

Strategic Scouts for Strategic Corporals

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The era of the “strategic corporal” is here. . . . The soldier of [today] must possess professional mastery of warfare, but must match this with political and media sensitivity.

—LTG Peter F. Leahy, Australian Army¹

WHEN U.S. ARMY conventional forces deploy in roles requiring extensive personal contact with indigenous people, there is often little nuance or subtlety about it. The Army seeks to dominate every facet of conflict—as it should. During operations, we profess noble, righteous intentions based on our values and beliefs and assume that if indigenous people do not immediately support our efforts, they will in time. History demonstrates, however, that fallacies abound in this assumption.

While planners might correctly assess negative local attitudes and opinions about operations, they have not been effective in weighing the strategic effects these factors have, nor have they suitably considered how initial local support can erode over time. We should consider why this happens and the role culture can play in such erosion. People in different cultures have values and beliefs unlike our own and do not see our principles as universal. We can see evidence of this in U.S. Army experiences in Vietnam, Somalia, Haiti, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

Historically, the Army and other armed forces worldwide have been about the profession of applying extreme pressure or violence to achieve an end, but the warfighter’s paradigm has changed because of the effects of mass media and global interconnectivity. Since the Vietnam War, U.S. military operations have largely occurred in full view of the public. As a result, the Army must change if it wishes to maintain strategic legitimacy in faraway lands. We simply cannot afford to collaterally alienate the people we are trying to influence, liberate, protect, or aid.

In addition, there can be no tolerance for the cultural ignorance of media-amplified “strategic corporals” (junior officers and soldiers at the forward edge of the battle area) whose words and actions can affect strategic outcomes. The information genie is out of the bottle, and from now and into the future, Army strategic legitimacy will be closely examined. We cannot fall victim to self-inflicted death by a thousand cuts. If there was ever a period in the Army’s history to consider the use of foreign area officers (FAOs) at the tactical level, this is it.

Throughout history, conventional military forces have rarely fared well operating in regions where indigenous cultures are significantly different from their own. The Army is no exception to this rule. When conducting such operations, we assume great risk unless we choose a course of change.

Two issues arise when considering the problem. First, when conventional forces deploy, soldiers or groups of soldiers will innocently or blatantly commit publicized acts of such grievous cultural ignorance as to erode strategic legitimacy and credibility. Second, planning staffs will produce faulty analysis and develop estimates and plans that violate the cultural and societal demands of the environment in which they operate and erode strategic legitimacy and credibility. These erosive effects in the contemporary operating environment (COE) are largely preventable because they occur where clear, concise tactical plans and rules of engagement (ROE) exist, which presents a quandary for tactical Army units because it reveals that plans and ROE lack depth and breadth and are not well suited for the cultural paradigm of a COE permeated by media influences. FAOs can bridge such strategic gaps at the tactical level to create second- and third-order results that positively affect the entire tactical spectrum.

Culture Matters

[T]he “clash of civilizations” theses recognized that the world isn’t culturally homogenized, and that cultural differences still matter.

—Secretary of State Colin L. Powell²

The Vietnam War was the last major prolonged conflict in which conventional U.S. forces regularly interacted with indigenous people having a culture radically different from our own. Conventional forces won the tactical engagements but were unable to win the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese people, largely because tactical planners did not understand or sufficiently consider indigenous Vietnamese culture and motivations.

In the eyes of the Vietnamese, the war was a nationalistic struggle having little to do with ideology. However, the United States fought the war as if it were an ideological struggle for hearts and minds. U.S. conventional forces applied a “limited war” doctrine, and opportunities to win over Vietnamese hearts and minds became lost in the fray.³ Fields, crops, homes, and roads were destroyed in the interest of combating an ideological enemy rather than a nationalistic one. Elderly villagers were often treated with disrespect because Americans did not understand their stature within their communities. The Vietnamese perceived this disrespect as an insult to the entire village.

General William Westmoreland once remarked that “[h]uman life is cheap to the Asian. They don’t feel the same way about death that we do [sic].” This quote was used in the antiwar film, *Hearts and Minds*, and was contrasted against video footage of a despairing Vietnamese widow trying to throw herself into her husband’s grave.⁴ Unfortunately, many enemies were needlessly created because of the lack of Vietnamese cultural awareness rampant throughout the entire chain of command.

