

An Organizational Solution for DOD's Cultural Knowledge Needs

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OVER THE PAST few years, the need for cultural and social knowledge has been increasingly recognized within the armed services and legislative branch. While much of this knowledge is available inside and outside the government, there is no systematic way to access or coordinate information from these sources. We can mitigate this gap quickly and effectively by developing a specialized organization within the Department of Defense (DOD) to produce, collect, and centralize cultural knowledge, which will have utility for policy development and military operations.

Know Your Enemy

Recently, policymakers, combatant commanders, Soldiers, and Marines have been calling for cultural knowledge of the adversary. In July 2004, *Proceedings* published retired Major General Robert Scales' article "Culture-Centric Warfare," which expresses his view that the conflict in Iraq requires "an exceptional ability to understand people, their culture, and their motivation."¹ Similarly, the 2005 "Defense Language Transformation Roadmap" notes that "[l]anguage skill and regional expertise are not valued as Defense core competencies yet they are as important as critical weapon systems."²

Although a number of institutions within the military community design and run programs with a cultural knowledge component, the programs are dispersed, underfunded, or not easily accessible to military commanders and policymakers from all agencies and services.³ The result is widespread confusion about how to gain access to needed information and resources and a subsequent reliance on informal means of gaining information, such as discussions with taxi drivers about public opinion in their country of origin.

The Defense Science Board's (DSB's) 2004 "Summer Study on Transition to and from Hos-

tilities" contains a number of recommendations for collecting, compiling, and sustaining cultural knowledge and notes that this requires an attention span far longer than the short-term focus common among today's collectors and users of information. The DSB suggests the creation of a National Center for Contingency Support, to be organized as a federally funded research and development corporation, which would have country and functional expertise to support contingency planning and joint interagency task forces. The DSB also suggests that regional combatant commanders (RCC) establish offices for regional expertise outreach to support country and regional planning and operations. The proposed RCC offices would maintain close working relations with country teams, regional centers, U.S. and foreign academia, think tanks, and so on.⁴

Pressing Concerns

Although the DSB's suggestions are excellent, they do not adequately address a number of needs within the defense community. Creating an organization solely dedicated to contingency task force support would not serve the ongoing needs of policymakers and Office of the Secretary of Defense permanent staffs who also require cultural and social information. Decentralized offices located at the RCC level will lead to a duplication of resources and effort, and a combination of contingency support and expertise dispersed at the RCC level would not address—

- Ethnographic field research.
- Cultural training.
- Advisers.
- Programmatic applications.
- Analytic studies.

Ethnographic field research. While some foreign area expertise exists within the military community, many of these cultural-knowledge resourc-



US Army

es are inadequate. Over the past 40 years, social science research has not been a priority within the defense science and technology research portfolio. As a result, individual researchers have selected their own areas of study, often based on intellectual whims and the vagaries of philanthropic funding. Thus, academic research is often not available for specific areas of interest, such as Al Anbar or Diyala provinces in Iraq, or research used to support the military is often outdated. For example, Task Force 121 used British 19th-century northwest-frontier anthropology to prepare for Afghanistan. Also, using intelligence assets to collect this type of information is not sufficient, since they lack the requisite training and skills. Furthermore, the objective of the intelligence-collection process often concerns targeting and orders of battle as opposed to understanding a complex social system.

Cultural training. Currently, cultural training within the military is generally not operationally relevant. For cultural training to have any value, Soldiers and Marines must be able to employ it in

the field with living human beings. For example, while many cultural-training programs note that Iraqis value honor, this knowledge is useless unless soldiers know how to confer it, on whom, and when. Much so-called cultural-awareness training is not specific or local in focus and is often conducted on a train-the-trainer basis. The consequence of a lack of training (or inadequate training) is a misunderstanding that can complicate operations.

Advisers. Operational commanders frequently identify an urgent need to understand local culture, politics, social structure, and economics. Lacking access to this type of expertise, other staff members, such as the information operations officer, the S5/G5, and the intelligence officer, must act as de facto cultural advisers. (Only rarely can commanders engage a foreign area officer [FAO] as an adviser since this is not a FAO's official role.)

