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## THE CULTURAL AWARENESS-A FANCY MILITARY TERM, OR A CRITICAL NECESSITY IN COUNTERINSURGENCY OPERATIONS?

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**Abstract:** *History had taught the U.S.A. hard lessons especially in Vietnam, about fighting in a foreign environment in a seemingly endless conflict. After almost 40 years the same army it is involved in its second long term, counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan, a country which is plagued with a vast landscape of inhospitable terrain, poor ground transportation network and a rampant insecurity. Of course that in the last four decades, the American Army and its allied militaries have struggled to change and to adapt the doctrine, and its technology to counter an elusive enemy. But it wasn't enough as it was proved by the war in Iraq, especially by the Abu-Ghraib prison's episode in the sense of winning a war not only at the technological level, but at the human level, too. Also, the shift of conflicts from the conventional warfare to counterinsurgency almost imposed to the U.S. military to devote substantial resources to research and education. Thus, appeared in the 1990's the Military Operations other than War, or as it is popularized by its acronym –MOOTW. At the core of MOOTW is cultural awareness, because these operations often require the military interaction on the ground with local population. But what is cultural awareness? Is it the key to success in counterinsurgency operations, or just a new concept used by U.S. foreign policy makers to control at a certain level the main enemy of it, which actually defeated the Americans in Vietnam, the media? By trying to find an objective answer to the questions mentioned above, the research in this article will be focused on the importance given by the U.S. military forces to the cultural side of war in Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan, especially to their similarities and differences.*

**Key words:** *Vietnam, conventional warfare, counterinsurgency; MOOTW, Iraq, cultural awareness, Human Terrain Team, Afghan culture;*

### 1. BACKGROUND

*„Guerillas never win wars but their adversaries  
often lose them”  
Charles W. Thayer*

Without any doubt, the 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> was dominated, and is still dominated, from the military point of view, by the U.S.A, despite the huge efforts made by the former U.S.S.R. during the Cold War period, Russian

Federation, and the Republic of China in the aftermath of it. The figures of the military budget allocated by the countries mentioned above are talking, in this respect. A simple comparison for the fiscal year 2010 for example, shows that the U.S.A. official figures allocated for the military budget, released by DoD, (*Fiscal 2010 Budget Proposal*, May 2009) were of \$663.84 billion, the Republic of China, of U.S.\$ 150 billion (Annual Report for the Congress, 2010), while the Russian Federation allocated

only U.S.\$ 58,7 billion according to the SIPRI Yearbook 2011 (2011:163).

Even so, despite the above data, it is known that the same U.S. military forces which were defeated in the Vietnam war, left behind the state of Iraq at the end of 2011, after eight years of war, an almost full sovereign one-indeed- but also a place where a minimal level of security is hardly to be achieved, while the deployed forces in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan since 2001, and starting with October, 2006, under the umbrella of ISAF, are facing serious difficulties in accomplishing their mission. And it is not about only the recent events such as the Qurā'n burning, or the massacre of those 16 Afghan civilians, done by an American sergeant from the base located in Panjwai, from the district of Kandahar, but about the costs of lives for all parties implied, as long as the time is passing and the situation in Afghanistan instead of being stabilized, is getting worse.

All of these having as a background the context in which the U.S. Army has learned already, a tough lesson during the war in Vietnam regarding the difference between the "*war of necessity and the war of choice*", and where it learned that wars, are no longer fought in the traditional old form and that the shift from the conventional warfare to counterinsurgency requires not only having financial resources or the most advanced military technology in the world, but also a different approach of the warfare itself, whose only characteristic that remains unchanged, is, its dynamic. As a result, having the best capabilities is not anymore equal with getting quick victory, with few casualties.

Also, as a part of the lessons learned, or at least, which had to be learned, is the appeal in October, 2004, of Major General Robert H. Scales Jr. who called for "a shift in operations and trainings towards a greater cultural awareness as an essential component of counter-insurgency operations"( L. Bond, 2010:69), while the Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus(2006:2) admitted that the war in

Afghanistan and Iraq were not the wars for which the U.S. military forces were prepared to fight in 2001, but the wars which the American forces must to master. Moreover, the same well-known general in the same article, pointed out that the overwhelming conventional military superiority such as the firepower, manoeuver, technology of the U.S. army will make it unlikely to be confronted directly; rather the asymmetric attacks, will be preferred, which requires to remember and to learn from the previous experiences.