We must be cautious of behaving in similar ways in Iraq because we run the risk of eroding our legitimacy and credibility there. Last year, images of a U.S. soldier searching a suspected insurgent in front of a CNN camera crew were replayed extensively in the Arab world. From the U.S. soldier’s perspective, the situation was about what he needed to do in the face of hostile combatants. In the Arab world, it was about an armed U.S. soldier with his foot firmly planted on the back of an Iraqi man writhing in the dirt outside of his home in full view of Iraqi women and his family members. Americans perceived tactical utility in the action; Iraqis and Arabs saw a patently offensive act that reinforced their

belief that U.S. and Zionist forces are out to dominate and humiliate the Arab world.

In November 2003, an article in *Newsweek* reported how an Army sergeant rebuffed an appreciative Iraqi police chief for attempting to plant kisses on his cheek. The sergeant said, “He was gonna give me that Arab kiss thing. I said, ‘I don’t kiss, buddy. How ya doin’?’”⁵ The sergeant perceived a threat to his masculinity; Iraqis and Arabs saw a slap in the face.

When brought to the world’s attention by the global media, such incidents tremendously affect the U.S. Army’s legitimacy and credibility. Even when the media is not present, such incidents create negative sentiments that cancel out the good deeds U.S. soldiers perform daily. The strategic reality is that such humiliations only need to happen once from the Iraqi and Arab perspective for us to wear out our welcome.

Adjusting Fire

When we are at war, we must think and act differently. We become more flexible and more adaptable.

—Chief of Staff of the Army General Peter J. Schoomaker⁶

In the COE there is little or no time for a learning curve. Conventional forces must be able to hit the ground running to achieve the maximum tactical return in an area of operations while, at the same time, not alienating the indigenous population. Some success stories have come from this front. “You have to achieve very rapid progress to show the people your intentions are good,” said Major General David Petraeus during his tenure commanding the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) in Mosul.⁷ As early as July 2003, the 101st employed the less intrusive “cordon and knock” method to canvass communities instead of the “cordon and search” method.⁸ Although there is no way to quantify this, I am sure residents within Petraeus’s sector appreciated not having their front doors knocked down in the middle of the night.

By contrast, another division commander in Iraq said it took his unit 8 months simply to understand the environment in which they were operating. His organization was often unsuccessful in analyzing intelligence gathered and was not capable of seeing through the fog. I interpret this as meaning that much of his problem centered around an absence of cultural and linguistic expertise on his staff.

Acknowledging his own organization’s shortfalls in Iraq, a third senior commander said every Army division should deploy with a team to advise the



Courtesy Major Ron Sargent

commander on strategic issues. In the end, these senior commanders' experiences underscore the need to adjust operations and enhance current strategic capabilities at the tactical level. Adjusting operations is only common sense; enhancing current strategic capabilities is an imperative.

Ultimately, the Army must ensure its tactics meet COE requirements. It doesn't work the other way around. Failure to do so will not bode well for strategic operations. Political- and media-savvy opportunists, as well as enemy forces, will capitalize on such shortcomings as evidence of a failed strategy.

A Possible Solution

Our values are sacrosanct. But everything else is on the table.—Schoomaker⁹

According to U.S. Department of the Army Pamphlet 600-3, *Commissioned Officer Development and Career Management*: "The Foreign Area Officer functional area is designed to train and develop commissioned officers to meet worldwide Army requirements for officers possessing regional analysis expertise. It provides officers with opportunities to develop skills required for conducting and analyzing military activities that have economic, social, cultural, psychological, or political impact. FAOs combine regional expertise, language competency, political-military awareness, and professional military skills to advance U.S. interests."¹⁰ This skill set is precisely

what is required at the division/unit of employment (UEX) staff level. With the officer branches and enlisted military occupational specialties in today's Army inventory, we cannot get a better strategic capability at the tactical level, unless the Army resources it from nothing.

Although FAOs are considered strategic- and operational-level assets, they are tactically competent and able to serve in strategic roles at the tactical level. While they spend most of their careers in strategic-level positions at embassies, combatant commands, or in Washington, D.C., (hence the nickname "Strategic Scouts"), all FAOs have successfully commanded tactical units at the company level; a few have commanded battalions and brigades; and many are also command and staff and senior service college graduates. Tactical experience and knowledge are not shortcomings on the typical FAO resume.