Because the officer corps generally lacks skills in anthropological field work, political science, sociology, development economics, and area

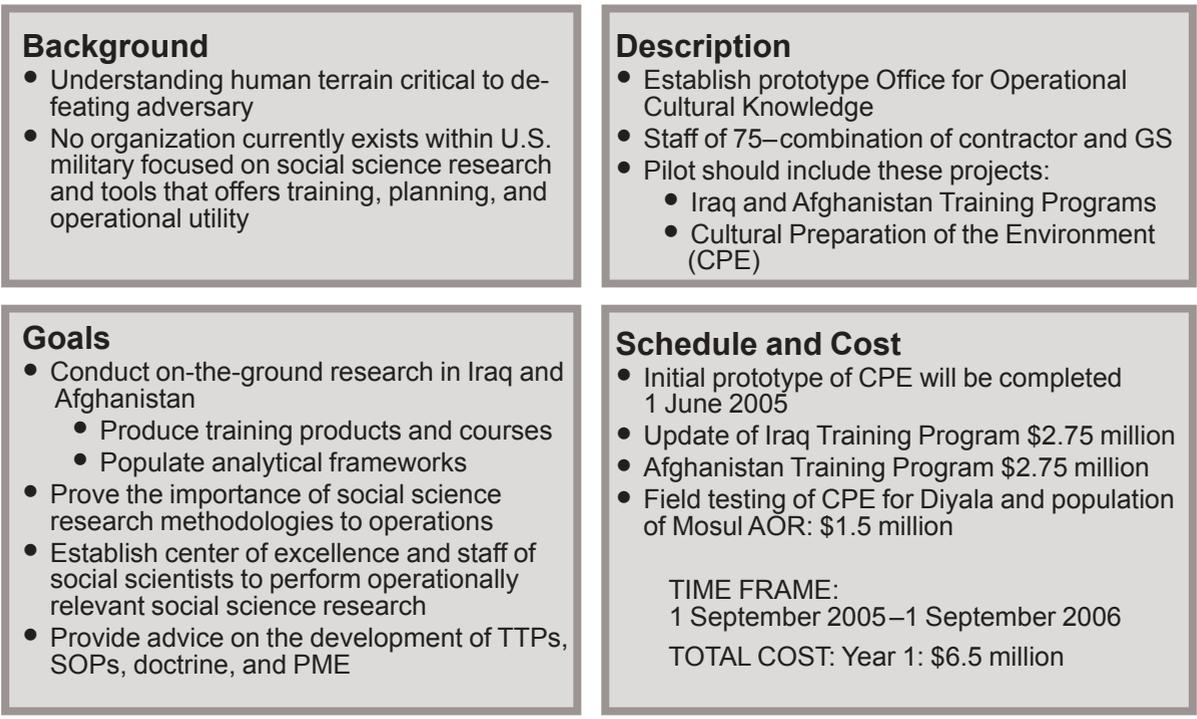


Figure 1. Pilot proposal: Office for Operational Cultural Knowledge

studies, commanders must muddle through with inadequate—and sometimes wrong—information. This skills gap is particularly acute at the battalion level and below, where much of the interaction between the U.S. military and the population actually occurs. Until changes in the professional military education (PME) system can fill this gap, commanders would benefit from cultural advisers who can identify legitimate leaders and the interests of the population in the area in question; ethno-religious, class, and tribal groups; and help develop courses of action for institution building and economic development, among other things.

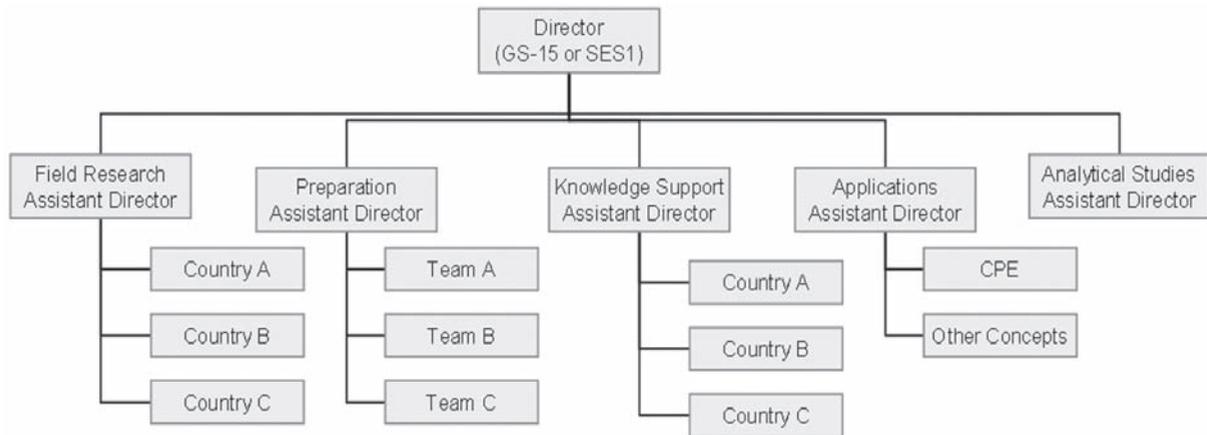
Programmatic applications. With no centralized office for cultural knowledge, no natural home exists for programs such as the Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Task Force pilot program on the cultural preparation of the environment or the Iraq Predeployment Training Program sponsored by the U.S. Army G3. As a result, such programs become buried within the bureaucracy and are not distributed or used in a timely and appropriate fashion.

