6.1 DISCUSSION

*(Fenstermacher) You should be aware of the cross-cultural team research (done in NATO Research and Technology Groups under the Human Factors and Medicine Panel) led by Dr. Janet Sutton (USA).*

*You're saying that they read the IRA book in prison? That's what the Naval War College guy (Professor Hashim) said. (There was much discussion negating this view).*

*(Jongman) Many of these problems are new and unprecedented. A lot of the problem was the US getting rid of the Iraqi military – they had military training and organized the insurgency without the need to read Michael Collins or Lenin or Che Guevara. Also, the global jihadis played a very important role. They are in sixty countries; it's a completely new enemy. They went into Iraq and manipulated the situation to establish an emirate. It's an issue to use too much violence; AQ in Iraq intimidated and killed people and they lost some popular support and that's the reason for the decrease in violence. Counter-militias were organized with the help of the US. The exit of the US will leave a vacuum. Signals are that AQ is still there, reconstituting and making a comeback. So the Sunni/Shia power shift is important. Now the Sunnis are seeking to get in the government again and you get cooperation between global jihad and the local Sunnis (due to their grievance). Iraq is a very complicated case. Not all insurgency in Iraq is associated with the global jihadist movement. AQ is not behind everything in Iraq.*

*(Jongman) No, they know how to exploit local conflicts (Somalia, etc.).*

*They don't want to see global jihadi and AQ support for the Taliban. They supply expertise, explosives and money.*