As a result to all these, suggestions, comments, perceived shortcomings, or recommendations, the U.S. military has poured millions of dollars in the development of an improved cultural understandings of the Muslim world, and had established human terrain teams(HTT) which are mostly composed of academics and cultural anthropologists, who have to accompany troops on operations and who provide cultural advice to unit commanders when required(Bond, 2010:69). Thus, the cultural awareness term has started to be researched, mentioned and heard more often within the military journals, and from commanders, even it is/was often met with rolled eyes from those who execute the orders, because soldiers often think that the cultural awareness is a weakness according to Major Mark S. Leslie ( 2007:4).

But what is cultural awareness? Why suddenly, is a such an important term for the U.S. military forces, in the aftermath of war in Vietnam, and these days, of that from Iraq? This question is genuine, as long as, during the war in Vietnam, did exist a pacification programme called CORDS which was the acronym for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, which aimed to provide to the S. Vietnam with access to vast human, financial and organizational resources in implementing an integrated program at the provincial, district, hamlet, and village level(Stewart, 2010). Also, it did existed and still exist MOOTW(Military Operations Other Than War), which was more popularized during the 90's, whose main objective was/is to focus on deterring war and



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to promote peace, according with its Joint Doctrine issued on June, 1995.

**1. CULTURAL AWARENESS, IN  
THE HISTORY OF THE U.S.  
ARMY**

*"If you know the enemy and know yourself,  
you need not fear the result of a hundred  
battles." Sun Tzu*

The U.S. Army and Marine Corps COIN Manual, quoted by Colonel Hershel L. Holiday(2008:2) defines cultures as being a „web of meaning” shared by members of a particular society or a group within a society. Therefore it is a system of shared believes, values, customs, behaviours, and artefacts, that members of a society use to cope with their world and with another. It can be learned, shared by the members of a society, patterned, changeable, internalized and very important for a modern soldier, arbitrary; meaning that the soldier should make no assumptions regarding what a society considers right or wrong, good or bad. Also, culture can be seen as an “operational code” that is valid for each member of the group, and includes under what circumstances the rules shift or change(Holiday, 2008). Coming back to U.S. Army’s meaning of culture, DoD, also consider/added the realities of racial and ethnic groups, stereotypes and tensions within the cultures to the characteristics mentioned above.

Even there are huge pitfalls in modern military strategy approach when considering culture as an organizing concept within military process, alongside with the Six Joint Operating Systems, in order to become the seventh operating system pending future operations involving stability and

transition/reconstruction operations(Holiday, 2008), the use of cultural knowledge during conflicts it is an old practice, which leads to the conclusion that the cultural knowledge and warfare are inseparable. To know the enemy in order to improve military prowess has been sought since Herodotus studied his opponents’ conduct during the Persian Wars (490–479 BC) as the well-known anthropologist McFate stressed in 2005. Also, as it can be seen from the quote above, Sun Tzu advises the soldiers to know themselves and the enemy. An example in this respect, for the Arabic part of the world is that of the Lieutenant Colonel T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia) from the British Army who documented his military cultural background while living among the Arabic people, in order to improve his military expertise(McFate, 2004).

As a recorded history within the U.S. Army’s operations, the concept of cultural awareness, surely, it is not a new one. As it is already mentioned above in this article, there were/are projects established by the U.S. Army which had/have at their heart the cultural awareness at least, partially. RAND Corporation quoted in Human Terrain Study Guide by Derian Der James and Camilla Hawthorne(2011:2) is mentioning that between 1916-1996 there were 846 MOOTW-type engagements in which the American Air Forces played a central role. MOOTW involves using military capabilities for purposes that do not include traditional warfare, such as: peacekeeping, arms control, assisting in response to domestic crises, while the cultural awareness is the core of MOOTW, because these type of operations frequently involve interaction of soldiers on the ground with locals( Derian Der James and Camilla Hawthorne, 2011). Also, the existence of CORDS which as a program implemented by South Vietnamese government and the Military Assistance Command which was

meant to undermine communist guerrillas from N. Vietnam, in large part by winning the local villagers from South Vietnam, is a prove of the fact that the cultural awareness was taking into account by the U.S. Army at a certain moment during a war where the conventional war shifted into counterinsurgency. Also, in 1970 DoD budget included \$115,000 for the development of cultural awareness, while the counterinsurgency operations through the Cold War, frequently involved the “applied military anthropology”( ( Derian Der James and Camilla Hawthorne, 2011).