Analytic studies. Demand for ad hoc social science research in support of planning and operations has been on the rise throughout the last 10 years. At present, staff officers with limited social science skills and minimal access to unbiased information on the subjects they are researching conduct much

of this research. Asked how he got information on other cultures, how other societies are organized, and what is important to their populations, one staff officer said the best resource he had was Google, which is hardly a solution to the pressing problems the United States currently faces.

DOD should create and house an organization of social scientists having strong connections to the services and combatant commands. The organization should act as a clearinghouse for cultural knowledge, conduct on-the-ground ethnographic field research, provide reachback to combatant commanders, design and conduct cultural training; and disseminate knowledge to the field in a useable form. (See Figure 1.) Among other things, this organization should be responsible for the following tasks:

- Provide on-the-ground ethnographic research (interviews and participant observation) in all areas of strategic importance (such as Eastern Europe, the Maghreb, Sub-Sahara Africa, the Middle East, Southwest Asia, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia) to support development of training, education, wargames, Red Teams, planning, and concepts.
- Develop and conduct predeployment and advanced cultural training on specific countries, help develop PME curriculum as needed, develop and produce computer-based training on society and culture, design and produce training that units can



Purpose: augment the military’s ability to effectively plan, train, and operate in the complex human terrain of weak states by conducting unbiased, accurate field research in countries of interest and administering related programs. TOTAL STAFFING: 75 persons in 5 sections.

Figure 2. Office for Operational Cultural Knowledge optimal organizational structure.

give in-house at training facilities, and so on.

- Respond to demands from within DOD for sociocultural studies on areas of interest (such as North Korean culture and society, Iranian military culture, and so on), and conduct case studies of coalition partners’ lessons learned on cultural training, such as the British experience in Iraq where cultural knowledge was applied to good effect, particularly in the organization of local councils to co-opt the tribal sheiks in Basra.

- Provide cultural advisers for planning and operations to commanders on request and provide reachback as needed and who would also be available to lecture at military educational institutions and military commands, with particular emphasis on operational commands.

- Take the lead in identifying and implementing experimental sociocultural programs, such as the cultural preparation of the environment—a comprehensive and constantly updated database

tool designed for use by operational commanders and planners that includes map overlays of tribes, religions, and demographics.

Establishing an office for operational cultural knowledge would solve many of the problems surrounding the effective, expedient use of adversary cultural knowledge. (See Figure 2.) Unfortunately, DOD’s archaic organization, which has not changed substantially since the Cold War, makes it almost impossible to create a centralized organization that serves policymakers as well as the uniformed services. DOD’s functional dispersion, Byzantine funding systems, and bureaucratic protectionism result in a tendency to seek ad hoc, temporary solutions to complex, long-range problems. Building an organization to capture operational cultural knowledge will require visionary leadership and tremendous persistence from someone inside the system who will not take no for an answer. **MR**

NOTES

1. Robert Scales, "Culture Centric Warfare," *Proceedings* (October 2004).
 2. Department of Defense (DOD), "Defense Language Transformation Roadmap," 2005, on-line at <www.languagepolicy.org/dodlangroadmap.pdf>, accessed 1 June 2005.

3. Among the agencies that come to mind are the Defense Intelligence Agency, U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, U.S. Marine Corps Training and Education Command, and the Office of Naval Research.
 4. DOD "Roadmap."

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