The FAO training model develops regional specialists. FAOs complete intensive initial language studies that last from 6 to 18 months, depending on the FAO's region. For a FAO to be linguistically qualified, he must achieve a 2/2/2 level of fluency (limited working proficiency in listening, reading, and speaking) by the Defense Language Proficiency Test standard. Many FAOs attain scores of 3/3/3 (professional linguistic abilities in listening, reading, and speaking) or higher.¹¹ All FAOs have region-

ally-oriented master's degrees, and some have doctorates. Their studies usually focus, in part, on regional strategic considerations.

FAOs undergo in-country training (ICT) for roughly 12 to 18 months, depending on their region. The training involves attending foreign command and staff colleges; acquiring advanced language and cultural skills; and participating in host-nation think tanks. During ICT, FAOs travel extensively within their assigned region to become intimately familiar with the culture and language. Once FAOs complete the extensive training requirements, their postings can also entail broad interface with U.S. Embassy staff members and personnel from other U.S. Government agencies.

With this experience and background, FAOs on a division/UEX staff can provide a degree of analytical refinement commanders might lack. For example, with the G2 intelligence officer, the FAO could improve intelligence analysis using his detailed knowledge of cultural factors, thus minimizing the need for educated guesses. Also, the FAO could provide sound, predictive analysis of civilian reactions and responses to U.S. operations. Because second- and third-order effects as a result of the G2's analysis abound throughout the rest of the staff's products and those of subordinate commands, these capabilities are critical.

With the G3 plans and operations officer, the FAO's expert insight could enhance planning and training to take the cultural paradigm of the COE into account in selecting appropriate tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP)—potentially the FAO's most important contribution. FAOs can also help conventional units train and operate in a manner conducive to establishing positive relations with indigenous peoples and, thus, help us understand how they perceive our presence. Remember, part of the mission is about sustaining strategic legitimacy and credibility.

With the G4 logistics officer, FAOs could be instrumental in getting the most logistical support out of the host nation in mutually beneficial ways.

With the G5 civil-military affairs and G7 information operations officers, the FAO could help implement civil-military operations, which would help fill the needs of local populations, and information operations, which would have a decisive, positive effect.

In short, including FAOs on the division/UEX staff is precisely what commanders at that level need,

particularly since their organizations typically have the most firsthand interaction with indigenous peoples.

How would a FAO serve on the division/UEX staff? I envision a cell of FAOs with backgrounds that correspond to their areas of operations. (See box.) For example, if a division/UEX is operating in Iraq, the cell would consist of four to six 48Gs (Middle East/North Africa FAOs). This same model would apply in the event of a division/UEX deploy-



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ment to other regions; for example, two to four 48Hs (Northeast Asia FAOs) combined with two 48Fs (China FAOs) in the event of conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

The lead FAO in each cell would ideally be a lieutenant colonel, with three to five FAO majors on his staff. This configuration would create ideal conditions for horizontal division/UEX staff coordination and integration and provide the ability to develop a habitual relationship with maneuver brigades/units of action (UA) (one FAO major per maneuver brigade/UA).¹² The cell could be modular, although I believe a full-time organic cell within the division/UEX staff would be far more beneficial.

Where would these FAOs come from? In light of the training overhead associated with FAO qualification, this is a valid question. I see three options. The first would be to assign FAOs on a temporary basis to division/UEX staffs as required. The drawback to this is they would likely be pulled away from critical strategic- or operational-level billets without any qualified backfill immediately available.

Second, some argue that we might have too many European FAOs (48C) because of a lack of post-Cold War global FAO redistribution. If true, the Army should consider reallocating FAOs in Europe, or elsewhere, into regions where there might be a greater strategic need for them.¹³ This would provide the Army with a more relevant and less redundant FAO



population and create more FAOs with appropriate regional skills for service on division/UEX staffs. There are two drawbacks to this, however. The Army would be “taking from hide” while potentially leaving critical vacancies elsewhere. Also, the Army might have to retrain reassigned FAOs. If the Army manages this judiciously, however, it could minimize this by assigning FAOs to regions suitable to their existing language skills, such as assigning a French-speaking 48C to a 48J Sub-Saharan African country where French is the national language.

Another option would be to simply assess and train more FAOs; assign them redundantly in newly created positions on division/UEX staffs; or post them to the Army Reserves so they could be tapped when needed. The major drawback is the original problem of training overhead, particularly as it relates to time. Nonetheless, this might be the best course of action.