Later on, in the aftermath of 9/11 events, during the war in Iraq, the U.S. Army realised that sometimes, the cultural awareness incorporated into operations, is much more important than other conventional weapons in their inventory. In this respect, Lieutenant General D. Petraeus underlined “the cultural terrain can be as important as, and, sometimes, much more important than the geographic terrain”, remark that stands at the base of his own definition of cultural awareness which is in his opinion” a force multiplier”(Petraeus, 2006). That is why, it is considered that the soldiers that are culturally aware and know how to apply the cultural awareness on the battle field, are the 21<sup>st</sup> century warriors(Leslie, 2007).

Because in an asymmetric environment as it is that of the today’s conflicts, which proves on daily basis that the fundamental nature of war has changed-( Derian Der James and Camilla Hawthorne, 2011), the modern fighter -has to know and understand what is behind a possible “target”, which might have a sum of features which may change the course of conflict in which the soldier is involved. The target may have the quality of a friend, of an ally, or it may be a representative of a non-governmental organisation, as well a civilian, each one of them with a different cultural background, meaning that in the modern warfare the soldiers are dealing with much more than a simple target. But to be able as a soldier, to make the difference between and among them, there is necessary cultural

training, which can be acquired in time, in specific conditions. Thus, appeared the idea to embed at the formal level, social scientists, such as anthropologists, with troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, as long as officers began to complain of their lack of adequate knowledge of local cultures. As a result Pentagon recruited Montgomery McFate a well-known anthropologist, then a program started by a retired S.O.F. namely Steve Fondacaro which aimed at embedding social scientists with combat brigades. The funds authorised by the Secretary of Defence Robert Gates in amount of \$41 million in 2007, were in order to expand the program and to give it consistency for the tax-payers. And due to the importance given at the formal level to the cultural awareness by senior military and elected officials, such as Scales, Petraeus, Gates or Ike Skelton, and under pressure of the development of conflict in Iraq, it was made a significant change in how the United States Government approaches warfare. Thus, appeared and developed Human Terrain System project. But why it was necessary, that the most powerful country in the world, to change its warfare strategy? What is the difference between the conventional warfare and COIN operations?

## **2. THE ROLE OF HUMAN TERRAIN SYSTEM WITHIN COIN OPERATIONS**

*“The guerrilla must swim in the people as the fish swims in the sea.”*

Mao Zedong

Perhaps the best description of COIN operations is given by the following definition: *“In counterinsurgency, military forces are a delivery system for civilian activity: their role is to afford sufficient protection and stability to allow the government to work safely with its population and for economic revival and political reconciliation to occur.”(Coin Manual, 2008:28)*. This means that counterinsurgency is a much more complicated war, as long as, it comprises military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological and civic actions. Its



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success is not defined solely by eliminating the insurgents; actually, a success is impossible without the application of a much more complex approach, thinking of all the actions mentioned above.

And, without any doubt, the cultural awareness term has gained an important place within military operations, especially in the aftermath of 9/11; but this only inside the COIN operations, due to HTS. In order to understand the importance of HTS, is essential to differentiate between the conventional war and COIN, because in a conventional war the key ongoing objectives is to obtain and retain the terrain, while in COIN the terrain has already been obtained and military forces often operate in the same AO(area of operations) for several months at a time. (L. Bond, 2010). The military forces often patrol in the same area, on a daily basis, which means that COIN operatives inevitably interact with the locals of the country in which the operations take place, and very important do the insurgent factions. So, it has been generally accepted that in COIN operations, it is imperative to gain the support of the population, as they are the centre of gravity for both sides of the conflict, according to Captain L. Bond.