In a perfect world with enough divisions/UEXs to cover the entire range of global contingencies, we could assign specific divisions/UEXs to specific flashpoints. In this event, I would suggest permanent billets for a FAO cell on each division/UEX staff. For example, if the 25th Infantry Division (Light) adopted a strictly Asian orientation, then its FAO cell would reflect this (an appropriate mix of 48Ds, 48Fs, 48Hs, and 48Is, as required). But, with the current expeditionary posture and force structure, this goal might be difficult to achieve. Even so, we must mitigate the perception that conventional forces are needlessly heavy-handed in operations

abroad, especially where indigenous cultures are significantly different from ours. I believe the gains achieved by posting FAOs onto the division/UEX staff far outweigh the resourcing challenges associated with getting them there. This is a concept that should not be undersold, particularly in an era when “everything . . . is on the table.”

A Case Study

Operation Mountain Sweep demonstrates how to and how not to conduct tactical operations and how to deal with the strategic fallout that occurs when tactical units are not culturally adept. The operation, which took place south of Khost and Gardez, Afghanistan, near the Pakistani border from 18 to 26 August 2002, has generally been considered a success. Soldiers from the 82d Airborne Division and other conventional units were roundly commended for their professionalism.¹⁴ However, in an article titled “I Yelled at Them to Stop,” *Newsweek* reporter Colin Soloway described the frustrations of a Special Forces (SF) Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA).¹⁵

The unit had operated in the region for some time and had developed a close rapport with local villagers. During a routine search, members of ODA arrived at the home of an elderly male villager, knocked on his door, and explained that they were searching for weapons. The elderly man allowed the ODA to enter his home after he sent the female inhabitants of the house to another room, out of sight of the strange men in accordance with a local custom. Af-

ter the search, the elderly man invited the ODA members to stay for tea and conversation. On their departure, the ODA members thanked the gentleman and moved on, leaving the inhabitants with their pride and dignity intact.

Moments later, the ODA watched as several 82d Airborne Division soldiers came to the same home, kicked down the front door, and forcibly entered the house. The ODA commander shouted for them to stop, but the elderly man who had just served tea was slammed to the ground by the soldiers from the 82d, who also attempted to frisk the women. The ODA commander sprinted back to the scene and ordered the soldiers to disengage. The ordeal was over almost as quickly as it had begun. However, the women were furious, and the elderly man had been dishonored and humiliated.

According to SF sources, local villagers and officials viewed Operation Mountain Sweep as a resounding failure. Local opinions often matter most, and their opinion was that Army units were successful only at "terrorizing innocent villagers and ruining the rapport that Special Forces had built up with local communities."¹⁶

One of the operation's primary targets was an al-Qaeda financier supposedly operating in the area. Apparently, the area's inhabitants tipped him off and he escaped capture. The commander of Operation Mountain Sweep was quoted as saying that local village elders "seemed to have some knowledge of us coming."¹⁷ Did village elders warn the suspected financier as revenge for inappropriate treatment by U.S. soldiers? If so, this certainly demonstrates how cultural ignorance can play a dramatic role in eroding U.S. legitimacy and credibility and increasing dangers in the threat environment. In retrospect, hav-

ing an experienced 48D South Asia FAO on the commander's staff (detailed from the higher division/UEX headquarters) would have been invaluable.

Providing Insight

Incidentally, every year one 48D FAO receives ICT at the Pakistan Army Command and Staff College. Most FAOs who attend develop a basic understanding of the Pashtu language and culture common to Northwestern Pakistan and the Khost/Gardez region of Afghanistan. A FAO such as this, particularly someone with experience working with Special Forces, could have advised the commander how to deconflict TTP and ROE with ODAs in the area so as not to lose the hearts and minds of local inhabitants.

As the organization's regional expert, the FAO would be ideally suited to provide the commander insight into the cultural dynamics of the region to better assess, visualize, and understand the environment. But as it stands, a humiliated old man with a broken-down front door is a living reminder of the day when the Americans came to town.

Like it or not, we are in the era of the "strategic corporal"—when the actions of privates, specialists, corporals, and planning staffs at the tactical level can have a distinct strategic effect on ongoing operations and can set the strategic tone in lands where we might need to deploy in the future.¹⁸ The Army must address this issue thoughtfully to build legitimacy and credibility abroad. Including FAOs on division/UEX staffs can produce desirable outcomes with direct implications for the actions of fellow staff members, subordinate commanders, and soldiers at the lowest levels. In the Global War on Terrorism, we must ensure that the past is not prologue. *MR*

NOTES

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