The importance of gaining the trust of the local population, it is clearly stated also in the Canadian National Defence, within its COIN doctrine : "many insurgencies will develop in failed or failing states where governments have failed to address or satisfy their basic needs of their populace. These needs will differ, depending upon the region or culture involved, but in general will include the basic essentials of a stable life, a responsible government, religious freedom, and economic viability".(L. Bond, 2010). Keeping in mind the quote above, about states, where

governments have failed to keep the level of security at a minimal level such as Iraq was, in the first years after the second Gulf war, the need for cultural awareness within COIN operations, was seen as a must after the raise to public prominence of Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus, and his redirection of COIN in Iraq. As a result, the American government, started to implement Scales's recommendations and Petraeus's ideas, and have established the HTS program, as largely composed of academics and cultural anthropologists, that are meant to provide with cultural information to unit commanders, at their request.

The HTS combines the best of both military and civilian cultural experts to assist in planning and executing the reconstruction operation in post-conflict environment conflicts. HTS program is composed of HTT(human terrain teams), RRC(research reachback cell) and SMEnet(subject matter expert network), each one of them having an important role in fulfilling the objectives of the HTS.

HTS teams were created to provide a knowledge on the local population to the military commanders, by assisting them in understanding the people within their area of operations, to reduce the chance of negative effect responses, such as improvised explosive device events, direct at American soldiers and to enable the commanders to make better informed decisions. This type of teams fill the social-cultural knowledge gap in the commander's AO. Another role of HTS teams is to assist in building relations with the local community. HTT are regionally focused, and modular, they deploy as trained and organized teams and are attached to army brigade combat teams, division-level headquarters, and higher command echelons. Also, very



important to note is the role of HTT which integrates into a unit's staff, the unclassified open sources and field research and provides focused and operational relevant human terrain information. (Leslie, 2007).

As well as CORDS, the HTS program is highly controversial and has many critics; one year before the first HTT was deployed, the American Anthropological Association, started an investigation into the ethics of its members involvement with the military intelligence. The AAA is opposing the HT project, by stating that their code of ethics is violated, which stipulates as a requirement that anthropologists do not harm the people they are studying, while the scientists involved in HTT are often accused of gathering intelligence. (Derian Der James and Camilla Hawthorne, 2011). Even so, the role of the HTT seems to be of help in fulfilling the aim of the COIN operations: that of an adequately protection of the civilian population and of exerting a maximum pressure on the enemy's freedom to act and influence, even the idea of implementation of such type of teams came too late for the American troops during the war in Vietnam, and partially for the Iraqi people-as long as the label of a failed/failing state, is far away of their borders, but, hopefully not for the Afghans.

### 3. INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION

The acknowledge at the formal level by the American policy makers of the concept of cultural awareness and the implementation of HTS project, came at a moment when the U.S.A, as a state, within the Middle East area, and among the Muslim in general, and not only, started to lose its credibility. Because it came with a military operations' history full of mistrust not only from the outsiders, but also from their own citizens. In this respect, it needs to be mentioned the Gulf Tonkin's episode which is strong connected with the war in Vietnam(motivated later on, as a containment policy, without any doubt, too late for H. Johnson as the President of the U.S.A); the Nayrah testimony about an inexistent act of atrocity done by the Iraqi

soldiers in a hospital from Kuwait(related to the Persian Gulf War in 1991); the non-existent W.M.D. in Iraq(which was the basis for the intervention in this country in 2003), according to the final report of C.I.A., and the use of a P.R. war for the last two mentioned wars, are the facts that lead to the question whether or not, the cultural awareness term is just a tool used by the U.S military forces to control the way, how their behaviour toward the local population in AO, is perceived. On the other hand, the question whether the cultural awareness is a fancy military word, or a critical necessity within the COIN operations, (un)fortunately, the answer maybe affirmative for both assumptions. Because it can be perceived as a fancy military word, as long as not all the soldiers, who are patrolling within the AO, and have to interact with villagers, have the ability to assimilate in a short period of time the cultural background needed it in a such situation. Moreover, a soldier can be prepared for an area of operation, such as Iraq, was, but the same soldier, is useless for the operations in Afghanistan, thinking of the cultural complexity of Afghanistan. And the costs are too high even for the military budget of the U.S.A, thinking of its new offshore balancing strategy. On the other hand, if the costs with trainings needed to acquire the cultural background necessary in AO, is overcome, the cultural awareness maybe seen as a critical necessity within the COIN operations as long as it is aimed at reducing the cost of lives for both sides, and it doesn't imply ethical problems for the social scientists embedded within the HTT.

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